



Chapter 15: The Test Nobody Ordered

The platform's idea of "night" was mostly psychological.

The lights dimmed. The hallway traffic quieted. The hum of machinery stayed constant. The sea kept hitting steel at the same tempo it had all day. Nothing outside the bulkheads cared whether humans were asleep.

Which meant sleep had to be earned.

Mai got a bunk room with a medical monitor and a threat in Bright's voice that sounded suspiciously like concern. She lay down because her ribs finally won the vote, but she didn't close her eyes for a long time. When she did, her hand stayed on the disruptor like it was a talisman.

Ace got a separate room.

Not because anyone said it out loud, but because the platform's rules were built from old scars: isolate the variable.

Ace didn't fight it. Not tonight. Not when her chest felt like a radio tuned between stations, catching whispers if she breathed wrong.

The room was clean: narrow bed, plain chair, a wall panel with a heart-rate display, and a ceiling speaker for emergencies. No windows. No mirrors. No decorations. Even the corners were rounded, as if sharp angles could be used as rituals if you weren't careful.

Ace sat on the edge of the bed and listened.

The dampening field kept the three-beat pulse low—soft enough to ignore if she wanted.

But it was still there.

Like someone waiting politely outside a door.

Ace took a slow breath and pressed two fingers to her sternum, feeling the pulse under skin and bone.

Stay quiet, she told Violet internally.

Violet didn't answer with words.

She answered with a warm, content stillness, like a cat pretending to sleep while keeping one eye half-open.

Ace hated how cooperative that felt.

She stood, paced two steps, then stopped because pacing was what predators did in cages.

She sat again.

She forced herself to eat a second protein bar because routine mattered and she was stubborn enough to weaponize routine.

Then the ceiling speaker clicked softly.

Bright's voice: "Ace."

Ace's head lifted instantly. "Yeah."

"I'm outside your room," Bright said. "I'm coming in."

A second later the door opened with a gentle hiss. Bright stepped in, alone, no guards, no clipboard. Just him in a dark jacket that looked like it had been slept in.

He closed the door behind him like he didn't want the hallway to hear what he was about to say.

Ace studied his face.

Bright looked tired in the honest way—like his body had forgotten how to relax. His eyes flicked to Ace's chest display, then back to her eyes.

"How are you," Bright asked.

Ace almost laughed.

Then she didn't.

"Functional," Ace said.

Bright's mouth twitched. "That's not an answer. That's a status report."

Ace shrugged slightly. "You asked. I answered."

Bright sat in the chair, careful, like he didn't want to loom. He didn't try to be friendly. He tried to be useful.

"Mai's asleep," Bright said quietly. "Drugged enough to stay asleep unless you scream."

Ace's jaw tightened. "I won't."

Bright nodded. "Good. Then I'm going to tell you something without Mai here to jump down my throat."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

Bright's voice stayed low. "The tests we said we'd run? The observation suite? The controlled tones?"

Ace's skin prickled. "Yes."

"We're not running them," Bright said.

Ace stared at him. "Why."

Bright exhaled. "Because someone already did."

The words landed like a stone dropped in a quiet room.

Ace's fingers flexed once. "Explain."

Bright tapped his knuckles lightly against the chair arm like he was forcing his own brain into order.

"The container event," Bright said. "The hull tapping. The name whisper. The protocol behavior." He paused. "We replayed the telemetry. We compared it with archived incidents that had similar 'addressing' traits."

Ace's throat tightened. "And."

Bright's eyes held hers. "And the pattern is too clean to be spontaneous."

Ace's voice went flat. "Meaning it was planned."

Bright nodded. "Meaning someone initiated a test."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Order."

Bright shook his head slowly. "Not Order."

The platform's hum felt suddenly louder.

Ace's hands went still, fingers locked together so hard her knuckles whitened.

"If not Order," Ace said, voice controlled, "then who."

Bright didn't answer immediately, and that delay made Ace's stomach drop.

Then he said it anyway.

"Foundation," Bright said.

Ace's eyes sharpened. "No."

Bright's gaze didn't flinch. "Not me. Not my team. Not Kato. But yes—Foundation infrastructure was used."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura tightened instinctively, a silent flare. The room's corners seemed to pull back, like her presence wanted more space.

Bright noticed. He didn't react with fear. He reacted with caution.

"I'm not here to accuse you," Bright said quickly. "I'm here to keep you from being blindsided."

Ace's voice was low. "You're telling me someone used me as bait."

Bright swallowed once. "I'm telling you someone routed you into a situation where your response could be measured."

Ace stared at the bed, then at the wall panel, then at the plainness of the room. Suddenly it didn't feel like safety. It felt like an experiment.

The three-beat pulse in her ribs flickered—quiet, amused.

Violet behind the lock perked up as if she'd heard the word "play."

Ace's voice came very soft. "Why."

