



Chapter 28: Signature Touch

They didn't stop until the tunnel spat them out into a maintenance trunk that smelled like fresh oil and warm circuitry—newer infrastructure, closer to the platform's living systems.

Bright slammed a panel shut behind them, not sealing it—just closing it enough to kill line-of-sight.

Mai pressed her shoulder against the wall, breathing through pain like she was chewing nails. One hand stayed on her disruptor. The other stayed on Ace—fingers dug into Ace's sleeve near the elbow, grounding through contact like a hardline cable.

Ace leaned into the wall, chest tight.

The fingertip touch on her shoulder still burned—not physical pain, but that lingering sensation of being tagged.

Compatible.

Confirmed.

Her ribs kept trying to fall into three beats and then jerking back out again like a heart refusing a song.

Bright's voice was low. "Ace. Status."

Ace's mouth worked once before sound came out. "She touched me."

Mai's eyes went hard. "Where."

Ace lifted her shoulder slightly, as if the fabric could show it. "Here."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Do you feel anything...new."

Ace swallowed, forced honesty. "I feel...like the tone knows me now. Like it has a reference point."

Bright's face tightened. "A handshake token."

Mai's voice went sharp. "We said no handshake."

Ace's eyes flicked to her, guilty flash—then anger. "I didn't accept it. I pulled away."

Mai's expression softened a fraction—because she knew the difference between accepting and being touched. She squeezed Ace's sleeve once. "I know. That's not on you."

Ace exhaled, shaky.

Bright rubbed a hand over his mouth, thinking fast. "If the interface has a confirmation that you're compatible, she'll push for a controlled reconnection. She'll try to get you back near that node."

Mai's smile was thin. "Then we don't go near it."

Bright nodded. "Agreed. We get off platform. Tonight."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "We tried. They sealed routes."

Bright's gaze sharpened. "Then we use the chaos I triggered to slip into a route they don't expect."

Ace's throat tightened. "Sub."

Bright nodded. "Yes. But not the dock they prepped for us. There's an auxiliary cradle. Old, rarely used. It's on the service ring."

Mai's voice was flat. "And the ring is probably sealed."

Bright's mouth twisted. "Probably. But seals are for people who don't know how to be ugly."

Mai snorted. "Fine. Ugly it is."

Ace pushed off the wall, trying to steady her breathing. Mai's grip stayed on her for a second longer than necessary—then released, but only because they needed both hands free now.

Bright led them down the trunk, past cabinets and junction boxes, toward an access ladder marked RING MAINT. He keyed it with his token.

The panel flashed.

ACCESS DENIED.

Bright swore, low and vicious.

Mai didn't even blink. "So."

Bright looked at Ace.

Ace understood the look immediately, and hated it.

"You want me to cut the seam," Ace said.

Bright's voice stayed calm. "I want you to decide if you can do it without feeding Violet."

Ace's jaw clenched. "I can."

Mai's gaze snapped to Bright. "We are not using her like a tool."

Bright didn't flinch. "We are using a capability that keeps all three of us alive."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Word it better."

Bright exhaled once. "Ace. If you can open a path without letting her in, we leave. If you can't, we find another way."

Ace's fingers tightened around her katana straps. The three-beat pulse in her ribs flared faintly at the idea of opening something.

Violet stirred like a cat hearing a can open.

Ace forced her breathing wrong and stepped to the access panel.

It wasn't a seam like the tunnel wall.

It was a locked door with a digital brain.

But the door still had a boundary.

Ace placed her palm flat against the steel beside the panel, not on the lock itself.

Mai moved instantly to Ace's side, shoulder almost touching, ready to anchor.

"Eyes on me," Mai whispered.

Ace nodded without looking away from the door.

Bright's token light dipped lower.

Ace exhaled, slow, and pushed her shadow-pressure not outward but sideways—into the door's frame, into the tiny microscopic spaces where metal met metal.

Like sliding a blade into a crack and widening it.

The platform's hum shifted.

Somewhere above, an alarm tone warbled.

Ace felt the pressure in her ribs try to sync to three beats.

Violet purred, delighted.

Doors again, Violet whispered. Let me help—

Ace swallowed hard. “No.”

Mai’s voice came instantly, low and steady. “Ace. Say my name.”

Ace’s throat tightened. “Mai.”

Mai: “Again.”

Ace: “Mai.”

Mai: “Again.”

Ace’s pulse stuttered away from the three-beat rhythm, just enough to keep Violet from getting traction.

The door frame groaned softly.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Just...yielding.

Bright’s eyes widened. “You’re bending the frame.”

Ace’s voice was tight. “Quiet.”

