



Chapter 16: Dream Interface

Sleep didn't arrive like a blanket.

It arrived like a trapdoor.

Ace's consciousness dipped, caught, dipped again—each time her brain tried to wake itself back up out of habit, out of mistrust. But the platform's dampening field dulled the edge of the three-beat pulse just enough for exhaustion to finally win.

Her hand stayed on her sternum.

A stupid gesture.

A human one.

And then the room fell away.

Not into darkness.

Into candlelight.

It was never darkness first. It was always warm first—orange flicker on stone, soft shadows dancing like they had their own lungs. Ace felt the scent of incense and iron. She felt the weight of kneeling even before she saw her knees.

She was small again.

Too small.

Her hands were out in front of her, palms up, trembling—not with fear, with cold. The stone beneath her was damp. The air tasted like old prayers.

A circle of candles surrounded her.

Not wide.

Tight.

Close enough that if she leaned forward she could burn her face.

And beyond the candle circle, the choir remnants stood—shapes in hooded black, mouths moving in a hymn that didn't care whether she understood it.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace's heart tried to match it.

She hated that part.

In the dream, she could feel Violet behind her eyes, not as a separate presence, but as an echo of something that had always been near. Like a second shadow on a wall.

Ace tried to stand.

Her legs didn't move.

A gentle pressure held her down—hands on her shoulders, not crushing, just firm enough to say: stay.

A voice spoke from somewhere beyond the candles. Calm. Patient.

Not the priest from the warehouse.

Not the voice that had whispered through steel.

A different voice.

Older.

Clean.

It didn't speak in words that vibrated her ribs.

It spoke in words that clicked into her mind like code.

Vessel. Confirm integrity.

Ace's stomach twisted.

This wasn't just memory.

Memory didn't issue commands.

Ace forced herself to look up.

At the edge of the candle circle, someone stood with no hood.

A woman.

Not tall. Not short. Hair pulled back. Face plain in the way that made it harder to remember. Like her features were designed to be overlooked.

Foundation gray, but without a uniform.

Her eyes were the wrong part.

They had that same violet glimmer—not bright, not dramatic. Just faint, like reflected light on deep water.

Ace's throat tightened. "Who are you."

The woman smiled slightly, as if the question was expected.

Interface.

Ace's fingers curled in her palms. "That's not a name."

The woman's voice stayed calm, almost kind. Names are for people. I am a function.

Ace tried to breathe.

The hymn continued around her, soft but relentless.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace forced her lungs to stay out of sync with it, stubbornly irregular, like refusing a dance.

"You're not real," Ace said.

The woman's smile didn't change. You're dreaming. I am real enough.

Ace felt the difference then.

The dream had the loose edges of memory—flicker, blur, emotional heaviness.

But the woman was sharp.

Too sharp.

Like an object placed into a dream from outside.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura flared instinctively—except in the dream it didn't manifest as emerald edges.

It manifested as quiet.

The candle flames bent away slightly, as if the air itself didn't want to touch her.

The woman's eyes brightened a fraction. There. That response. Good.

Ace's jaw clenched. "You're testing me."

Yes, the woman said simply. We require calibration.

Ace's blood went cold. "Foundation."

The woman didn't deny it. She also didn't confirm it with pride.

The organization is a body, she said. Bodies have many hands. Some hands are careful. Some hands are curious. Some hands are afraid.

Ace's pulse spiked.

She felt it in the dream as a thud under her ribs, and the hymn tried to catch it and drag it into rhythm.

Ace pressed her palm to her sternum harder, even in the dream, as if physical pressure could override metaphysics.

"What do you want," Ace demanded.

The woman stepped closer to the candle circle. The heat should've touched her skin.

It didn't.

She spoke, and each word landed with clinical precision.

We want to know whether your lock is yours.

Ace stared. "What."

Your containment contract. Your internal partition. The woman's head tilted. Is it self-authored? Or does it rely on external reinforcement?

Ace's teeth bared. "I wrote it."

The woman's smile sharpened slightly. Then you won't mind proving it.

The candles flared.

The hymn rose.

The choir remnants' voices layered into something denser, almost beautiful, and the beauty made it worse—made it more seductive.

Ace felt Violet behind the lock stir, delighted by the familiarity.

This is ours, Violet purred. This is the old room. I remember this. Let me—

“No,” Ace snapped, aloud in the dream, voice cracking through the hymn.

The woman watched like a scientist watching a reaction in a beaker.

Good, she said. Now hold that while I remove the dampeners.

Ace’s stomach dropped. “Remove—”

The air changed.

The candlelight sharpened.

The hymn’s three-beat pattern slammed into Ace’s ribs like a fist.

In the waking world, the platform’s dampening field had muffled the pulse.

In the dream, the dampeners vanished like a switch being flipped.

Ace felt the pulse surge, loud and clean and hungry.

The woman’s eyes glimmered violet. Confirm. Response to harmonic stimulus.

Ace’s vision flickered red.

Not just candlelight.

A child’s palms.

A voice saying good girl in a tone that had nothing to do with kindness.

Ace’s body tried to match the hymn rhythm.

Her heart tried to obey.

Her lungs tried to fall into the three-beat pattern because it was easier than fighting.

Ace clamped her jaw until her teeth hurt.

“No,” she whispered.

The woman didn’t move. Hold.

Ace felt Violet press against the lock like a tide pushing a door.

