



## Chapter 27: No Handshake

The tone pressed harder.

Not louder—closer.

Like an invisible thumb pushing into the center of Ace’s sternum, searching for the exact place where a reply would be automatic. The column’s green depth rippled, and the air around it shimmered faintly, bending the weak light in the cavity.

Ace’s ribs tried to obey.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Her heart fought the pull, and for a moment it felt like her own body had become contested territory—two protocols attempting to claim the same rhythm.

Mai’s fingers tightened around Ace’s hand.

A human grip.

Warm through gloves.

Not a command. Not a system. Not calibration.

Just: I'm here. Stay.

Bright's eyes flicked between the interface and the column like he was tracking two predators in one room.

He spoke low, to Ace, to Mai, to himself. "It's trying to establish a channel."

The interface's voice was calm, almost conversational, despite the pressure in the air. "It is establishing a channel. She is compatible."

Mai's disruptor stayed aimed at the interface's throat, perfectly steady. "You don't get to say that like it's a compliment."

The interface didn't blink. "It isn't."

Ace forced her breathing wrong—ragged, uneven. She kept her eyes on Mai, not on the column, because looking at the column felt like looking at a mirror that wanted to decide what you were.

Mai's voice was low. "Ace. Repeat after me."

Ace swallowed. "Okay."

Mai spoke slowly, steady as a metronome that refused the three-beat pattern. "No handshake."

Ace's lips moved. "No handshake."

Mai: "No reply."

Ace: "No reply."

Mai: "No rhythm."

Ace's jaw clenched. "No rhythm."

The pull in Ace's ribs wavered. Not gone, but disrupted—like a machine that expected a clean signal and received static instead.

The column pulsed again, more insistently.

The tone sharpened, and for a fraction of a second Ace saw it—not with her eyes, but with something deeper: a pattern of addressing, a clean protocol structure that treated her chest as a port.

Violet behind the lock laughed softly, delighted.

It thinks you're ours, Violet whispered. It thinks you belong. Let it in. Just a crack—

Ace snarled under her breath, "Shut up."

Bright caught the sound and stiffened. "Ace."

Ace's voice came out rough. "She's...talking."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Hold."

Mai didn't flinch. She simply tightened her grip and stepped half a pace closer, putting her own body between Ace and the column's line of "attention" as if that mattered.

And maybe it did.

The interface's eyes flicked to Mai. "Your proximity alters response. Interesting."

Mai smiled thinly. "I'm not interesting. I'm inconvenient."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "You used sedation to reduce proximity."

The interface's smile was faint. "Yes."

Bright's voice went cold. "So you admit weaponizing a relationship."

The interface's gaze returned to Ace. "Relationships are variables. Variables are managed."

Mai's disruptor trembled a millimeter—rage wanting to escape containment.

Ace felt it, and it steadied her. Not because she wanted Mai angry, but because Mai's anger was real, and real things anchored better than comforting lies.

Bright whispered, "We need to break line-of-sight. The node is using her as a reference."

Mai's gaze flicked to the cavity walls. "We don't have cover."

Bright's eyes landed on the jagged tunnel mouth behind the interface. "We do if she moves."

Mai's voice went flat. "Then we make her move."

The interface watched them like she was watching animals approach an electric fence.

"You can't kill me," she said calmly. "Not here. Not now. If you kill me, you will be reclassified. You will lose all leverage."

Mai's smile sharpened. "Watch me decide leverage is overrated."

Ace squeezed Mai's hand once, small and quick. Not a plea. A check-in.

Mai didn't look at Ace, but her fingers squeezed back.

Bright's jaw worked. He made a decision that tasted like regret.

He raised his token, thumbed a function Ace hadn't seen before.

The token emitted a short burst—silent to ears, but the cavity's lights flickered like a heartbeat.

The column's tone stuttered.

The interface's eyes narrowed. "What did you do?"

Bright's voice was flat. "I just told the platform's safety system that this chamber has a containment breach and a possible flooding event."

Mai blinked once, then grinned. "Bright."

Bright's mouth twisted. "If we're going to be hunted, we might as well set the building on fire."

