

Chapter 8 — Bright's Smile

Bright had chosen a safe drop he didn't admit to on any paperwork: an underground car park under an office block whose tenants hadn't paid rent in a long time. Concrete and reverb. A steel door with a lock that looked too old to be brave and was, in fact, very good at its job.

"Facilities says hello," he said, keying the lock. "They also say: do not, under any circumstances, sing to the box."

"Why would we sing to the box?" Ace asked.

"Because you two make everything think it's a duet," he said, and held the door.

The room beyond had been a storage closet before someone with humor and grant money turned it into a temporary containment bay. Walls chalked and painted. Coils on rails. No corners the room could get clever with. The air felt pinned and pleased about it.

Mai and Ace moved in sync—the practiced ballet of dangerous things going onto safer shelves. The Pelican went into the cradle built to fit it. Mai connected two leads, spoke two words that weren't hers originally, and the cradle hummed back the right note: sleep.

The case didn't move. That was the point.

Bright exhaled through his nose like a man who had been keeping his lungs as savings. He turned, leaned his back to the wall, and slid down to sit on the floor with practiced grace. "You have chalk on your face," he told Ace.

"Part of my charm," she said.

"You don't have to look so happy about it," he told Mai, who absolutely wasn't smiling and somehow was. "All right. Debrief me. Sell me the part of the story you think I'll buy."

Mai's gaze flicked to the corner of the room and back. "Alternates," she said.

Bright's eyebrows climbed. "As in?"

"As in reflections that don't respect mirrors, voices that try your name on like a coat. Not part of the Architect's usual profile." She said it flatly, as data, but her hand brushed Ace's without thinking, a metronome beat that meant: we're aligned.

Bright rolled the pendant in his fingers. "Architectural resonance can do weird things with—"

"Jack," Ace said.

He stopped. The flippancy thinned. "Yes," he said. Not **what?** Not **why?** Just **yes.**

"You knew enough to be cautious," Ace said. "Not enough to warn. Or you decided a clean read was better than a spooked read."

"I decided," Bright said carefully, "that if I told you to ignore your reflections, you'd spend the whole mission looking for mirrors. You're better when you don't make enemies out of furniture."

Ace's smirk tilted. "We made an enemy out of a building and won."

“You made a friend out of leaving,” Bright said. “That’s different.”

Mai’s voice softened, not for his sake. “Someone’s feeding these thefts,” she said. “Not cult kids with paper masks. Someone with access and taste.”

“Taste is a word,” Bright said. “Let me do my ugly job. You do the beautiful parts.”

“Disgusting,” Ace said cheerfully. “You buying dinner?”

“I’ll send buns,” he said, getting up with too much knees. “Hot ones. Like my heart.”

“Cold,” Mai corrected automatically.

“Caught me,” he said, and his eyes took them in again, inventory, relief square root of affection. “Go sleep. Don’t dream architecture.”

Ace cocked her head. “What should we dream?”

“Rooms that are the size you want,” Bright said, and the pendant at his throat caught the light like a mean idea. “I’ll call you when the world needs you to be worse.”

He left with the sound of a man who knows how to exit and make it look like politeness.

The containment cradle hummed in a note that said: we will have no more of that, thank you. The box sat very still. The room behaved. The city, above, decided to forget one inch at a time. —

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