



Chapter 28 — Bright, Verified

They took a short pause in a room with nothing reflective, nothing smart, nothing friendly.

HARD LINE sat on the table like an artifact from a more honest era.

Mai turned it on.

“Bright,” she said.

Static, then his voice—worn, sharp, real.

“Report.”

Mai gave raw data first, because that was the only sane way to speak to a nightmare. “Concept insertion increased. Direct push at decision points. Reflection-channel sightings continuing. Near-breach attempt: interior boundary softening. Stopped via deliberate choice + anchor contact. Possible residual sensitivity.”

Bright was silent for a beat—processing, recalibrating.

Then: “Okay. That near-breach matters. We treat you as compromised-adjacent until proven otherwise.”

Ace’s mouth went thin. “I love being a category.”

Bright’s tone went dry. “You were always a category.”

Mai didn’t smile. “Next steps.”

Bright’s voice tightened. “Containment team will work a proper protocol. Not just ad hoc refusal. You’ll stay in analog conditions for now. And Ace—”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “What.”

Bright’s voice went hard. “If the seam uses my voice again, you do not respond. Even if it sounds perfect. Even if it says it knows how to fix the hairline.”

Mai answered instantly. “Understood.”

Ace exhaled slowly. “Yeah. Understood.”

Bright paused, then added, quieter: “Also—Halverson was right. The watcher isn’t you imagining things. Treat it as unknown. Don’t chase. Don’t speak.”

Ace stared at the blank wall. “It’s getting closer.”

Bright didn’t argue. “Then you keep making yourself expensive to approach.”

Mai turned the brick off.

Silence returned.

Ace sat back and let her head touch the wall for one second—then shifted, refusing to let even that become “her spot.”

Mai’s hand brushed Ace’s wrist again—anchor pressure, brief, real.

No ritual words.

No comfort script.

Just: still here. still human.

Ace exhaled.

They’d made it to a place where doors didn’t greet you.

They’d stopped the first real attempt at a breach into the definition of “inside.”

And they’d learned the uncomfortable truth:

The seam wasn’t just trying to get in.

It was trying to teach them that “in” was negotiable.

Not today.

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