The interface's calm cracked slightly. "You're escalating infrastructure alarms."

Bright met her eyes. "You escalated sleep."

The platform responded.

A distant, deeper alarm tone rolled through the structure—lower frequency, the kind that made your stomach tighten.

The cavity's emergency lights shifted from red to a pulsing amber.

A mechanical voice—not memetics, not interface—boomed faintly through distant speakers:

"BALLAST ANOMALY. RESTRICTED AREA. EVACUATE SUBDECK SECTORS."

Mai's eyes widened. "That'll pull bodies."

Bright nodded. "Including hers."

The interface's gaze flicked upward, then back to Ace—calculating. She was still calm, but now her calm had edges.

"You're attempting to create noise," she said.

Bright nodded. "Yes."

The column pulsed again—angrier now, if a system could be angry. The tone sharpened, pressing into Ace's ribs like a drilling bit.

Ace's vision blurred at the edges.

Not darkness—green shimmer, faint candle-flicker, the dream trying to leak into reality.

Violet pressed hard against the lock, ecstatic.

Now, Violet whispered. Now you could open and they'd all—

Ace's knees almost buckled.

Mai's grip yanked her back upright instantly, body close, voice harsh and real.

"Ace," Mai said, low. "Look at me."

Ace did, panting.

Mai's eyes were silver-blue ice. "Say my name."

Ace's throat tightened. "Mai."

Mai: "Again."

Ace: "Mai."

Mai: "Again."

Ace's voice cracked slightly. "Mai."

The column's tone stuttered.

The three-beat pulse lost purchase for half a second.

Bright used the half second.

He lunged—not at the interface's face, but at her wrist.

He grabbed her forearm and twisted, not breaking, just controlling, yanking her sideways into the tunnel wall.

The interface's composure didn't shatter, but she exhaled sharply in surprise—human reflex.

Mai moved instantly, disruptor shifting from throat to sternum.

"Move," Mai said.

The interface's eyes flicked to Mai, then to Ace.

"You can't keep her from it forever," she said softly. "It will learn. It will adjust."

Mai's voice was a whisper. "Then we move faster than it learns."

Bright shoved the interface backward down the tunnel mouth just enough to clear the path.

Mai didn't shoot.

She didn't need to.

She stepped forward, shoulder-checking the interface out of the doorway like she was removing a piece of furniture.

"Out," Mai hissed.

The interface stumbled a step—recovered instantly—eyes narrowing now with something like genuine irritation.

Ace used the opening.

She grabbed Bright's sleeve. "Now."

Bright nodded. "Go."

They moved, slipping past the interface into the tunnel mouth.

The interface reached out—

—not to grab.

Not to restrain.

To touch Ace's shoulder lightly, almost gentle.

And in that fingertip contact, Ace felt a jolt: not electricity, not pain.

A clean spike of addressing.

A confirmation ping.

Compatible.

Ace jerked away violently, aura flaring instinctively.

The interface's eyes glimmered. "Confirmed."

Mai's disruptor snapped up, aimed at the interface's head now, voice cold enough to freeze water.

"Touch her again," Mai said softly, "and I stop caring about classification."

The interface held Mai's gaze for one long beat.

Then she stepped back, letting them go.

Not because she was afraid.

Because she'd gotten what she wanted.

A confirmation.

Ace stumbled into the tunnel, breath ragged, heart hammering wrong on purpose.

Behind them, the column pulsed one last time, and the tone followed them into the tunnel like a scent.

Bright whispered, "Keep moving."

Mai hissed, "No handshakes."

Ace swallowed hard, shaking. "No handshakes."

They ran—not full sprint, but fast enough now that the tunnel's tight geometry became a blur of damp steel and composite.

Above them, the platform's new alarms spread like wildfire.

Doors locking. Compartments sealing. People running toward a "ballast anomaly."

Noise. Confusion. Bodies pulled away from their hunt.

And in the dark behind Ace's ribs, Violet smiled.

Not because she'd won.

Because the game had just gotten a new player—  
and it had touched Ace’s shoulder like a signature.

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