



Chapter 21: Hardline Confession

The corridor outside Mai's room felt different the moment they stepped into it.

Not because the lights changed.

Because the posture of the place changed—like the platform had decided they were no longer “agents in transit” but “subjects in motion.”

The two guards at Ace's door were gone.

Replaced.

Three personnel stood at the junction, not quite blocking the hall, not quite letting it stay open. Clean uniforms. Hands visible. That polite, rehearsed calm that said: We're here to help you comply.

Mai didn't slow.

She walked like pain was a nuisance she'd file later.

Bright matched her pace, jaw tight, and Ace stayed half a step behind Mai—not hiding, not leading, just close enough that if someone tried to grab, they'd lose fingers.

One of the new personnel lifted a hand. "Agent Mai—Dr. Bright—please return to your quarters. This is not authorized movement."

Mai stopped. Not because she'd been commanded. Because she chose to stop here.

She looked at the man like she was measuring the thickness of his skull.

"You sedated me," Mai said calmly.

The man's expression stayed neutral. "No one here—"

Mai cut him off. "Someone did. And I'm not negotiating with the organizational equivalent of a shrug."

Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs twitch as if the place itself had leaned in to listen.

Bright's voice was flat. "Step aside."

The man hesitated—just long enough to show he'd received instructions not to escalate in the hallway.

"Dr. Bright," he said carefully, "your access is temporarily limited pending review."

Bright smiled without humor. "Temporarily limited by who. Speak the name."

The man's eyes flicked—upward, to a camera.

Mai saw it.

Mai's mouth twitched. "Ah. The ceiling."

The man swallowed and tried again. "Please. Return to quarters. You can file concerns through proper—"

Mai stepped forward one pace, enough to make him instinctively shift weight backward.

"Proper channels?" Mai asked softly. "You mean the channels you're already piggybacking? The ones you used to enter her sleep?" She nodded once toward Ace without looking away. "You want proper channels. Great. We're going to the one you can't touch."

Bright didn't add anything. He didn't need to. His presence was the punctuation.

The personnel moved aside—not willingly, but because the alternative was a visible confrontation, and visible confrontation was a paperwork disaster.

Mai walked through the gap.

Ace followed.

As they passed, one of them murmured, low, meant for cameras more than ears: "She's unstable."

Mai didn't even glance back. "I'm not unstable," she said, voice crisp. "I'm awake."

They entered the service spine again, and the platform immediately felt more honest. Less polished. More pipes. More raw metal. Less theater.

Bright opened the pump access hatch and led them down the ladder.

Ace descended last, listening for footsteps above them.

None.

Yet.

At the bottom, the utility corridor waited—thin emergency lighting, damp air, salt and steel. Bright moved to a sealed cabinet, keyed it open with his token, and revealed a small junction box with old-school ports. No wireless. No platform routing. No “helpful” overlays.

A hardline.

A place where truth could travel without being turned into data.

Mai leaned against the wall, ribs protesting. She didn’t complain. Her eyes were all sharp edges now.

Bright pulled a short cable and handed it to Mai. “You want to send it, you write it. I’m not putting words in your mouth.”

Mai took the cable. “Good.”

Ace watched her plug it in, then looked at Bright. “Who are we sending to.”

Bright’s mouth tightened. “People who hate surprises.”

Mai snorted. “People who hate memetics.”

Bright didn’t deny it. He keyed in a destination list—internal oversight nodes, compartmentalized audit channels, a couple of names that weren’t “bosses” so much as “storms.” His fingers moved like he’d done this before.

He had.

Mai’s posture stayed rigid. “Time stamps.”

Bright nodded. “I have the platform log. Override entries. Sedation delta. Audio feed tags.”

Mai’s eyes flicked to Ace. “And you.”

Ace swallowed. “I can describe the dream interface.”

Mai’s voice went quiet. “Describe it like a witness. Not like a poet.”

Ace’s lips twitched once, faint. “Copy.”

Bright opened a text input window on the junction interface—plain, ugly, simple. No formatting. No branding. Just a place to put words.

Mai started dictating.

Not ranting.

Not screaming.

Not emotional.

Worse.

Clinical.

“Report begins,” Mai said, voice steady. “At approximately 02:14 platform time, Subject M sedation level was increased beyond prescribed parameters without on-site medical authorization. Evidence: IV feed log, dosage delta, and monitor waveform shift.”

Bright typed fast, nodding.

Mai continued. “At approximately 02:19, platform dampening field array was overridden via remote authorization. Evidence: system log entry ‘DAMPENING FIELD: OVERRIDE – REMOTE AUTH.’”

Bright’s hands paused for a fraction, then resumed.

Mai’s gaze sharpened. “At approximately 02:20, Subject A experienced an intrusive dream-state event consistent with memetic interface manipulation. Evidence: Subject A report, monitor spike, sleep-state monitoring enable flag.”

Bright looked at Ace. “Now.”

Ace stepped closer, eyes on the plain interface. The words mattered more than the room.

She spoke carefully. “Dream began as trauma memory—candles, kneeling, choir remnants. Then an inserted entity appeared, too sharp to be endogenous. Female presentation. Plain features. Violet glimmer in eyes. Addressed me as ‘Vessel.’ Issued command phrase: ‘Confirm integrity.’ Identified itself as ‘Interface’ and discussed lock authorship.”

