Vacuum Sealed

The Cabin · Book 10

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Chapter 1

The corridor outside the Sector 7 locker alcove was only forty inches wide, narrowed further by the insulated greywater conduits bolted at shoulder height along the bulkhead. When two first-shift technicians rounded the junction heading toward the mess hall, Mei had to turn sideways and press her shoulder blades flat against the vibrating steel wall to let them pass.

Neither of them lowered their voices.

"Check the corner feed on the sub-board," the taller tech—Miller, from primary scrubbers—said, tapping the back of his wrist as he squeezed past Mei's knees. "Tanaka's restriction clock just rolled past forty-eight hours. Pre-arrival lock went live Tuesday."

His partner, a woman from thermal maintenance, glanced over her shoulder at Mei with the casual curiosity of someone checking a weather report. "Heard Stanford ran the same ninety-day attendant protocol on Titan Station before she transferred. Keeps her own wellness numbers above ninety-five the whole tour and locks her primary down to zero. Better you than me, Tanaka. Watch the humidity on Deck 9—it's already sticky down there."

Mei kept her chin level, her arms folded lightly across the front of her gray station-issue top until their boots faded down the grating. She did not answer. On HAB-7, there was no point wasting breath on what was already public telemetry.

Above the junction door, the routine departmental status strip glowed in pale blue numerals. Right beneath the 20.8 percent oxygen baseline and the main scrubber pressure sat the personnel wellness block that every crew member on the ring could read from any terminal or wall repeater:

CHIEF, ENV-SYS: STANFORD, C. — SATISFACTION INDEX: PENDING ARRIVAL.

ATTENDANT: TANAKA, M. — CELIBACY MANDATE: 48 HRS 14 MIN (ACTIVE / LOGGED).

Two days into the preparatory lock, the restriction wasn't painful yet, only insistent—a low, background awareness under her skin that made the cool air of the passage feel sharper against her bare legs and forearms, and turned the biometric band on her left wrist into a warm weight she could never quite ignore. Her mandate for the next ninety days was logged in black and white in her personnel file: optimize workflow, morale, and physical wellness for the incoming Section Chief, and remain strictly celibate until the monthly all-staff calibration.

The inner airlock at the end of the approach sealed with a soft, pressurized sigh. Mei kept her eyes on the status panel until the indicator light turned green, then stepped through into the primary operations corridor. The deck plates vibrated faintly through the thick composite soles of her boots—the station's usual low mechanical hum, deeper here near the outer hull

where the massive circulation pumps pushed recycled air through a habitat without a single window to the black outside.

She had been told the new section chief would arrive on the 1800 shuttle. She had not been told the chief would already be waiting at the end of the corridor.

The woman stood with one hand resting on the edge of a diagnostic table, her weight shifted comfortably onto one hip. Long blonde hair fell past her shoulders in loose waves, catching the cool blue-and-violet glare from the overhead strips. She wore the same station-issue athletic set as everyone else—fitted gray top, matching shorts—but the fabric sat differently on her. Her posture was loose in a way that still took up more of the cramped corridor than it needed to, as if the steel walls had been built to her measurements rather than the other way around.

Mei stopped a few paces short of the table, her tablet held ready against her side. "Officer Tanaka. Reporting for orientation."

The blonde's gaze lifted. Blue eyes, clear and unhurried. She looked Mei over once, head to boots, taking in the slight tension in Mei's shoulders and the biometric band at her wrist, then nodded.

"Commander Stanford. You'll be working under me on environmental systems." Her voice was even, the accent flat and North American. "Walk me through the overnight logs while we go."

Mei stepped closer. The commander turned and started down the corridor without waiting to see if she was followed. Mei matched her pace at once, her tablet already open to the overnight summary. She began with the oxygen variance on Deck 7, detailing the numbers that had sat outside the optimal

band for eleven hours before the backup filters compensated. Stanford listened without interrupting, one hand occasionally brushing the conduit casing along the wall as they passed a junction.

