



Chapter 38: Paper Teeth

The debrief room was the opposite of the quiet room.

Not louder—just...sharper.

Hard angles. A table bolted to the deck. Two chairs on one side, one on the other. A wall-mounted recorder with a physical toggle switch and a red light that looked offended at being analog. No windows.

A second camera in the corner—also behind a metal shutter, currently open.

Mai hated the camera instantly. You could see it in the set of her shoulders.

Bright hated the table because it looked like confession furniture.

Clipboard hated neither. She moved like she'd been built for rooms like this.

She sat on the single chair, set the clipboard down, and flipped the recorder switch with a deliberate

click.

Red light on.

“Timestamp,” she said.

Bright gave it automatically. Date, time, maritime coordinate window.

Mai gave nothing. She only stared.

Clipboard looked at Mai once. “Agent Mai, you may remain if you can keep your answers factual.”

Mai’s eyes were cold. “Try me.”

Clipboard nodded once, as if accepting the threat like a weather report.

Then she looked at Bright.

“Dr. Bright,” she said. “Start with the first anomaly. Raw. No narrative.”

Bright exhaled, rubbed his jaw, and began.

“Pressure tap on the hull,” he said. “Not random. Patterned. Three beats, pause, three beats.”

Clipboard wrote.

Mai’s jaw tightened. “That pattern again.”

Bright continued. “Then the speakers. The voice. A memetics vector that attempted to address Ace through the environment. We moved away. We were then routed into substructure.”

Clipboard looked up. “Routed how.”

Bright’s eyes hardened. “By an interface handler.”

Mai cut in, voice clipped. “She wasn’t in pursuit posture. She was guiding posture.”

Clipboard wrote that too.

Bright said, “We found a chamber. A translucent column—embedded node. It emitted the same patterned tone. It attempted handshake behavior keyed to Ace.”

Clipboard’s pen paused. “Handshake behavior: describe.”

Bright swallowed. “Assumption of compatibility. Like it expected a reply.”

Mai’s voice went low. “Like it expected obedience.”

Clipboard didn’t correct the word. She just wrote.

Bright continued, “The handler touched Ace’s shoulder. After that, the external pings intensified. We escaped via auxiliary sub. In the water, we encountered a responder object—non-biological movement, capable of structured signal transmission and physical hull contact.”

Clipboard looked at him very steadily. “Physical hull contact: impact, scrape, or latch.”

Bright's eyes narrowed, remembering. "Brush first. Then forceful contact. Enough to throw us. It also induced system flicker."

Clipboard wrote, then asked, "Did it attempt to breach?"

Bright hesitated a fraction. "Not observed, but capability inferred."

Mai's eyes flashed. "It was close enough to want to."

Clipboard nodded once. "Inferred. Acceptable."

She looked at Mai. "Agent Mai. Sedation."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Aerosol. Delivered by handler. Not a full knockout, but enough to dull judgment and slow reaction. She used it to separate me from Ace—reduce proximity."

Clipboard's gaze sharpened. "So she understood proximity altered coupling."

Mai's eyes were ice. "Yes. She knew."

Clipboard wrote for a long moment, then set the pen down.

The room felt like it tightened around that fact.

Then Clipboard said, "Now we stop describing the anomaly and start describing the organization."

Bright's posture changed—stiff, defensive. "You're making this internal."

Clipboard didn't blink. "It already is."

She tapped the clipboard once. "On what authority was a memetics handler operating live on a platform without your briefing?"

Bright's jaw clenched. "None that came through me."

Clipboard: "On what authority were ceiling relays used in proximity to an unstable lock carrier?"

Mai's voice was low. "None that came through me."

Clipboard's gaze went to the recorder light as if speaking to the people who'd listen later.

"On what authority was a non-Foundation node left active in structural subdeck?"

Bright's voice went flat. "Unknown. But someone knew it existed."

Mai's fingers curled into a fist on the table.

Clipboard leaned back slightly, finally letting her calm show its teeth.

"Good," she said softly. "Because now we have something we can kill."

Bright stared at her. "Kill."

Clipboard nodded once. "Not the node. Not yet. We kill the permission chain. We kill the plausible deniability. We kill the ability to say 'this was an accident.'"

Mai's mouth twisted. "Paper teeth."

Clipboard's eyes flicked to her. "Yes."

Bright exhaled a humorless laugh. "You're Oversight."

Clipboard's voice stayed calm. "Not exactly."

