



## Chapter 41: The Room That Refuses

They moved deeper into the facility in a straight line.

No turns that felt accidental. No dead ends. Every door had a physical key slot, a manual deadbolt, and a secondary latch that looked like it belonged in a submarine. The air was dry and cold, filtered hard enough to feel like the building was breathing through clenched teeth.

Clipboard led them into a room that looked like someone had tried to design “neutral” and accidentally built “defiant.”

Concrete walls with acoustic treatment panels. A cot. A table. Two chairs. No vents visible except a high grille with a thick mesh behind it. No speaker. No camera, unless it was hidden and they’d gotten better at hiding than Ace wanted to imagine.

Mai stepped in with Ace and didn’t stop at the doorway this time.

Clipboard looked at her.

Mai stared back.

A beat.

Clipboard nodded once. "Anchor stays."

Mai's shoulders loosened by a fraction.

Bright exhaled. "Thank you."

Clipboard didn't react to gratitude like it meant anything.

She placed her case on the table and opened it.

Out came three things:

A second dampening patch—same matte texture, slightly larger.

A thin strip of conductive tape.

A small handheld unit with a single dial and a needle gauge—no display, no UI flourish. Just function.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "What's the dial do?"

Clipboard answered without drama. "Noise injection. Very low amplitude. It won't block the coupling. It will make it harder to stabilize."

Ace swallowed. "So...more fuzz."

Clipboard nodded. "Yes."

Mai's jaw tightened. "And if Violet tries to ride the fuzz?"

Clipboard's gaze flicked to Ace. "Then we learn which direction she prefers."

That sentence tasted like steel.

Ace sat on the cot and forced her hands to unclench.

Mai sat close—chair pulled to Ace's side, knees angled toward her, posture ready to spring.

Bright leaned against the wall, arms folded, eyes scanning corners like he didn't trust architecture.

Clipboard stepped toward Ace with the second patch. "Permission."

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

Clipboard applied the patch slightly higher than the first, overlapping enough to create a layered field. Then she placed the conductive tape in a line that connected the patches to the interference band like she was drawing a circuit on Ace's skin.

Ace felt a faint coolness, then warmth, then a subtle shift in the tug in her sternum—like something tried to pull and found its grip slick.

Mai watched Ace's face. "Any change?"

Ace breathed wrong on purpose, then answered honestly. "The tug is still there, but it feels...blurred."

Clipboard nodded. "Good."

She turned the dial on the handheld unit a hair.

The needle gauge flickered.

Ace felt it immediately—like a faint static in her chest, not painful, just...annoying. A low-level interference that made the coupling feel less like a line and more like a fog.

Mai's eyes sharpened. "Better?"

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Bright muttered, "I can't believe we're doing signal hygiene on a person."

Clipboard didn't look up. "Believe it."

Ace's sternum tugged once—testing.

Then the three-beat hook tried to form.

Ace felt it like muscle memory someone else was trying to install.

Mai's hand snapped to Ace's wrist, firm. "No handshake."

Ace's breath went ragged. "No handshake."

The hook wobbled, tried to stabilize, then slipped—caught in the fuzz.

Mai's mouth tightened in satisfaction. "Good."

Clipboard watched the needle gauge as if it were a heart monitor. "Hook attempt fails under layered dampeners plus anchor plus breathing disruption," she said softly. "Good."

Ace swallowed. "So I'm safe."

Clipboard's eyes lifted to Ace's and held them—calm, honest.

"No," she said. "You're not safe. You're stabilized."

Ace's stomach dropped. It was worse than a lie, but better than comfort.

Mai's voice was low. "Stabilized is good enough for today."

Clipboard nodded once.

Bright shifted his weight. "How long before someone tries to override your compartment integrity with 'we need answers.'"

Clipboard's gaze went colder. "They'll try."

Mai's eyes flashed. "Let them."

Clipboard closed her case and slid it under the table like a weapon stored within reach. "I've issued a temporary quarantine order. It will hold long enough to build a permanent one if we have evidence."

Bright snorted. "Evidence, we have."

Clipboard's voice was flat. "We need evidence that survives internal politics. That is different."

Mai's jaw tightened. "You're good at this."

Clipboard didn't accept praise. "I'm alive because of it."

A silence settled.

Ace's sternum tugged faintly again—less now, muffled and blurred. Violet's presence rose inside her like a shadow behind glass.

Not loud.

Not hungry.

Curious.

They're making you noisy, Violet whispered. That's...annoying. But you know what noise does, Ace? It hides things.

Ace's throat tightened. She didn't respond.

Violet continued anyway, voice smooth in the mind like oil. If they can't hear the medium, they can't hear what else is moving inside it. They'll think the noise is protection. But noise is also cover.

Ace's fingers dug into the foil blanket edge, knuckles whitening.

Mai noticed instantly. "What."

Ace swallowed, careful. "Violet thinks the noise can hide things."

Mai's eyes went hard. "She's right."

Bright's face tightened. "And that means she'll try to move under it."

Clipboard's pen was out again instantly. "Noted."

Mai leaned in close to Ace, voice low and fierce. "Then you don't let her. If you feel her shift, you tell me."

Ace nodded. "Okay."

Bright muttered, "This is going to be fun."

Mai's eyes flicked to him. "Don't."

Bright shut up.

Clipboard stood. "I'm leaving you for thirty minutes. Door remains locked. No visitors. If anyone comes with an order, you do not open. You call for me using the physical alarm button only."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Physical."

Clipboard nodded. "Physical."

She pointed to a small red button set into the wall. It wasn't connected to a speaker. It was connected to a light in a corridor and a wired buzzer—no audio into the room.

Ace stared at it like it was a lifeline.

Clipboard paused at the door and looked back once.

"Ace," she said, "you did well tonight."

Ace blinked. "I did what I had to."

Clipboard nodded. "Yes. That is what 'well' is."

She left.

The heavy door shut.

Deadbolt clacked.

Silence.

Ace sat on the cot with layered patches and static hum in her chest, Mai beside her like a guard dog that had learned empathy, Bright against the wall like a man refusing to collapse.

For the first time in hours, no one was chasing them in real time.

But in the quiet between breaths, Ace could still feel the coupling signature hovering like a ghost line in her sternum—blurred, muffled, waiting.

Mai's hand stayed on Ace's wrist.

Ace breathed wrong on purpose.

And Violet, quiet and amused, watched the new defenses and began counting where the first crack might form—not because she wanted the ocean to win...

but because she wanted Ace to learn what it meant to be the seam.

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Last update: **17/03/2026 17:37**

