



Chapter 24: Bleeding Architecture

The steel under Ace's palm wasn't alive.

Not in the way priests meant when they whispered about "hungry rooms."

But it was organized.

It had pressure gradients, dampening fields, sensor routes, memetic channels, redundancies—an engineered nervous system.

And Ace's shadow-pressure wasn't a spell.

It was a force that hated seams.

She pushed, carefully—not brute force, not an explosion. A precise intrusion into the crack between "door" and "wall," into the logic of the structure.

The alarms wavered.

For half a second the platform's hymn lost its tempo, like the rig had inhaled wrong.

The interface's violet eyes widened a fraction.

Not fear.

Recognition.

"Stop," the interface said softly.

Ace didn't.

She felt the seam respond—not opening like a hinge, but giving like metal under stress. A low groan shuddered through the vent corridor.

Behind them, the team at the ladder shaft froze, flashlights jittering.

"WHAT THE HELL—" someone barked.

Mai's hand locked onto Ace's wrist—not pulling her away, just present, grounding. "Ace."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Holding."

Bright stared at Ace's hand on the wall like he was watching a new failure mode being invented in real time.

"Ace," Bright said sharply, "what are you doing."

Ace's voice was quiet, steady. "Making a door where they don't have a script."

The interface's tone sharpened. "You are destabilizing containment infrastructure."

Mai's laugh cut through the alarms like broken glass. "Good."

The interface's gaze flicked to Mai—calm trying to reassert itself. "Agent Mai, this is not—"

Mai cut her off. "Don't. You drugged me, and now you're going to watch what happens when you lose the narrative."

The men behind them raised weapons—nonlethal rigs by the look of the barrels, restraint tech, shock nets. They weren't here to kill.

They were here to end movement.

"DOWN! HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM!" the lead voice shouted.

Bright didn't comply.

He didn't resist either.

He just stood very still, eyes fixed on Ace's hand and the seam, calculating.

Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs surge—excited, hungry—like Violet enjoyed this pressure.

Open something, Violet purred. Just a little. Doors are fun.

Ace forced herself to breathe wrong—ragged, off-tempo—and kept Violet sealed.

This wasn't Violet's door.

This was hers.

The seam groaned again.

Metal shifted.

A hairline crack widened where no crack should exist.

Not a neat line. Not a clean engineering split.

A jagged, ugly tear.

Like the platform was bleeding structure.

The interface stepped forward half a pace, voice suddenly sharper. "Ace. Remove your hand."

Ace didn't look at her. "No."

The interface's eyes narrowed. "You are not authorized."

Ace's lips twitched faintly. "You keep saying that like it means something."

The crack widened.

Cold air sighed through, carrying a different smell—older, deeper, almost like the ocean's underbelly.

Bright's voice went tight. "That's not a service trunk."

Ace's fingertips tingled against the metal. The seam felt...wrongly easy now, like once you found the weakness it wanted to become a door.

Mai's grip tightened on Ace's wrist. "Ace—if this is a bad door—"

Ace's voice stayed calm. "Then we pick the bad door over the controlled door."

The team behind them advanced.

Shock net cartridge clicked into readiness.

"LAST WARNING!" the lead shouted.

Bright moved then—one step sideways, placing himself between the team and Mai, token in his hand like a badge and a knife.

"Stop," Bright said, voice flat. "If you fire in this corridor, you'll trip the vent pressure and choke half the deck. You want that on your report?"

The lead hesitated—because Bright was right, and because hazard protocols were the one thing even zealots respected.

Ace used the hesitation.

She pushed the seam one final time.

The metal gave.

Not like a door swinging open.

Like a wound tearing wider.

The wall split with a sound like a ship hull complaining—low, grinding, teeth on bone.

And behind the torn seam was darkness.

A crawlspace? A duct? A maintenance trunk?

No.

It was too...smooth.

Too rounded.

Too intentional.

A throat.

A tunnel the platform hadn't admitted existed.

The interface stared at it, and for the first time her calm expression shifted into something that looked almost like irritation.

"That path is not mapped," she said.

Mai's grin was vicious. "Perfect."

Bright looked at Ace, eyes hard. "Can you close it if it's wrong?"

Ace swallowed. Honest answer. "I don't know."

Bright didn't flinch. He nodded once. "Then we commit."

Mai didn't wait.

She stepped forward, pressed her shoulder through the jagged opening, and slid into the darkness like she'd been born in tight spaces and bad decisions.

Ace's heart lurched.

"Mai—"

Mai's voice came from the dark, strained. "Keep moving."

Ace followed instantly, ducking through the torn metal. Sharp edges scraped her jacket. Cold air slapped her face.

Bright came next, moving fast.

The team behind them surged forward, and the interface shouted—first time she'd raised her voice.

“DO NOT ENTER THAT SPACE!”

Mai laughed inside the dark. “Too late!”

Ace squeezed deeper into the tunnel, muscles tight, katanas snagging for a heartbeat before she yanked them free.

The opening behind them stayed jagged, raw.

Bright reached back, grabbed a loose strip of torn metal, and hauled it down, bending it like a crude door flap to slow pursuit.

Not sealing. Not closing.

Just buying seconds.

They crawled.

The tunnel sloped downward. The air grew colder. The platform's alarms faded, muffled by distance and steel.

But something else replaced them.

A low hum.

Not mechanical. Not electrical.

A pressure-frequency that made Ace's ribs ache.

The three-beat pulse in her chest answered faintly, like two tuning forks recognizing the same note.

Violet behind the lock went still—quiet in a way that wasn't obedience.

More like attention.

Mai crawled ahead, breathing hard but controlled, ribs protesting. Bright followed close behind her, token light dim and shaking slightly as it illuminated the tunnel's walls.

The walls weren't raw steel.

They were...laminated.

Layered material like composite hull plating, smoother than the platform's service trunks should be.

Bright whispered, “This wasn't in the schematics.”

Mai's voice came back, low. “Good.”

Ace's fingertips brushed the wall as she crawled, and she felt faint vibration—like the material was carrying a signal, faint and patient.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace clenched her jaw.

She didn't answer.

Behind them, far away now, muffled voices shouted. Metal clanged. Someone tried to widen the torn seam. Someone cursed.

The interface's calm voice drifted faintly through the distance, distorted by layers:

"Subject A. You are not in control."

Ace crawled forward, eyes narrowed, breath ragged on purpose.

And under her ribs, the lock held—tight, reinforced—while the platform's hidden architecture guided them deeper, not like a trap that snapped...

...but like a corridor that had been waiting a long time to be used.

Because the platform wasn't just bleeding.

It was revealing its older bones.

And those bones knew the hymn.

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