She reached into her coat and pulled out an ID card—no flourish, no drama. Just a piece of laminated authority.

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Internal audit."

Clipboard slid the card back away. "Compartment Integrity."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "That's not a department people talk about."

Clipboard gave Mai a look that was almost sympathetic.

"That's the point," she said.

Bright leaned forward. "What do you want from us."

Clipboard's answer was immediate. "Your raw logs. Your exact movement path. Every lock you touched. Every speaker you heard. Every phrase the handler used that you remember."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "So you can build a case."

Clipboard nodded once. "So I can build a trap."

Bright's posture went rigid. "You're going back."

Clipboard didn't deny it. "Not personally. But yes—this platform will be visited, mapped, and stripped."

Mai's voice was cold. "And the handler."

Clipboard's eyes hardened. "If she's Foundation, she's done. If she's not Foundation, she's worse than done."

Ace's name hadn't been spoken in thirty seconds, and that itself felt suspicious.

Bright noticed too. "Where's Ace in your plan."

Clipboard didn't answer immediately.

When she finally did, her voice was still calm, but it carried weight now.

"Ace is the reason this becomes urgent," Clipboard said. "Ace is also the reason we can bait the node and responder into revealing behavior."

Mai's disruptor wasn't in the room, but her glare was a weapon by itself. "No."

Clipboard met Mai's eyes without flinching. "Not by exposure. By controlled observation with dampeners and interference. We will not hand her to anything. We will use the coupling signature as

a sensor while we build containment.”

Mai’s voice was low and brutal. “You will not use her as a key again.”

Clipboard nodded once, as if agreeing to a constraint. “Understood.”

Bright’s eyes stayed hard. “Can you actually damp the coupling long-term.”

Clipboard’s answer was honest. “Unknown. But we can reduce channel quality and prevent clean handshake conditions.”

Mai’s lips tightened. “So we keep her in rooms that don’t listen.”

Clipboard nodded. “Yes.”

Bright’s voice went quiet. “And Violet.”

Clipboard’s gaze flicked to Bright. “Violet is internal.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “Violet is a person in there.”

Clipboard didn’t argue the word person. She just said, “Violet has an agenda. And tonight, that agenda intersected with an external system. That’s the new variable.”

Bright leaned back, jaw tight. “So we have an inside predator and an outside predator.”

Clipboard’s voice was flat. “Yes.”

Mai muttered, “Perfect.”

Clipboard flipped to a clean page, then spoke like she was dictating the beginning of a war report.

“Action items,” she said. “One: isolate Ace with layered dampening and human anchor protocol. Two: freeze all memetics relay access on platform and audit sedation authorizations. Three: emergency stand-up of a maritime anomaly team with acoustic expertise and structural mapping. Four: identify interface handler from movement logs and visual confirmation. Five: establish decoy coupling signature capability to misdirect responder searches away from Ace.”

Bright’s mouth twisted. “You’re going to teach the Foundation to lie to the ocean.”

Clipboard’s eyes stayed cold. “Yes.”

Mai’s voice was quieter now, but no less sharp. “And you’re going to do it fast, because if that responder learns—”

Clipboard finished the sentence without drama. “—it will stop chasing lies and start extracting truth.”

A silence settled.

Then Bright leaned forward again, eyes hard. “What do you need from Ace.”

Clipboard’s gaze went distant for a fraction of a second—as if she was doing math with human lives.

“Nothing,” she said finally. “Not tonight.”

Mai exhaled like she'd been holding a blade between her teeth.

Clipboard added, "Tonight, her only job is to stay human."

Mai nodded once. "That, she can do."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Can she."

Mai's eyes flashed. "Yes."

Bright didn't argue. He looked away, tired.

Clipboard flipped the recorder toggle off.

The red light died.

In that small darkness, the room felt less like interrogation and more like shelter.

Clipboard stood, collected her things, and spoke one final sentence that landed like a nail in the floor.

"This platform is compromised," she said. "And someone inside the Foundation wanted to see what Ace would do when the medium called her."

Mai's voice was a whisper full of venom. "Then we show them."

Clipboard nodded once. "Exactly."

She opened the door.

Cold corridor air slid in.

Bright stood.

Mai stood.

And somewhere else—two decks away, behind insulated walls—Ace sat on a cot in a room that didn't listen, breathing wrong on purpose.

Human.

Ugly.

Alive.

While the Foundation's paper teeth began to sharpen.

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