



Chapter 23: Alarm Hymn

The corridor beyond the ballast chamber was older, narrower, and meaner.

No strip lighting. No clean paint. Just emergency lamps in intermittent pockets, throwing pale cones onto steel that had been scraped, welded, scraped again. The air tasted of old lubricant and seawater. Every surface sweated condensation.

Above them, the platform's alarms escalated in layers—chirps to tones to a steady urgent wail—like the rig itself had started singing.

A hymn.

Not three beats.

A mess of frequencies.

Good.

Mess meant friction.

Friction meant systems arguing with each other instead of focusing on Ace's ribcage.

Mai moved like she'd found a rhythm that didn't hurt her ribs too badly: short steps, controlled torso, disruptor low but ready. She didn't look back, but her presence was a constant pressure in Ace's peripheral vision—real, solid, not a simulation in a dream.

Bright kept his token light dim and swept it low across junction labels, searching for the path he'd promised.

"Ahead," Bright whispered. "Trunk leads to the subdeck service ring. If they lock the ring, we're done."

Mai didn't slow. "Then we don't let them lock it."

Ace's ribs pulsed—faint, eager. Violet behind the lock purred as if the alarm tones were music.

Chaos, Violet whispered. So much easier to slip in chaos.

Ace clenched her jaw. "Not happening."

Mai glanced back just once, eyes silver and sharp. She didn't ask what Ace was talking to. She didn't need to. She just nodded, like she understood the battle inside Ace's chest was a second corridor running parallel to this one.

They reached a junction.

Three doors: one labeled AFT SERVICE, another BALLAST VENT, a third with no label at all—just bare steel and a seam.

Bright crouched by the unlabeled one, ran his hand along the edge, found a hidden latch, and swore softly.

"They welded it," he hissed. "That wasn't welded last year."

Mai's face tightened. "So they anticipated."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Or they're improvising fast."

Ace moved closer, feeling the seam with her fingertips. The steel was cold, damp, and...slightly wrong.

Not "supernatural wrong," but like a surface that had been touched by a pattern.

Like someone had made a door where there wasn't supposed to be one.

Ace's ribs pulsed harder—three beats trying to emerge from the noise, trying to become a signal again.

Violet stirred, pleased.

Seams, Violet murmured. We love seams.

Ace forced her breathing into rough irregularity.

Mai saw the tightening in Ace's throat. "Ace," she said softly.

Ace didn't look at her. "I'm holding."

Mai's voice stayed calm. "Good. Then listen. This place is trying to make you the interface."

Ace's jaw clenched. "I know."

Mai nodded once. "So don't touch the seam unless you have to."

Bright stood, eyes scanning the other doors. "We go aft service. It should loop."

Mai's mouth twisted. "Should."

Bright pushed the aft door.

Locked.

He tried again with his token.

ACCESS DENIED.

He swore.

The alarm tone above them shifted again, louder, more insistent. A second tone layered in—an evacuation warning, automated and stupid.

Mai glanced upward. "They're sealing compartments."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Yes."

Ace's skin prickled.

This was the platform doing what bodies did: constrict.

And constriction meant routes disappearing.

Bright moved to the ballast vent door.

Unlocked.

He spun it open.

Cold air whooshed out, smelling of seawater and metal.

A ladder shaft dropped down into darker space.

Bright looked at Ace and Mai. "This will dump us near the ring. If it's still open."

Mai didn't hesitate. "Down."

Ace went first this time—because she could move fastest if the bottom was a trap.

She climbed down, boots finding rungs slick with condensation. The ladder vibrated faintly with the platform's alarms, like the whole structure was singing through its bones.

Halfway down, Ace heard it.

Not the alarm.

Something else.

A voice, muffled through steel, speaking with authority.

Orders.

Boots on metal.

They weren't alone in the shaft network.

Ace's ribs pulsed—three beats, pause, three beats—trying to sync with the approaching cadence.

Violet purred, delighted.

They're coming to hold you, Violet whispered. Let me show them—

Ace clenched her jaw so hard pain flashed. "No."

Mai climbed down behind Ace, saw Ace's shoulders tighten.

"What," Mai whispered.

Ace didn't turn her head. "People. Below. Moving up."

Mai's grip tightened on the rung. Her eyes went hard. "How many."

Ace listened, counted footfalls, tried to isolate through alarm vibration.

"Four," Ace said. Then corrected. "Five."

Bright came down last, paused mid-ladder as he heard it too. His eyes narrowed.

"We can't go back up," Bright whispered. "They're sealing above."

Mai's voice went low and sharp. "Then we go forward."

Ace reached the bottom.

The ladder shaft opened into a narrow vent corridor—tall enough to crouch, lined with ducting and pipes. Ahead, a grated intersection led left and right.

