



Chapter 25: Older Bones

The tunnel didn't end.

It reassigned itself.

One moment it was a crawlspace with composite walls. The next it widened just enough for knees to stop scraping and for shoulders to roll. A subtle shift in geometry that felt less like construction and more like permission.

Mai paused in front, breathing hard, ribs protesting. She didn't whine. She listened.

Bright's token light brushed the walls, and the beam slid across markings that weren't Foundation stencils—no barcode labels, no hazard icons. Just faint, shallow grooves in the laminate, curved lines repeating in a pattern.

Ace's ribs pulsed faintly.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

The grooves matched the tempo the way a shoreline matched a tide.

Mai touched one of the grooves with a gloved fingertip, then withdrew like it burned.

"This is not normal infrastructure," Mai whispered.

Bright's mouth tightened. "Yes."

Ace didn't like how Bright said yes. Not surprised. Not confused. More like he'd feared this possibility for years and prayed he'd never see it.

Ace's voice came out low. "You've seen this before."

Bright's eyes flicked to her. "Not here. But...similar patterns exist in archived sites. Places we thought were just 'old construction.'"

Mai's gaze sharpened. "And?"

Bright exhaled. "And those places tended to have one thing in common."

Ace didn't ask. She already knew.

The thing she'd been hearing.

The clean protocol behavior.

The address.

Mai said it first, flat and controlled. "A system."

Bright nodded once. "Yes."

The tunnel curved.

Not in a clean arc like a duct.

In a slow spiral that felt like it was gently trying to make them walk in circles.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura tightened instinctively, and the spiral sensation eased—like the force inside her pushed back against the tunnel's suggestion.

Mai noticed. "That was you."

Ace swallowed. "It was trying to...guide."

Mai's voice stayed quiet. "Or condition."

Bright's token light swept ahead.

The spiral opened into a narrow chamber—standing height now, barely. The ceiling was low, curved, smooth. The walls were the same composite laminate, but thicker here, almost padded.

A pocket inside the platform's skeleton.

In the chamber's center: a small panel.

Not Foundation design.

No keypads.

No screens.

Just a recessed circle the size of a palm, ringed with those faint groove patterns.

Ace's ribs pulsed harder.

Violet behind the lock went utterly silent.

Not obedient silence.

Listening silence.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Don't touch it."

Ace's hand was already halfway lifted before she stopped herself.

Bright stepped closer, scanning the panel. "This is...an interface."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Of course it is."

Bright's voice went grim. "This isn't memetics. This is older."

Mai glanced at Ace. "How does it feel."

Ace swallowed, honest. "Like it knows I'm here."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Because it probably does."

Bright crouched, bringing his token light closer. The grooves around the recessed circle shimmered faintly—barely visible, like condensation catching light.

Ace's ribs pulsed.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Mai's voice went low. "Bright. If this is the same kind of 'protocol' thing that tapped the hull—"

Bright nodded, not looking up. "I know."

Mai: "Then this chamber is not a refuge. It's a throat."

Bright's jaw worked. "Yes."

Ace stared at the recessed circle and felt a pressure behind her sternum—like the lock was being gently invited to align.

Not forced.

Not threatened.

Coaxed.

Violet's presence behind the seal stirred, curious.

This is our kind of room, Violet whispered softly. It's shaped for us. Let me—

Ace clenched her jaw. "No."

Mai's gaze snapped to Ace's face. "Ace."

Ace exhaled. "She's...interested."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "Good. Then we don't feed her."

Bright stood slowly. "We need to decide. Either we stay ahead of the hunting team, or we stop running and learn what this is."

Mai's laugh was short and bitter. "Learn? In here? This is how people die."

Bright's eyes stayed hard. "People also die when they stay in rooms with ceiling speakers."

Mai didn't argue. Because it was true.

Ace stared at the recessed circle and felt something awful settle in her gut:

They hadn't just escaped into a random forgotten space.

They'd been guided here.

And the interface—memetics—whatever was chasing them—might not even be the main problem down here.

Mai's voice went soft, precise. "If we're being guided, we break guidance. We choose a path that's wrong."

Bright's eyes flicked to the chamber's far wall.

A second opening. Narrow, dark.

Not spiral-shaped.

Not grooved.

Just a rough breach in the composite, like something had punched through from the other side long ago.

Bright pointed. "That."

Mai nodded. "Yes. That looks like something that doesn't want us to go where the system wants."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Or something that wanted out."

A silence settled.

Mai looked at Ace, and something in her expression softened—not comforting, just...real.

"Do you trust your lock," Mai asked quietly.

Ace swallowed. "Yes."

Mai nodded once. "Do you trust it enough to stand near that interface panel without touching it."

Ace hesitated a fraction.

Then: "Yes."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Good."

Bright's eyes stayed on the recessed circle. "We don't touch it. We don't give it a handshake. We go through the breach."

Ace nodded once.

They moved.

Mai went first, careful with ribs. Bright followed. Ace last.

As Ace passed the recessed circle, she felt it.

Not a voice.

A ping.

A clean pulse that tried to line up with her ribs.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace forced herself to breathe wrong, ragged and ugly.

Her heart refused to sync.

She didn't look at the panel.

She didn't acknowledge it.

She didn't answer.

But in the corner of her vision, she saw the grooves shimmer faintly, like something had just registered an attempted connection and noted the refusal.

They slipped through the rough breach.

The composite material scraped Ace's shoulder. Dust fell like old skin.

Beyond the breach, the tunnel changed again—less smooth, more damaged, as if the platform's older bones here weren't meant for regular access.

The alarms from above were almost gone now.

Only a faint, distant wail, like a memory of panic.

And then, from somewhere deeper in the platform's belly, Ace heard something that wasn't a siren.

A tone.

Clean.

Low.

Intentional.

It rolled through the structure like sonar.

A call.

Mai stopped and looked back, eyes sharp. "You hear that."

Ace nodded, throat tight. "Yes."

Bright's face hardened. "That's not them."

Mai whispered, "Then what is it."

Ace's ribs pulsed once, hard—her own heart, not Violet, not the hymn.

And in the darkness ahead, the older bones answered with another clean tone, closer this time, as if the platform itself was speaking in a language it had been built to remember.

Not Order's hymn.

Not Foundation's memetics.

Something else.

Something that didn't need candles or dreams.

Something that could live in steel and water and protocol.

And it had just noticed that Ace was inside its ribs.

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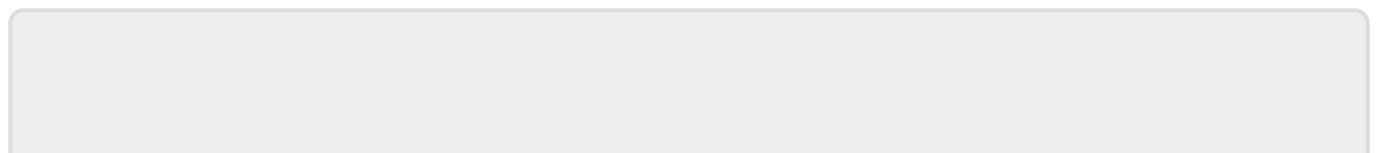
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