Open, Violet whispered. Just a crack. We can answer them. We can show them how strong we are. We can—

Ace’s shadow-pressure aura surged in the dream, not outward, but inward—compressing, tightening, reinforcing her internal boundary like steel bands around a vault.

“I wrote it,” Ace said, voice shaking, “so I can hold it.”

The hymn screamed louder.

The choir remnants leaned forward, as if their breath could push the lock open.

The woman watched, expression calm.

Confirm.

Ace's knees on stone burned with cold. Her palms trembled. Tears threatened—anger tears, frustration tears, the kind that came from being forced to fight inside your own chest.

Ace forced her eyes up.

She looked straight at the woman.

"You're doing this in my dream because you think it's safer," Ace snarled. "You think you can poke at me without consequences."

The woman's smile faded a fraction. Dreams are interfaces. Interfaces can be monitored.

Ace's voice went low. "Then monitor this."

She stopped fighting the hymn directly.

Instead, she did what she'd learned with Mai's disruptor: she broke rhythm.

Ace's breathing became deliberately wrong—ragged, irregular, not matching anything. She shifted her knees slightly on stone, changing pressure points, disrupting the stillness the ritual wanted.

And most importantly—

She stopped thinking in sentences.

She thought in anchors.

Mai's face.

Mai's voice.

Mai's hand on her wrist.

The smell of coffee regret.

The sound of boots on wet dock.

The weight of a katana hilt.

Reality. Messy. Human. Not candle-perfect.

The hymn stumbled.

Just a fraction.

The woman's eyes narrowed. External anchor.

Ace smiled without warmth. "Yes."

The woman's voice hardened slightly. Remove it.

Ace's stomach dropped again.

Because suddenly the candle circle widened.

The dream-space stretched like rubber.

The room expanded into a vast chamber, and the choir remnants multiplied in the shadows until there were too many to count.

And Mai was there.

Not as herself.

As a copy.

Standing at the edge of the circle, eyes silver-blue, expression blank.

Ace's throat closed.

"No," Ace whispered.

The woman's voice remained clinical. Anchor simulation. If your lock is self-authored, you will not require her.

The Mai-copy lifted her disruptor.

Pointed it at Ace.

And spoke in Mai's exact cadence, exact tone, the one that could slice through panic.

"Ace," the copy said softly. "Open it. You're tired. Let it out. We'll handle it together."

Ace's whole body recoiled.

The hymn surged, trying to catch her flinch and turn it into surrender.

Violet purred behind the lock, delighted by the cruelty.

They're clever, Violet whispered. They know what you need. Let me—

"No," Ace said, louder now.

She looked at the Mai-copy and felt something fierce rise in her chest.

Not comfort.

Rage.

Because Mai wasn't a tool.

Mai wasn't an anchor to be simulated and weaponized.

Mai was real.

And this thing in her dream was not her.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura snapped outward like a whip.

The candle flames bent violently.

The Mai-copy flickered—image tearing like bad video.

Ace forced her voice into the shape of a command.

“YOU ARE NOT HER.”

The words hit the dream like a shockwave.

The Mai-copy shattered into black dust and candle smoke.

The hymn faltered, stunned.

For the first time, the woman's calm expression cracked.

Not fear.

Interest.

Strong response, she murmured. Protective aggression.

Ace's breathing came hard now, lungs refusing the hymn rhythm.

Ace locked eyes with the woman.

“You want proof my lock is mine?” Ace said, voice shaking but sharp. “Here's proof.”

She reached inward—not to open Violet.

To seal her deeper.

Ace imagined a second bolt sliding shut, heavier than the first, forged from everything she'd learned since meeting Mai: consent, control, edges held with care, power held without worship.

Violet hissed behind the lock, annoyed.

The hymn's rhythm lost purchase.

The three-beat pulse under Ace's ribs didn't vanish, but it dulled—forced into the background by her will.

The woman's violet eyes narrowed.

Confirm. Lock integrity holds under high stimulus.

Ace spat, “Get out of my head.”

The woman smiled again, small and cold. We are already in. That is the point.

Ace's shadow-pressure surged—

—and the dream fractured.

Candlelight snapped into shards.

The hymn broke into noise.

The chamber collapsed inward like a folding map.

And Ace jolted awake in her platform bed, lungs dragging in air like she'd been underwater.

The wall panel in her room screamed with a silent red alert: her pulse line spiking hard, irregular, ugly.

The ceiling speaker clicked—then crackled.

Bright's voice came through, sharp and urgent. "Ace! You spiked. Talk to me. Right now."

Ace sat up fast, hand on her sternum, fingers shaking.

In her ribs, the three-beat pulse was loud again—inside the platform, where it shouldn't be.

Not as loud as in the dream.

But louder than before.

As if something had learned that dreams were a door.

Ace swallowed and forced her voice steady.

"Bright," Ace said, hoarse, "someone just ran a test inside my sleep."

A pause.

Then Bright's voice went very quiet.

"Describe them."

Ace stared at the blank wall, heart hammering.

"A woman," Ace said, voice tight. "Not Order. Not a priest. She called herself an interface."

Bright didn't speak for a long second.

When he did, the calm was gone.

"Stay awake," Bright said. "Do not go back to sleep. I'm coming."

Ace's jaw clenched.

In the dim room, Violet's presence behind the lock was humming softly—not triumphant, not angry.

Just pleased.

Because now they all knew the same thing:

The enemy didn't just knock on doors in steel.

It could knock on doors in dreams.

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