



Chapter 17: Wake Protocol

Ace's hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Not because she was weak—because the adrenaline dump had nowhere to go in a sealed room built to keep noise contained. Her fingers trembled around her sternum like she could physically hold the boundary shut, like ribs were door-bolts and skin was steel.

The wall panel's heartbeat graph stuttered, redlining, then slowly started to settle as Ace forced her breathing into something ugly but controlled.

In. Hold. Out.

Not three beats.

Not their rhythm.

Her rhythm.

Bright's voice in the speaker was close now, fast, clipped. "Ace. Stay on comm. I'm outside your door in twenty."

Ace swallowed. "I'm awake."

"Good. Keep it that way," Bright said. "Describe what you saw again. From the start. Slow."

Ace stared at the blank wall. Candlelight still flickered behind her eyes if she blinked too long.

"It started like memory," Ace said. "The circle. Candles. Choir. Kneeling."

Bright: "Expected."

Ace's jaw tightened. "Then she appeared. Inserted. Too sharp for a dream. Violet eyes. Plain face. She said—" Ace's throat clenched —"she said 'Vessel. Confirm integrity.'"

A long pause in the speaker. When Bright spoke again, his voice was different—colder.

"That phrase matters," Bright said quietly. "Very much."

Ace's skin prickled. "You know it."

Bright didn't answer directly. "Continue."

Ace exhaled slowly. "She called herself an interface. Said names are for people. She asked whether my lock is self-authored. Then she removed dampeners inside the dream."

Bright's voice sharpened. "She can manipulate your internal dampening state."

Ace's laughter came out like a broken thing. "Apparently."

Another pause. Then Bright's voice went flat. "Did she try to make you open Violet?"

Ace's jaw clenched hard. "Yes."

Bright: "Did you."

"No," Ace said immediately. "I sealed her deeper."

Bright exhaled once, audible relief clipped short by professionalism. "Good."

Ace's voice went tight. "Then she simulated Mai. Used her voice. Made the copy tell me to open."

Bright's silence this time was longer.

Then: "That was not a random dream component."

Ace's fingers tightened. "I know."

The door hissed.

Bright stepped in fast, shutting it behind him. His eyes went straight to Ace, then to the wall panel's red alert, then back to Ace again. He looked like a man walking into a room where the rules had been altered and he was trying not to show it.

He held up one hand, palm out—not “stop,” but “steady.”

“You did the right thing,” Bright said quietly.

Ace’s mouth twisted. “By getting violated in my sleep?”

Bright’s jaw tightened. “By not opening the lock.”

Ace’s eyes flashed violet with anger, not Violet. “So I’m just...a thing you all measure.”

Bright’s gaze didn’t flinch. “Yes.”

Ace froze.

Bright continued immediately, before the word could be misunderstood. “You are also a person. And Mai will murder anyone who forgets that. But operationally? Yes. You’re a thing that gets measured because the things inside you can end cities.”

Ace’s hands curled into fists. “Then tell me who did it.”

Bright’s eyes narrowed. “I’m about to.”

He moved to the wall panel and pulled a small device from his pocket—an encrypted token, Foundation issue. He pressed it to the panel. The display flickered, then changed: the heartbeat graph shrank to a corner, replaced by a log interface.

Ace stared.

Bright scrolled.

Lines of time stamps. System entries. Field fluctuations. Gate status.

And then one line that made Ace’s throat tighten:

DAMPENING FIELD: OVERRIDE - REMOTE AUTH

Ace’s blood went cold. “Remote.”

Bright nodded once. “The platform’s dampening array was altered for nine minutes.”

Ace’s eyes widened. “That’s when—”

“Yes,” Bright said. “That’s when your dream interface got teeth.”

Mai.

Ace’s mind snapped to Mai instantly—alone in her bunk, drugged, asleep.

Ace’s voice sharpened. “Did they hit her too?”

Bright’s jaw clenched. “Her monitor didn’t spike. Which tells me they weren’t interested in her as a variable.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “Or they kept her sedated on purpose.”

Bright didn't contradict it. He simply said, "I checked her room. She's breathing steady. Guard is posted outside now."

Ace's chest loosened by a fraction.

Bright scrolled further down the log.

A second line appeared, worse than the first:

SLEEP-STATE MONITORING: ENABLE - SUBJECT A

Ace's throat tightened. "They were watching me sleep."

