



## Chapter 19: The Seam They Didn't See

They walked back up the service corridor like prisoners who hadn't been told they were prisoners yet.

The Interfaces man—Ace had started calling him that in her head, because giving him a name felt like granting him humanity—kept a polite distance. Two additional security staff appeared behind him after the hatch above had opened and closed again. Quiet boots. Neutral faces. Guns holstered but present.

Not overt containment.

Just enough pressure to remind you you were inside someone else's diagram.

Bright didn't speak.

His silence was not calm.

It was the kind of silence that stored violence for later, where it belonged: in the right place, at the right time, against the right target.

Ace walked with her head level, aura compressed inward so tightly it felt like wearing a too-small jacket. She could feel Violet behind the lock, alert and amused, like someone enjoying a chess match with blood on the board.

Mai was still asleep.

Ace kept thinking that like a mantra.

Still asleep. Still safe. Still ignorant.

They reached the ladder hatch marked PUMP ACCESS again. Bright spun the wheel and climbed first, because he always stepped first when the risk was unknown.

Ace followed.

As she climbed, the three-beat pulse in her ribs ticked louder with each rung, like proximity to the platform's main field arrays made the hook remember it had room to breathe.

She forced herself to breathe wrong—ragged, irregular.

Be boring.

At the top, the hatch opened into the service spine corridor again. Bright led them toward Ace's room without looking back.

The Interfaces man matched their pace, too smooth, like he was escorting guests at a conference.

"You should understand," he said casually, as if discussing weather, "that our objective is not control. It's stability."

Mai would've stabbed him with a sentence.

Ace didn't give him the pleasure of a response.

Bright spoke instead, voice flat. "You entered her dream."

The man didn't blink. "We observed her dream."

Bright's laugh was cold. "Sure."

The man's gaze flicked to Ace. "You demonstrated remarkable self-authorship under stimulus."

Ace's fingers tightened on her katana straps. She didn't look at him.

The man continued, still calm. "Your anchor is effective."

Ace's voice came out low without turning her head. "Don't say that word."

The man's smile thinned. "Anchor. Stabilizer. External support vector. Choose your label."

Ace stopped walking.

Bright stopped too, instantly, turning his head slightly.

The security staff stiffened.

The corridor's emergency lights hummed.

Ace turned her head just enough to look at the man with one eye.

Her voice was quiet.

"Choose your next word very carefully," Ace said.

For the first time, the man's calm showed a hairline crack: an awareness that she wasn't a lab rat. She was a weapon with a conscience, and conscience could be pushed into corners where it snapped.

He swallowed, then said, softer, "Mai."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura flared.

Not outward. Not dramatic.

Just enough that the air pressure changed in a radius around her, making the emergency lights flicker once.

The man's pupils widened.

Bright's hand touched Ace's shoulder immediately. Firm. "Ace."

Ace inhaled, forced the aura back down, compressed it until it hurt.

She resumed walking without another word.

They reached Ace's room.

The door opened.

Bright stepped inside first, because again: first.

Ace followed.

The Interfaces man stayed in the doorway, not entering, which was interesting. He wasn't arrogant. He was careful.

"Sleep," the man said to Ace, tone calm. "We'll observe again."

Bright's head snapped toward him, fury controlled to a thin wire. "You will not."

The man's expression stayed neutral. "That isn't your decision."

Bright's voice sharpened. "Get away from her door."

The man glanced at the security staff, then back to Bright. "Twenty-four hours. Don't make it worse."

And then he backed away, leaving two guards posted in the corridor—outside Ace's door like polite statues.

Bright shut the door with a controlled hiss and turned the manual lock.

Not because it would stop the Foundation.

Because it would make them sound like the Foundation if they came in.

He turned to Ace.

His eyes were hard. "You don't do that again."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Do what."

Bright's voice went sharp. "Threaten to open your lock."

Ace stared at him. "It wasn't a threat. It was a boundary."

Bright's mouth twisted. "It was a boundary you can't afford to bluff."

Ace's eyes went cold. "Who said it was a bluff."

A silence hit.

Bright looked at her for a long beat, then exhaled through his nose like he was trying not to swear. "Okay. Fine. But if you ever use that line again, you tell me first. Because I need to know if I'm about to be standing next to a live grenade."

Ace's voice went quiet. "You already are."

Bright didn't argue.

He moved to the wall panel and checked the dampening readout. It still flashed OVERRIDE ACTIVE.

He swore softly. "They've got control of the platform field."

