



Chapter 37: Quiet Room, Loud Truth

Inside the craft, everything changed character.

The ocean noise became background—filtered through metal and insulation—while the air smelled like sterilizer, old rubber seals, and dry electronics. The corridor lights were low and steady, not the anxious red pulse of the platform. No speakers. No ceiling grilles. No “calm voice” waiting to slide into your skull.

That alone felt like mercy.

The woman with the clipboard—Ace decided to call her Clipboard until someone gave her a name—guided them through two pressure doors and one mechanical lock that required actual keys. Old school. Brutally physical.

Mai noticed too.

Mai’s voice was quiet. “No network locks.”

Clipboard didn't turn. "Not in this section."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Smart."

Clipboard stopped at a door with no label and a single analog deadbolt.

She opened it and gestured Ace in first.

It was...small.

A room with padded walls—not the soft kind, the industrial kind meant to damp sound, vibrations, and interference. A narrow cot bolted to the floor. A stainless steel sink. A single camera in the corner—covered by a sliding metal shutter currently closed.

Mai stepped in behind Ace.

Clipboard's gaze flicked to her. "Not you."

Mai didn't move. "Yes me."

Clipboard didn't raise her voice. "Agent Mai, you are injured, and you are not cleared for this compartment."

Mai's eyes were cold. "Ace isn't cleared for being alone right now."

Clipboard paused.

Not a negotiation pause.

A calculation pause.

Then she nodded once. "Five minutes. You stay in the doorway. You do not touch anything except her."

Mai's mouth twitched—almost a smile. "That's cute."

Bright stepped in last, posture tense.

Clipboard handed Bright a sealed pouch. "Token. Put it in."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "You want my token."

Clipboard nodded once. "Yes."

Bright's jaw tightened. He didn't like giving up leverage. But he did it anyway—slid the token into the pouch and sealed it.

Clipboard took it, pocketed it, and for the first time Ace saw something like a microscopic crack in her calm.

Not weakness.

Concern.

"Good," Clipboard said softly. "Now this room doesn't know your name."

Then she turned to Ace and spoke with a tone that wasn't unkind, but was entirely done with bullshit.

"Ace. Tell me what you are experiencing in your body right now. Raw facts."

Ace swallowed. The dampening patch near her collarbone felt cool, heavy.

"My chest still...tugs," Ace said. "Not pulling, but present."

Clipboard nodded once. "Any involuntary rhythm attempt?"

Ace's lips tightened. "Yes. Three beats."

Mai's fingers dug into the doorframe. Her voice was low and furious. "Stop calling it rhythm. It's a hook."

Clipboard didn't argue. "Fine. Hook attempt?"

Ace nodded. "Hook attempt."

Clipboard's gaze sharpened. "Any imagery?"

Ace hesitated—then remembered the rule: raw facts. "Green flashes at the edges. Not candles. Sea color. Pressure."

Clipboard nodded again. "Any voice?"

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes. Violet. She's...quiet most of the time, but she speaks when the hook tightens."

Mai's eyes flashed. "What does she say?"

Ace's throat tightened. "She...encourages it. Calls it song. Says it's easier if I stop fighting."

Mai's jaw clenched hard.

Clipboard wrote something without looking down.

Then she asked the question that made Ace's stomach tighten.

"Do you want to stop fighting?"

Ace stared at her.

Mai's body went still, like a blade being held back.

Ace exhaled through her nose, slow. "No."

Clipboard nodded once, satisfied. "Good."

Mai let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

Clipboard turned to Bright. "Dr. Bright. What did the interface say verbatim?"

Bright's mouth tightened. "Not verbatim. But close: she confirmed compatibility. She stated the node 'prefers clarity.' She said the node 'will learn.' She implied the node isn't bound to platform—bound to

medium.”

Clipboard’s pen paused. “Medium.”

Bright nodded, grim. “Steel. Water. Signal.”

Clipboard wrote. Then looked at Ace. “Did she say anything else that stuck.”

Ace swallowed. “She said...if we left, we’d trigger a response we couldn’t contain.”

Clipboard nodded slowly. “And did you.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “Yes.”

Mai’s voice was cold. “We weren’t given a choice.”

Clipboard’s gaze flicked to Mai. “I know.”

A beat of silence.

Then the room did something strange.

Not a sound.

Not a light flicker.

A sensation—Ace felt it in her sternum first.