Bright's voice went very quiet. "Yes."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura rose, a low, controlled flare that made the room feel smaller, as if walls had leaned in to hear.

Bright lifted his gaze. "Ace. I need you calm."

Ace's voice was a knife. "I am calm."

Bright held her gaze. "Then I'm going to show you something you may not like."

Ace's jaw tightened. "Show me."

Bright tapped the log entry and opened its metadata.

A signature block appeared—scrambled at first, then resolving into a clearance stamp and an internal routing node name.

Bright didn't speak for a second.

Because the node name wasn't just "Tokyo Hub" or "Platform Array."

It was a person-tag.

A department.

A function.

Memetics / Interfaces - Calibration Cell

Ace felt the room tilt, just slightly, like the boat had under the hull tap.

"Memetics," Ace said, voice flat. "So this is a Foundation specialty."

Bright nodded slowly. "Yes."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "And 'Interfaces.'"

Bright's mouth tightened. "Yes."

Ace swallowed. "So the woman in my dream—"

Bright cut in, voice controlled. "Could be a projected construct. Could be a trained operator using a memetic channel. Could be something else wearing a Foundation label. But the routing says Memetics touched your sleep-state."

Ace's fingers dug into her palms. "Meaning they did it."

"Meaning someone with memetics access did it," Bright corrected. "That's not the same as 'the whole department.'"

Ace's laugh was sharp, humorless. "That'll comfort me when they crawl into my head again."

Bright's eyes hardened. "They won't. Not tonight."

Ace's gaze snapped to him. "How can you guarantee that."

Bright held up the token again. "Because I'm taking control of the platform's dampening field from here, and I'm physically severing the external routing."

Ace blinked. "You can do that?"

Bright's mouth twitched. "I can if I'm willing to get yelled at by people who outrank me."

Ace's expression sharpened. "So you're going rogue."

Bright nodded once. "Yes."

Ace stared at him, then said the obvious. "You'll get burned for that."

Bright's voice was flat. "Better me than you."

A silence fell.

Then Ace said quietly, "Mai needs to know."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Not yet."

Ace's eyes flashed. "Yes."

Bright leaned in slightly, voice low and hard. "If you wake Mai and tell her 'the Foundation entered your dream,' she will start a war in a steel hallway while injured. The memetics cell will respond by escalating containment protocols, and you will both lose freedom before you gain clarity."

Ace's nostrils flared. He wasn't wrong. That was the problem.

Ace looked away, jaw tight. "So we lie."

Bright shook his head. "We delay. We control the moment you tell her."

Ace swallowed. "When."

Bright's answer was immediate. "When we're off this platform."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "We're leaving now?"

Bright nodded. "Yes."

Ace's pulse spiked again, not from the three-beat rhythm—from the sudden shift to action.

Bright continued. "I told you earlier we'd bait the baiters. Congratulations. They took the bait. Now we move before they realize you're awake and angry."

Ace's mouth twisted. "And Mai?"

Bright's eyes flicked toward the door. "We wake her. Gently. We tell her there was a platform field fluctuation. We don't give her the memetics label yet. We get her moving. Then we brief her in a controlled space."

Ace's jaw worked. She hated this.

But she understood it.

"All right," Ace said quietly. "What's the route."

Bright's voice went brisk. "We go below-deck. Service ladder. Submersible dock."

Ace blinked. "Submersible?"

Bright's mouth twitched without humor. "Told you we'd stop being predictable."

Ace stood, grabbed her katanas, checked straps like ritual, because sometimes the only ritual you were allowed was the one you chose.

Bright moved to the door, then paused.

"Ace," he said quietly.

Ace looked at him.

Bright's eyes were steady. "If she comes back in your sleep—if the interface voice returns—do not talk. Do not argue. Do not threaten. You don't give a system a handshake."

Ace's jaw clenched. "So what do I do."

Bright's answer landed like a rule hammered into bone.

"You wake," he said.

Ace nodded once.

Bright opened the door.

The corridor outside was dim, quiet, empty.

But as they stepped out, Ace felt something cold brush the edge of her awareness—like the ocean beneath the platform had shifted.

And somewhere, far below steel and water and dampening fields, the three-beat rhythm answered itself in the dark like a patient heartbeat.

Not loud.

Not urgent.

Just present.

As if whoever was knocking didn't mind being forced to wait.

Because time, to them, was just another kind of door.

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