Ace stepped off the ladder and moved left automatically—

—and stopped.

A figure stood at the far end, half-lit by a red emergency lamp. Not one of the five climbing.

Someone already here.

A woman.

Plain face.

Hair pulled back.

Violet glimmer in her eyes like reflected deep water.

Ace's stomach dropped.

The interface.

Not in a dream.

In a steel corridor.

Real enough to cast a shadow.

Mai hit the bottom rung and froze, seeing Ace's posture.

Bright dropped beside them, weapon hand rising instinctively.

The woman didn't raise a gun.

She didn't need to.

She spoke calmly, voice steady despite alarms.

"Ace," she said. "You're destabilizing the platform."

Mai's disruptor came up, aimed center mass. "Identify yourself."

The woman's gaze flicked to Mai, then back to Ace. "Memetics. Interfaces. Calibration."

Bright's voice was ice. "You are not authorized to be here."

The woman smiled faintly. "I am the authorization."

Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs surge, like it recognized her.

Violet pressed against the lock, excited.

She's here, Violet whispered. She brought us to her.

Ace forced herself to breathe wrong. To stay human.

Mai's voice cut like a blade. "You sedated me."

The woman's expression didn't change. "Correct."

Mai's finger tightened on the trigger. "I could kill you."

The woman's gaze stayed calm. "You won't."

Mai's smile was small and vicious. "Try me."

Bright took a half-step forward, voice sharp. "What do you want."

The woman didn't look at him. She looked at Ace like Bright was background noise.

"We need to confirm the boundary between you and the lock," she said. "With the anchor suppressed, your response becomes clearer."

Mai's voice went low and lethal. "Say 'anchor' again."

The woman's eyes glimmered. "Anchor."

Mai shifted her aim a millimeter upward—throat.

Ace's aura trembled, pressure gathering, like a storm wanting to burst through a keyhole.

Bright snapped, "Mai—"

Mai didn't flinch. "She touched my blood."

The woman spoke again, calm, clinical. "Your relationship is operationally relevant."

Mai's lips peeled back. "Now you're definitely dying."

The five boots below came closer, climbing.

Ace heard them through the vent corridor's metal. She knew they'd be here in seconds.

Everything was compressing. Corridors narrowing. Time narrowing.

The platform wasn't just sealing doors.

It was sealing choices.

Ace locked eyes with the woman.

In the candlelit dream, the interface had been sharp.

Here, she was sharper.

Too still.

Too clean.

A person-shaped procedure.

Ace's voice came out quiet. "You want to see if my lock holds without Mai."

The woman nodded once. "Yes."

Ace's jaw clenched. "And you used sedation, rerouting, doors—"

The woman didn't deny it. "Yes."

Ace's ribs pulsed hard—three beats, pause, three beats—trying to pull her heart into it.

Violet pushed, thrilled.

Ace felt the lock strain.

Mai's hand touched Ace's forearm—quick, grounding, real. "Ace. Don't."

Ace didn't look at Mai.

But she felt her.

Anchor. Not tool. Not variable. Person.

Ace inhaled.

Then she did something the interface didn't expect.

Ace smiled.

Not friendly.

Not mad.

A small, precise smile that meant: You're not the only one who can use systems.

"You want clarity?" Ace said softly.

The interface's eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes."

Ace's smile stayed. "Then watch."

Ace turned her head slightly toward Bright, voice low. "When they come up, do not fight them."

Bright blinked. "What."

Mai's eyes widened. "Ace—"

Ace kept her gaze on the interface. "You wanted a test. Here's the test."

The interface's calm finally shifted. "Explain."

Ace's voice was quiet and absolute.

"I'm not going to show you what happens when you take Mai away," Ace said. "I'm going to show you what happens when you make me choose."

The boots hit the top of the ladder shaft behind them.

Voices. Flashlights.

"CONTACT!" someone shouted.

Mai's disruptor stayed aimed at the interface.

Bright's hand hovered near his weapon.

Ace stood between them and the incoming team like she'd decided the corridor belonged to her.

The interface's eyes glimmered.

Violet behind the lock purred in delight.

And Ace, breathing wrong, heartbeat refusing the three-beat rhythm, looked at the person-shaped procedure and spoke the one sentence that made the whole platform's logic tremble:

"You don't get data from me," Ace said softly. "You get consequences."

Then she raised her hand—not to open Violet—

—but to press her palm flat against the vent corridor wall.

Against the seam.

Against the metal that had been shaped into a door by systems.

Ace felt her shadow-pressure aura move—controlled, surgical—into the steel like a silent blade sliding into a crack.

The corridor lights flickered.

The alarms wavered.

And the platform, for the first time, reacted not like a machine...

...but like something that had just realized it could bleed.

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