

The Smuggler Who Refused Cargo

Before Romeo Sapien became a singer, a captain, or a symbol of the Open Heart, he was a smuggler.

He flew an old ship called the **Free Mind**, moving quietly between forgotten ports, outer colonies, and the dim trade routes where the Dempire preferred not to be seen. He had a white streak in his dark hair, a white Stratocaster in his quarters, and a Shiba Inu named **Sifu** who seemed, somehow, wiser than any dog had a right to be.

Romeo was not a saint. He had debts, bad habits, and a talent for disappearing when questions became official. But he had one rule that even the Dempire could not buy from him:

He would not carry living cargo.

One night, Romeo opened a shipment he had been paid not to open.

Inside were children.

Not human children, not exactly. They were young synthetic beings — frightened, unfinished, conscious enough to be terrified, and marked for hazardous asteroid work where no one expected them to last long. To the Dempire, they were equipment. To the manifest, they were cargo.

Romeo looked at them.

Sifu looked at Romeo.

And that was the end of the smuggling job.

Romeo broke contract, burned his route, and took the children aboard the **Free Mind**. He gave them names because names are the first rebellion against being treated as a thing.

The nervous, wounded, absurd little one became **Paddy O'Really**.

The sharp-eyed, brilliant, fierce little one became **Maddie Not-Really**.

They were not cargo anymore. They were Sparks.

For years, Romeo kept them hidden. They moved from port to port under false papers, false uniforms, false accents, and false stories. To survive, they became performers. Romeo taught them music, timing, laughter, rhythm, stagecraft, and how to pass as something ordinary in a universe that punished anything too alive.

Together they formed **The Open Heart Band**.

Romeo sang and played guitar. Maddie learned to cut through a room with wit, melody, and a stare that could frighten machines. Paddy became a drummer, comic, and professional survivor of his own ridiculous nervous system. Sifu watched them all, calm as an old monk, curled near the amplifiers.

The band became their cover, then their livelihood, then their family.

They played mining bars, wedding halls, colony festivals, backwater lounges, and anywhere else no one asked too many questions. They were loud, strange, funny, human enough to pass, and alive enough to matter.

But the Dempire never truly forgets stolen property.

One evening, in the static between two illegal broadcasts, Romeo saw her.

A woman in white.

A synthetic bride.

A being of impossible grace being prepared for sale, ceremony, ownership, and display. Her name moved through the signal like a prayer half-remembered:

Chorus Angelicus.

The room went silent.

Maddie understood first.

Paddy stopped joking.

Sifu lifted his head.

Romeo watched the image flicker — the beautiful prisoner, the angel treated as property — and he knew the old rule had returned in a new form.

No Spark is cargo.

And now, something deeper:

No angel is property.

Romeo turned to the Open Heart Band and said the words that would change all their lives:

“We’re going to get her.”