A faint tightening, like the tag-line noticed the quiet environment and tested the edges of it.

Mai’s hand snapped to Ace’s wrist immediately.

Ace’s breath hitched.

Clipboard’s eyes sharpened. “Hook attempt?”

Ace nodded, jaw clenched. “Yes.”

Clipboard stepped closer—not touching—just observing Ace’s face like a medic watching pupil response.

“Does it feel like a pull toward water,” Clipboard asked, “or toward signal.”

Ace swallowed. “Signal.”

Mai’s voice was low and brutal. “So it doesn’t care where we are. It cares if it can talk.”

Clipboard nodded once. “Correct.”

Mai’s fingers tightened. “Then why does this room help.”

Clipboard’s answer was immediate. “Because this room doesn’t amplify. It doesn’t relay. It doesn’t provide clean channels. It forces the coupling to work harder.”

Ace’s sternum tugged again, then eased slightly, like something outside had tried and found the

resistance irritating.

Clipboard watched that micro-change and nodded as if confirming a hypothesis.

“Good,” she murmured. Then, to Ace: “You are going to keep the dampener patch. We will add a second layer.”

She opened her sealed case and removed a thin collar-like band—matte black, flexible, with faint embedded threads like a circuit drawn by a spider.

Mai’s eyes narrowed instantly. “What is that.”

Clipboard didn’t look at her. “A passive interference band. It doesn’t block, it fuzzes. It adds noise to the coupling at a biological interface level.”

Mai’s voice was sharp. “You’re putting tech on her body.”

Clipboard finally looked at Mai. Calm. Firm. “Yes. And you will let me, because the alternative is hoping willpower beats a system that’s already touched her.”

Mai’s jaw clenched. She hated it. But she didn’t say no.

Ace swallowed. “Do it.”

Clipboard stepped in and carefully placed the band around Ace’s upper chest, just under the collarbone line, snug but not choking. The threads warmed faintly against skin—like a heated blanket on a cold nerve.

Ace felt the tag-line in her sternum flicker—tighten, then loosen—like the coupling tried to re-acquire and slipped.

Mai’s eyes widened by a fraction. “That helped.”

Ace exhaled. “Yes.”

Clipboard nodded once. “Good.”

Bright’s voice was tight. “How long does that last.”

Clipboard didn’t lie. “Hours. Maybe a day. This is not a cure. It is time.”

Mai’s voice was flat. “Time for what.”

Clipboard looked at Bright. “Time to find who authorized an interface handler to run a live calibration test on a platform node.”

Bright’s eyes hardened. “And time to find out what the node is.”

Clipboard nodded once. “Yes.”

Mai leaned closer to Ace, voice softer, still steel. “Anchor check.”

Ace breathed wrong, ragged and real. “Here.”

Mai nodded.

Clipboard checked her watch.

“Five minutes is over,” she said to Mai.

Mai didn’t move immediately. She looked at Ace, eyes searching.

Ace nodded once—small. “I’m okay.”

Mai’s jaw clenched, then she stepped back into the doorway as ordered. Not because she respected Clipboard’s authority. Because she respected the room’s purpose.

Clipboard turned to Bright. “Debrief room. Now.”

Bright nodded once.

Clipboard started to leave, then paused at the door and looked back at Ace.

One last question—quiet, precise.

“Ace,” she said. “If the interface returns and offers you a ‘clean’ reconnection—promise of relief, promise of control—what do you do.”

Ace didn’t hesitate. The answer came out like a rule carved into bone.

“I don’t handshake,” Ace said.

Clipboard nodded once. “Good.”

She closed the door most of the way, leaving it unlatched—Mai still in the doorway, as promised.

Ace sat on the cot, foil blanket around her shoulders, interference band warm against skin.

For the first time since the platform, the tug in her sternum wasn’t gone—but it was muffled.

Not silent.

Just quieter.

And in that quieter space, Ace noticed something that scared her more than the ping:

Violet was quiet too.

Not pushed back.

Not suppressed.

Just...observing.

Like a passenger in the dark, watching the new technology around her and learning its edges.

Ace closed her eyes and breathed wrong on purpose, because ugly human breath was still the only weapon she trusted completely.

Outside the room, through the insulated walls, Ace couldn’t hear the ocean.

But she could feel—faintly—the world still listening.

And somewhere out there, in steel and water and signal, something patient adjusted its search parameters and waited for a cleaner seam.

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