Because Mei's job was no longer just maintaining the machinery—because her own evaluation depended on anticipating this woman's stress and keeping her satisfied—Mei watched more than the screen. She noted the unhurried length of Stanford's stride, the way she breathed evenly through her nose, and the faint knot of travel stiffness sitting between her shoulder blades.

At the first control alcove Stanford stopped. The holographic panel bloomed at her touch, pale blue lines mapping the station's closed air loops in concentric glowing rings. Down here in the sealed belly of the station, those circulating blue lines were the closest thing to a horizon anyone ever saw. Stanford studied the display for a moment, then glanced sideways.

"You're shorter than I expected."

Mei's mouth stayed closed. She watched the commander's finger move across the projected graph, tracing the recovery curve.

"And quieter," Stanford added. She straightened. In the tight alcove, the movement brought her shoulder near enough that Mei caught the clean scent of the station's standard soap layered over something warmer—skin heat that hadn't yet cooled from the shuttle deck. "Good. The last tech talked through every adjustment."

They continued deeper into the core. Mei kept the tablet angled so Stanford could inspect the night's pressure readings

without either of them having to reach. At the next station the commander leaned in to check a valve schematic. Her blonde hair slipped forward over her shoulder; a heavy strand brushed against the bare skin of Mei's wrist right beside her sensor band. Stanford did not move it.

Mei felt a tiny jump in her pulse and knew, with a quiet flare of claustrophobia, that the station software had just logged the spike to the tenth of a beat.

"You'll be on second shift with me for the next cycle," Stanford said, still looking at the schematic. "I like my people close while I learn the board."

Mei's thumb rested against the cool aluminum edge of the tablet. She nodded once.

Stanford straightened again. The narrow passage ahead opened into the main environmental bay—not a wide observation deck, but a cavernous, windowless drum of pulsing scrubber towers, manifold pipes, and glowing blue consoles sealed behind triplethick hull plating. Every breath in the chamber had already passed through two hundred pairs of lungs down-sector, scrubbed of carbon and fed back into the loop. For a moment neither of them spoke. The station's deep vibration filled the space between them.

"Any questions before we start?" Stanford asked.

Mei looked at the towering manifold wall, then back at the woman beside her. The blonde's expression was open, almost mild. Nothing in it suggested urgency—or doubt about who owned the room.

"No, Commander," Mei said.

Stanford's mouth moved, the smallest shift. "Then let's begin."

They spent the first hour at the main environmental board. Stanford moved between the holographic overlays and the physical valve panel without wasted motion, occasionally asking Mei to call up a specific log or confirm a reading. Mei answered each time, her voice low, the tablet held at a steady angle so the commander could read it without shifting her stance. Whenever Stanford's focus narrowed on a stubborn pressure variance, Mei already had the corresponding sub-loop schematic queued on her screen before Stanford asked for it.

At the end of the hour Stanford stepped back from the board. The pale blue light from the displays slid across the line of her collarbone and the curve of one shoulder. She rolled that shoulder once, slow—the exact spot of transit tension Mei had clocked earlier—then glanced down at her.

"Your shift ends in forty minutes," Stanford said. "Stay. I want to walk the secondary loops while the load is still low."

Mei closed the tablet until the screen dimmed against her palm and followed Stanford out of the bay into the narrower service corridor that ran parallel to the outer hull. Here, with only the pressure skin separating them from vacuum, the ambient air dropped ten degrees, raising gooseflesh along Mei's bare thighs and arms. Condensation beaded along the lowest pipe runs and dripped onto the steel grating at irregular intervals, each drop striking metal with a soft, distinct sound that counted off the seconds.

Stanford stopped at the first access panel. She keyed it open and leaned in, one hand braced against the cold metal frame. The position put her body squarely across the narrow passage, blocking it completely.

Mei waited. When the commander did not shift out of the way, Mei had to step directly into her personal space to read the secondary pressure gauge mounted inside the recess. Their shoulders brushed. In the chill of the hull corridor, the heat radiating off Stanford's body felt like an open furnace door. Stanford's hair shifted with the vent draft, and a few strands settled against the bare side of Mei's neck. The blonde did not pull them back.