Bright shut up.

Ace pushed—careful, controlled.

The steel flexed.

The latch mechanism inside, confused by geometry that wasn’t supposed to change, clicked.

The panel flashed an error.

Then the door popped open a centimeter.

Mai exhaled sharply, half relief, half awe.

Bright slid his fingers into the gap and yanked the door open fully.

They climbed the ladder fast.

At the top, the hatch opened into the service ring corridor.

And the ring was not empty.

Two armed personnel stood twenty meters down, turning toward them as the hatch hissed.

Their weapons came up.

“STOP!” one shouted.

Mai didn’t stop.

She moved, disruptor up, not firing—aiming. Dominating space.

Bright stepped out beside her, token held up. “Stand down!”

The personnel hesitated for half a heartbeat—just long enough to show they recognized Bright, and just long enough for Ace to feel the three-beat pulse in her ribs flare hard.

Because behind the armed personnel, mounted high on the corridor wall, a small speaker grille blinked softly.

Not a normal speaker.

A memetics relay.

The woman’s voice came through, calm and too close.

“Subject A,” she said. “Return. We can do this cleanly.”

Ace’s stomach dropped.

Mai’s head snapped up, eyes burning. “You again.”

The voice ignored her. “We have confirmed compatibility. The node is responding. Cooperation reduces risk.”

Bright’s jaw tightened. “Shut it off.”

The voice was almost gentle. “Dr. Bright, you cannot shut off what is already inside her.”

Ace felt her ribs pulse—three beats, pause, three beats—stronger now, like the tone beneath had found her again through the relay.

Violet behind the lock smiled.

Mai’s hand shot out and grabbed Ace’s forearm hard. “Ace. Look at me.”

Ace forced her gaze away from the blinking grille and into Mai’s eyes.

Mai’s voice was low, fierce, steady. “You are not a node. You are not compatible. You are not theirs.”

Ace’s throat tightened. “I know.”

Mai’s voice sharpened. “Say it.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “I’m not theirs.”

Bright’s eyes flicked between them and the armed personnel. “We need to move now.”

Mai's gaze cut to the guards. "Last chance. Move."

The guards hesitated—caught between orders and the sudden realization that this was not "routine containment."

One of them shifted weight, weapon dipping slightly.

That was enough.

Mai moved.

Not a full assault—just a fast, controlled step forward that forced the guards to recoil and create space.

Bright yanked Ace into motion.

They sprinted down the ring corridor, alarms still wailing in the distance, memetics voice trailing them through speaker grilles like a whisper in a haunted house.

"Subject A... Subject A..."

Ace's ribs pulsed in time with the voice now, trying to sync, trying to turn her breath into signal.

Mai stayed pressed close as they ran, shoulder brushing Ace's, a constant human interference pattern.

Bright shouted over the noise. "Aux cradle is fifty meters! Left turn!"

They hit the left turn—

—and the ring corridor opened into a bay.

The auxiliary sub cradle sat in the center like a dark animal, compact and ready, but the bay doors were sealed, and a small control console blinked red:

LAUNCH LOCK - REMOTE HOLD

Mai's face went savage. "Of course."

Bright sprinted to the console, slammed his token against it.

ACCESS DENIED.

The memetics voice came through a speaker in the bay, smooth as silk:

"You cannot leave."

Ace's ribs pulsed hard.

Violet purred.

Mai turned slowly toward the ceiling speaker, disruptor raised.

"This," Mai said softly, "is the part where you learn what happens when you touch my blood."

Bright snapped, "Mai—don't—"

Mai didn't fire at the speaker.

She fired at the console.

A short, controlled burst.

Sparks exploded.

The lock display flickered.

Bright cursed. "That might have—"

The display died.

The bay door mechanism groaned.

Then, slowly, unwillingly—

it began to unlock.

Mai's eyes cut to Bright. "You're welcome."

Bright stared, then laughed once—sharp, disbelieving. "I hate that it worked."

Ace's chest tightened as the three-beat pulse surged, angry now, resisting the escape.

The memetics voice hardened for the first time.

"Subject A," it said. "If you leave, you will trigger a response you cannot contain."

Mai grabbed Ace's hand again, squeezed hard. "No handshake."

Ace swallowed. "No handshake."

The bay doors opened with a heavy hydraulic sigh.

Cold sea air slammed into the room.

The auxiliary sub cradle lights turned green.

Bright shouted, "IN!"

They ran.

Because the signature touch had marked Ace—

and now the platform, the node beneath, and the woman in the speakers all seemed to agree on one thing:

Ace leaving was unacceptable.

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