Ace sat on the edge of the bed again, shoulders rigid.

Bright turned back to her. "You bought time. Good. But now we have to use it."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "How."

Bright's reply came immediately. "We wake Mai."

Ace's stomach tightened. "Now?"

Bright nodded. "Yes. Before they decide to 'stabilize' her."

Ace stood in a heartbeat. "Let's go."

Bright held up one hand. "Not like that. You don't storm in. You don't tell her everything in the hallway. You don't trigger her."

Ace's voice was sharp. "She has the right to know."

Bright's eyes hardened. "She will know. In a room with a closed door and no listeners. If you tell her in a corridor, she'll explode and the memetics cell will record it like applause."

Ace swallowed, forcing herself to nod once.

Bright opened the door again, stepped into the corridor. The guards were still there, faces blank.

Bright didn't ask permission. He walked anyway, and they followed.

Ace followed Bright.

They walked toward Mai's room.

The corridor seemed longer now, narrower, like the platform's architecture had decided to lean in. Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs throb in faint amusement.

They think they have us.

They think this is containment.

They think sleep is just a state.

Bright stopped outside Mai's door. A single guard stood there, posture stiff.

Bright's voice went crisp. "Open."

The guard hesitated. "I don't have authorization—"

Bright's eyes went dangerous. "Do you want to explain to your supervisor why you refused a direct instruction from me during an active anomaly event?"

The guard swallowed and opened the door.

They stepped inside.

Mai lay on the bunk, hair spread across the pillow like spilled silver, face pale, lips slightly parted. A medical monitor blinked quietly beside her, steady waveforms.

She looked peaceful in a way that made Ace's throat tighten.

Because it was rare.

Because it was unsafe.

Bright moved to the monitor, checked the sedative line readout, frowned.

Ace watched his face.

"What," Ace whispered.

Bright's jaw tightened. "Her sedative level is higher than what the medic prescribed."

Ace's blood went cold.

Mai's breathing was steady, but deeper, heavier.

"Wake her," Ace said, voice low.

Bright nodded once. He leaned over Mai, voice calm, deliberate. "Mai. Wake up."

Mai didn't stir.

Bright tried again, louder. "Mai."

Nothing.

Ace stepped closer, jaw tight. "Mai."

No reaction.

Bright's eyes narrowed. He reached for the IV line, checked the dose feed. His fingers tightened.

"They increased it," Bright said quietly. "Recently."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura surged—compressed and angry.

Bright's hand came up instinctively, touching Ace's forearm. "Ace. Hold."

Ace forced herself to breathe wrong. Forced the aura down.

But her voice came out like steel.

"They're trying to keep her unconscious."

Bright nodded once. "Yes."

Ace stared at Mai's still face, felt a cold rage settle into her bones.

Because now it wasn't just about calibration.

It was about control.

They weren't merely observing the anchor.

They were trying to remove it.

Bright's voice went sharp, command tone. "Get me the medic. Now."

The guard outside flinched at the force in his voice and moved.

Ace leaned over Mai, not touching her face, not shaking her—just close enough to feel her breath.

"Mai," Ace whispered, voice raw in a way she hated. "Wake up."

Mai didn't.

And in the dim room, the platform's hum seemed to deepen—as if somewhere in the steel skeleton of the place, a system recognized that the stabilizer was being suppressed.

Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs brighten, hungry.

Violet behind the lock purred softly.

See? Violet whispered. They want you alone.

Ace's jaw clenched until her teeth hurt.

“Not happening,” Ace whispered back, not to Violet—to the world.

And as if the world had been waiting for that sentence, the ceiling speaker in Mai’s room clicked softly.

A different voice came through.

Not Bright’s.

Not the Interfaces man’s calm cadence.

A woman’s voice—plain, controlled, too sharp to be a nurse.

“Subject M sedation adjusted,” the voice said. “External anchor support temporarily reduced. Proceed with observation.”

Ace froze.

Bright’s eyes went flat with fury.

Ace’s shadow-pressure aura snapped outward—

—and the lights in Mai’s room flickered like the building itself flinched.

Bright grabbed Ace’s wrist hard. “Ace!”

Ace’s breath hitched. Not from pain.

From the edge of losing control.

Because this wasn’t just an affront.

It was a violation of Mai.

And in Ace’s chest, the three-beat pulse rose like a drumbeat in a ritual that wanted to begin.

The seam they didn’t see...

...was that Ace didn’t just have a lock.

She had a line.

And they were stepping over it.

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