"Numbers," Stanford said.

Mei read them aloud, keeping her voice level while the needle sat just inside the green band. Stanford listened without yielding an inch of space, then reached directly across Mei to adjust a manual valve. The motion pressed her chest briefly, firmly against Mei's upper arm; the gray fabric of the athletic top was warm from her skin. Mei kept her eyes locked on the gauge until the needle settled, willing her breathing to stay shallow so her chest wouldn't brush against Stanford's ribs.

Stanford straightened, closed the panel, and continued down the corridor without comment. Mei matched her stride, the tablet held tight against her thigh. At the next junction—a cramped inspection niche where the main air ducts curved back toward the core—the commander slowed and turned her head just enough to study Mei's profile.

"You don't fill silence," Stanford said. "Most people do."

Mei stopped beside her, leaving a careful distance between their elbows in the tight niche.

"I prefer people who stay quiet until they have something useful," Stanford continued, her eyes resting on the status conduits pulsing along the steel bulkhead. "You'll be useful. I can already tell."

The dim corridor strips caught the clean edge of her jaw and the long fall of her blonde hair. Mei watched the pressure needle on the duct manifold for a moment longer, then spoke.

"The secondary loop on Deck 9 is still running three percent high on humidity. I can pull the filter history if you want it before you leave the board."

Stanford's mouth moved again, that small, knowing shift Mei had noticed earlier. She pushed off the guard rail and started back toward the main bay.

"Pull it," she said over her shoulder. "And stay until I dismiss you. I don't like training people twice."

Mei followed. The tablet warmed under her fingers as she brought up the filter log. Ahead of her, Stanford's stride stayed unhurried, the gray athletic set shifting cleanly with each step, the long blonde hair moving against the fabric of her back. Mei kept her eyes on the corridor ahead and matched the pace exactly.

The filter history took longer than Mei expected. She stood at the secondary terminal in the main bay while Stanford moved between the primary board and the physical valve wall, checking seals by hand. With the bay doors closed for the evening load, the recycled air felt thicker, holding the warmth of the machinery; the commander's gray top clung where sweat had darkened the fabric between her shoulder blades. Mei kept her eyes on the scrolling log, but the numbers blurred every time Stanford passed within arm's reach.

At 2140 Stanford returned to the terminal, standing close enough that Mei could feel the heat coming off her bare arm. The blonde reached past her and tapped the display, enlarging the humidity spike from Deck 9—her finger passing half an inch

from the corner telemetry readout where Mei's restriction counter now read 52 HOURS.

"Three percent is nothing," Stanford said. "But you flagged it anyway."

Mei's fingers stayed on the edge of the terminal. "The filters were replaced six days ago. They shouldn't be drifting yet."

Stanford's hand remained on the glass, her thumb resting just above Mei's. "Show me the replacement record."

Mei pulled it up. The two lines of data sat side by side. Stanford read them without leaning closer; she didn't need to. The space between them had already narrowed until Mei's shoulder almost touched the commander's ribs.

"Good catch," Stanford said. She straightened, but only enough to look down at Mei. "Most people wait until the alarm trips."

The bay lights dimmed for the night cycle, shifting the holographic overlays to a softer, deeper blue. Stanford stepped back half a pace, then turned toward the small ready room attached to the bay. The door stood open, revealing a windowless steel cubby scarcely six feet wide, furnished only with a single bolted bench and a wall-mounted dispenser for water and electrolyte packets.

"Break," she said. "Ten minutes. You haven't sat down since I got here."

Mei followed her in. The ready room was cooler than the main bay, the ventilation louver humming directly overhead. Stanford filled two plastic cups from the dispenser and set one on the bench beside Mei without asking. She drank from her own, her throat working, then lowered the cup and watched Mei over the rim.

"You're not nervous," Stanford said. "You're careful. There's a difference."

Mei held the cup with both hands, feeling the cool plastic against her palms, and drank. The water tasted faintly of the station's mineral pack. Stanford set her cup down and rolled her shoulders again, the same slow motion as earlier, the athletic top shifting across her chest. Mei looked down at the deck plates between their boots.