Bright's expression tightened. "Because someone in the chain is terrified that Order isn't the only thing in you." He paused. "They want to know what else can answer."

Ace's nails dug into her palms. "So they pushed."

Bright nodded. "They pushed. And when the container began to pattern, they watched to see whether you'd open."

Ace's jaw tightened. "I didn't."

Bright's eyes held hers. "No. You didn't. That's why I'm here."

Ace's breath came slow. She forced the anger to stay inside her skin. Anger didn't help if it became a signal.

"Who," Ace said, each letter clean, "authorized it."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Nobody I can find. That's the problem."

Ace's gaze lifted, cold. "Then it's rogue."

“Or compartmentalized,” Bright replied. “Or both.”

Ace leaned forward slightly, voice low. “Mai can’t know yet.”

Bright nodded immediately. “I know.”

Ace exhaled, controlled. “If she knows, she’ll start a war on this platform.”

Bright’s eyes flicked toward the door. “And she’d win,” he said, deadpan. Then his face sobered. “But it would cost you both.”

Ace swallowed. “So what do we do.”

Bright’s answer came like he’d been rehearsing it in his head for hours.

“We stop being predictable,” Bright said. “And we find out who’s touching our routing.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “How.”

Bright leaned forward slightly. “First: tonight, you sleep. Because if you don’t, your brain will make a door for the thing in your ribs whether you want it to or not.”

Ace’s mouth twisted. “That’s not convincing.”

Bright’s voice went firm. “It’s true.”

Ace didn’t argue, because she knew he was right.

Bright continued. “Second: in the morning, you and Mai leave this platform—but not along the scheduled route. Kato thinks you’re staying twenty-four. He’ll prep accordingly. Someone else—whoever initiated the test—will expect you to be here.”

Ace’s gaze sharpened. “So we disappear.”

Bright nodded. “For a short window. Enough to see who panics.”

Ace’s lips parted slightly. “You’re going to bait the baiters.”

Bright’s mouth twitched, humorless. “Yes.”

Ace stared at him.

This was dangerous. This was messy. This was exactly the kind of operational chaos that usually got people killed.

And yet—

It was the first plan today that wasn’t purely defensive.

Ace felt something in her chest tighten—not the pulse, not Violet.

Her own will.

“All right,” Ace said quietly.

Bright's shoulders eased a fraction.

Ace added, voice low and sharp: "If this goes wrong, I'm not dying for internal politics."

Bright nodded once, eyes steady. "Agreed."

A pause settled.

Then Bright said something softer, almost reluctant.

"For what it's worth...you handled the container event better than most people would handle a gun pointed at them."

Ace didn't respond to the praise.

She responded to the subtext.

"They expected me to answer," Ace said.

Bright nodded. "Yes."

Ace's gaze lowered. "And something out there still expects me to."

Bright's voice tightened. "That's why you don't do this alone. If you feel the pulse spike, you wake Mai. If you can't wake Mai, you wake me. If you can't wake me..."

He paused, choosing words carefully.

"...you fight to stay conscious."

Ace's throat tightened. "Okay."

Bright stood. "Sleep."

Ace didn't move. "If I dream."

Bright didn't hesitate. "Then you call it what it is. A dream. Not a door. Not a message. A dream."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Violet will try to..."

Bright's eyes hardened. "Then you don't negotiate. You don't bargain. You don't 'just peek.' You hold the lock."

Ace nodded once, slow.

Bright moved to the door.

Then he stopped with his hand on the panel and looked back.

"One more thing," Bright said quietly. "If someone here wanted you to answer...they might try again tonight. While you're vulnerable."

Ace's skin went cold. "On this platform."

Bright nodded. "Yes."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura rose a fraction.

Bright added, voice flat: "And if they do, I need you to remember: the Foundation is big. Not all of it is your enemy. But parts of it will treat you like an asset. Assets don't get to say no unless they make it expensive."

Ace met his eyes.

"I know," Ace said.

Bright opened the door and left.

The door hissed shut.

Ace sat on the bed for a long time, staring at the wall panel's steady pulse line, listening to the platform's hum, feeling the three-beat rhythm under her ribs.

Muted.

Waiting.

Then she lay down.

She didn't close her eyes immediately.

She kept one hand on her sternum like she could physically hold the lock shut.

And in the quiet, Violet whispered inside her—not pleading, not pushing.

Just amused.

They're afraid of you, Violet purred. That's new. I like it.

Ace stared at the ceiling, jaw tight.

"Sleep," she told herself out loud, like a command.

Her eyelids finally lowered.

The last thing she heard before slipping toward unconsciousness was the distant sound of sea against steel—

—and, very faintly, a tap far below on one of the platform's legs.

Once.

Twice.

Three beats.

Pause.

Three beats.

No one else woke.

No alarms sounded.

But Ace's pulse line on the wall panel spiked by a single notch—

—as if something, somewhere, had just checked that the door was still there.

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