Mai’s jaw tightened visibly at the word vessel.

Ace continued anyway. “Entity removed internal dampeners inside dream, increasing harmonic stimulus. Attempted to induce lock opening. Simulated Agent Mai as a false anchor and used her voice to suggest compliance. I refused. I reinforced internal partition.”

Bright kept typing, fingers moving like they were trying to outrun the implications.

Mai’s voice cut in, controlled. “Note: Use of Agent Mai simulation constitutes hostile psychological manipulation of a Foundation agent, and an operational security violation due to attempted exploitation of interpersonal dependency.”

Bright glanced at her. “That line will make enemies.”

Mai didn’t blink. “Good.”

Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs twitch faintly, as if something behind the lock enjoyed the taste of institutional blood.

Violet purred softly inside her, amused in a way that made Ace want to spit.

Bright finished typing, then hesitated over the send command.

Mai watched him. "Do it."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Once it's sent, they'll come."

Mai's voice was calm. "They're already here. They just haven't taken off the gloves because they think we'll behave."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "They'll escalate."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Bright exhaled once, then hit send.

The hardline clicked softly, like an old machine acknowledging a decision.

For two seconds nothing happened.

Then the platform shuddered—not physically, but socially. A subtle change in the hum, the way silence shifted when a building's nervous system realized a message had left the body.

Bright's console beeped once.

DELIVERED.

Mai's expression didn't change.

Ace felt her own heart rate stabilize, strangely. Not because the danger was over—but because uncertainty had snapped into a cleaner shape. Now there was a line, and they knew where it ran.

Bright unplugged the cable and shut the cabinet. "We move."

Mai pushed off the wall carefully. "Where."

Bright's eyes were hard. "Anywhere but a room with a ceiling speaker."

Ace's pulse spiked, and she looked up the corridor instinctively.

Footsteps.

Above them.

Fast. Multiple.

Not running—moving with the confidence of people who believed the space belonged to them.

Mai's hand went to her disruptor. She didn't raise it. She simply held it ready, the way you held a truth you were willing to enforce.

Bright whispered, "We go back down."

Ace blinked. "There's lower."

Bright nodded once. "Maintenance ballast. Old compartments. No cameras. No audio."

Mai's mouth twisted. "So we hide."

Bright's reply was quiet. "No. We choose the room."

Ace understood that immediately.

If your enemy owned the building, you didn't win by sprinting in the corridors.

You won by finding the one place the building didn't know how to narrate.

Bright opened a second hatch at the corridor's end—one Ace hadn't noticed before because it was painted the same dead gray as everything else. The label on it wasn't "restricted." It was worse.

DECOMMISSIONED.

Bright spun the wheel latch. It resisted, then yielded with a groan that sounded like the platform didn't like being reminded it had older bones.

Cold air breathed out.

Darkness below, thicker than shadow, smelling of stagnant salt and old metal.

Mai looked down. "Charming."

Bright nodded once. "Down."

Ace stepped first this time, because she could.

She descended into the decommissioned space—ladder rungs damp, metal slick. The air was colder, quieter, and the platform's hum became distant, like the sound of a city heard through a wall.

Mai followed, wincing once, jaw set.

Bright came last, pulling the hatch closed above them without sealing it fully—just enough to muffle sound.

They stood in a narrow maintenance chamber with stripped panels and dead conduits. No lights except the thin glow from their own gear. No speaker. No cameras that Ace could see.

And for the first time in hours—

—the three-beat pulse in Ace's ribs dimmed.

Not because she was calm.

Because the environment had fewer hooks.

Mai noticed the exhale Ace didn't realize she'd made. She didn't comment. She just leaned her shoulder lightly against Ace's for a brief second.

Anchor. Still here. Still real.

Above them, faintly through steel, footsteps passed. Voices murmured—too muffled to parse, but purposeful.

They were looking.

Mai's voice was a whisper now. "They're going to come down."

Bright's reply was equally quiet. "Yes."

Ace's eyes adjusted to the low light, scanning the chamber's far end. A tunnel angled away—maintenance access, half-collapsed, still passable if you didn't mind crawling.

Ace pointed. "There."

Bright nodded. "We move deeper. If they want a clean calibration, we give them a dirty maze."

Mai's mouth twisted into a grin that hurt her ribs. "Finally. Something honest."

They moved into the tunnel.

Steel scraped against gear. Old dust fell in slow drifts. The platform's polished reality receded behind them with every meter.

And somewhere above, in the clean corridors where systems liked to pretend they were in control, the memetics cell would be reading the report.

Realizing the "subjects" had spoken to people who mattered.

Realizing that the quiet little experiment had just become a political knife fight in a building floating on black water.

Ace crawled forward, pulse low, jaw tight.

Because now the stakes weren't only "can Ace hold the lock."

Now the stakes were:

Who gets to decide what Ace is.

And in the dark decommissioned tunnel, Violet purred softly behind the seal like she enjoyed the taste of their fear—

—but she also enjoyed the taste of their defiance.

Because defiance, too, was a kind of song.

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