"I don't waste time on people who need constant direction," Stanford continued, her voice staying low in the small room. "You'll stay on second shift with me. Same board. Same loops. I want you within arm's reach until I know how you work."

Mei nodded once. The cup creaked faintly under her fingers.

Stanford reached for her own cup again. Her knuckles brushed the outside of Mei's wrist as she lifted it, grazing the edge of the biometric band. The contact was brief, skin to skin, sending a small, involuntary jolt up Mei's forearm. Stanford didn't apologize or move away. She drank, set the cup down, and checked the time on the wall display.

"Back on the board in four minutes," she said. "Bring the filter log. We'll reset the humidity parameters before the night cycle locks."

She stood, and the tiny ready room felt instantly smaller with her upright. Mei stood with her, the half-empty cup still in her hand. Stanford paused in the doorway, one hand braced on the frame, and looked back.

"Leave the cup," she said. "We'll be at the panel longer than you think."

Mei set it on the bench. When she stepped back into the bay, Stanford was already at the main board, the holographic display

open, the long fall of blonde hair catching the blue light. Mei moved to her usual place at the commander's left side and opened the log. The station's hum settled around them again, steady and low. Stanford's elbow rested against the edge of the console, close enough that Mei could feel the warmth of her skin in the narrow gap between them.

The humidity parameters took another hour. Stanford stood at the main console and dictated the new setpoints while Mei entered them. Each time the blonde reached across to confirm a value, her bare forearm rested against Mei's for a second longer than necessary. The contact was warm and steady. Mei did not shift away. By the third adjustment, she realized she was leaning a fraction of an inch into the pressure before catching herself.

At 2320 the night cycle locked and the bay lights dropped another notch. Stanford closed the primary overlay, stepped back from the board, and rolled her neck once, slow, before looking at Mei.

"You're off shift in ten minutes," she said. "Stay until the secondary loop finishes its first full cycle under the new parameters. I want to see the numbers stabilize before I leave the bay."

Mei nodded and stayed at the terminal while Stanford moved to the valve wall and checked the manual gauges by hand, the way she had earlier. The athletic top clung damply between her shoulder blades again. When she returned, she stopped directly behind Mei's right shoulder. One hand settled on the edge of the console, close enough that her fingers nearly touched Mei's.

"Read the current humidity," Stanford said.

Mei read it aloud. The number sat cleanly inside the new green band.

Stanford's other hand came to rest lightly on the bare skin at the back of Mei's neck, just above the collar of her station shirt. Her palm was warm and unhurried. It stayed there while Mei finished the reading, heavy enough that Mei felt the pulse in her own throat beating against the stillness of the room.

"Good," Stanford said. Her thumb moved once—a short, deliberate stroke along the base of Mei's skull. "That's the first full cycle. You'll monitor the next two on your own tomorrow. I'll be on the board with you again at 1800."

She did not lift her hand from Mei's neck right away; instead, her fingers curved slightly, guiding Mei a half-turn toward the open door of the ready room.

"Station wellness protocol already has you logged as my attendant for the first ninety days," Stanford said, her voice staying low and even in the dim bay. "You know the restriction on your own schedule—no personal climaxes for the duration of the assignment so you stay focused and available. My travel cortisol has been sitting twelve points high since the shuttle docked. Come inside and bring it down before I sign out."

Mei's throat moved. She stepped ahead of the commander into the small, enclosed ready room, and the door slid shut behind them, sealing out everything except the hum of the louver and the warmth of the woman standing inches away.

The door sealed behind them. The ready-room louver hummed a steady note overhead. Stanford sat on the edge of the bolted bench, back against the steel wall, boots planted on the deck plates. Mei turned. The space left her standing between

Stanford's knees, the commander's gray athletic shorts already dark at the inner seams from the long shift.

Stanford's hands rested on the bench edge. She watched Mei's face for a moment, then said, "On your knees. Start slow. I want to feel exactly how carefully you pay attention."

Mei lowered herself onto one knee, then the other, the composite deck cold against her bare knees. Her palms settled lightly on Stanford's thighs, just above the knees. The muscle under the skin was tight from the shuttle and the hours on her feet. Mei waited until the tension eased a fraction, then slid her hands higher, thumbs pressing a slow line along the inner seam of each thigh. Stanford's breath left her through her nose, even and controlled.

"That's it," Stanford said, voice low. "You already feel where it's held. Keep your hands there while you work. Tell me with your mouth when it changes."

Mei hooked her fingers into the waistband of the shorts and the thin briefs beneath. Stanford lifted her hips an inch. The fabric slid down over the curve of her ass and along her thighs. Mei drew the clothing the rest of the way, past the boots, and set it aside on the deck. The skin of Stanford's hips and the soft crease where thigh met pelvis were warm. Mei rested her hands there again, feeling the pulse under her left palm.

She leaned in. Her mouth met the inside of Stanford's left thigh first, a dry press of lips that lingered. She moved higher by small increments. When she reached the crease, she paused. Stanford's thighs opened another half-inch.

"Closer," Stanford said. "Use the flat of your tongue first. I want to feel the full length of it before you narrow."

Mei's tongue traced the outer fold once, slow, learning the shape. The flesh was already slick. She followed the length of it with the flat of her tongue, then again, narrower, until the tip settled at the top and circled the small rise of the clit with the lightest pressure.

Stanford's breath shortened. Her right hand left the bench and settled at the back of Mei's neck. The fingers curved but did not push. "Good. You felt that. Stay exactly there. Don't speed up until I tell you the tension drops."

Mei kept the circle steady. She felt the shift when Stanford's hips tilted forward a degree; the angle changed the contact. Mei adjusted, the tip of her tongue pressing a fraction firmer on the downstroke, lighter on the return. A low sound left Stanford's throat.

"There," Stanford said. "That stroke. Do that again. My left thigh is still holding—press with your hand until it lets go."

Mei's free hand stayed on Stanford's right thigh, tracking the muscle. When the thigh began to draw inward she eased the pressure of her tongue until the muscle softened again. She varied the pattern: two slow circles, then a longer stroke that carried the wet heat from the entrance upward, then back to the tight circles. Stanford's breathing settled into a deeper rhythm that matched the strokes.

"Better," Stanford said. Her thumb moved once against the base of Mei's skull. "You're listening to the breath now. Keep the pressure even. When I tighten, lighten. When I open, stay. You don't need to chase it."

The hand on Mei's neck moved with her, guiding nothing, only resting. Mei's own pulse beat hard against the biometric band. The ache low in her belly stayed locked behind the

mandate, unused. She kept her attention on the small changes under her mouth: the way the clit swelled under the tip of her tongue, the way Stanford's hips rolled once and then held still, the way the commander's left hand gripped the bench edge until the knuckles stood out and then loosened again.

"Right there," Stanford said, the words quieter. "Don't change the angle. My shoulders just dropped—you feel that through the rest of me. Stay with it."

When Stanford's thighs began to tremble at the edges, Mei slowed further. She flattened her tongue and held it there, letting Stanford press down in small, controlled increments.

"Yes," Stanford said. The word came on an exhale. "Exactly that. Hold. Let it finish on its own."

The first contraction arrived as a tight pulse against her tongue. Mei stayed with it, the strokes shortening until they were only a steady pressure. Stanford's breath caught and released in a long exhale. The hand at Mei's neck stayed, thumb resting just behind her ear.

"Good," Stanford said, the single word low and even. "You stayed with every shift. Don't move yet."

Mei continued the light, even contact until the last aftershocks faded under her tongue. Only then did she ease back a fraction, her mouth still close, breath warm against the wet skin. Stanford's hand remained on her neck.

Afterward, the air inside the tiny room was warm and heavy with the scent of skin and standard soap. Stanford remained seated on the edge of the bench for a quiet moment, her breathing deep and even, one hand resting lightly against the side of Mei's neck before her thumb traced her jawline once and lifted away. Still on her knees, Mei reached for the thin briefs

and gray athletic shorts on the deck, guiding them back over Stanford's boots and up her calves. Stanford stood and pulled the waistband into place, adjusting the shorts across her hips—the knot of tension that had sat between her shoulder blades all evening completely gone.

Stanford remained seated on the edge of the bench for a quiet moment, her breathing deep and even, one hand resting lightly against the side of Mei's neck before her thumb traced her jawline once and lifted away. When Stanford stood and adjusted her gray athletic shorts, the knot of tension that had sat between her shoulder blades all evening was completely gone.

Above the water dispenser, the small wall repeater chimed softly as the station network updated its public ledger:

CHIEF, ENV-SYS: STANFORD, C. — SATISFACTION INDEX: 99.6% (OPTIMAL).

LOGGED BY: TANAKA, M. — ATTENDANT RESTRICTION: 54 HRS 02 MIN (UNBROKEN).

Stanford looked down at Mei, her clear blue eyes unhurried and observant.

"You pay attention to the small shifts, Tanaka," Stanford said, her tone carrying a quiet, genuine approval that made something warm tighten behind Mei's ribs despite the heavy, unresolved ache pulsing low in her own body. "I didn't have to tell you twice. Most attendants take two weeks to learn my cues."

Mei kept her gaze steady on the floor between their boots for a beat, then looked up, feeling an unexpected swell of fierce, quiet pride beneath the frustration of her locked timer. "Thank you, Commander."

They stepped back out into the dim main bay together. Stanford reached past her and closed the primary console overlay, the motion bringing her chest briefly against Mei's shoulder. She did not step back immediately.

"Dismissed," Stanford said. "Get some sleep. Tomorrow will be longer."

Mei shut down the secondary terminal. When she turned, Stanford was still standing close, one hand resting on the console, the gray athletic set shifting slightly with her slow, satisfied breath. Mei stepped past her toward the operations corridor. Behind her, the commander's quiet footsteps followed as far as the bay entrance, then stopped.

Halfway down the narrow passage toward the crew quarters, Mei passed the two night-shift relief techs heading in to take over the board. As they squeezed past her under the low pipe runs, the younger tech glanced at the fresh green 99.6% on the corridor wall strip, then back at Mei's flushed face.

"Damn, Tanaka," the tech murmured with a low whistle as they passed. "Ninety-nine-six on night one? Looks like the new chief likes your work."

Mei didn't say a word, and she didn't slow her stride—hugging her tablet closer to her chest as the station's hum settled around her, steady and low, all the way to the junction that led to the bunks.

Chapter 2

By the eighth day of the cycle, the narrow corridors of HAB-7 had begun to feel less like passageways and more like the interior of a barometer.

At 1730, thirty minutes before second shift, Mei stood in the cramped galley line waiting for the dispenser to portion her tray of soy-broth and steamed greens. The ceiling in the mess module sat low enough that the taller hull technicians brushed the overhead air ducts with their hair, and the steel bulkheads carried the same constant, low-frequency tremor from the circulation pumps that vibrated through the deck plates down in Environmental. There were no viewports here either—only a long strip of pale blue telemetry running above the food chutes so crew members on break could track sector pressure, scrubber loads, and departmental wellness logs over their meals.

Two seats down the bolted steel table, a pair of propulsion mechanics were looking straight up at the strip while they ate.

"Two hundred and thirty-four hours," the older mechanic said around a spoonful of broth, nodding toward the personnel block at the right end of the board. "Tanaka's clock hasn't dipped once since pre-arrival. Look at her baseline conductivity—she's running four points hot just standing in the chow line."

"Compare that to the top line," the younger woman beside him replied, tapping her fork against her tray. "Stanford hasn't dropped below ninety-nine-point-four all week. My section chief in Propulsion is half-throttled on caffeine tablets by 1400, and Environmental's boss is walking the rings like she just stepped out of a spa. Whatever Tanaka's doing in that ready room at 2330, it's keeping the whole sector's maintenance queue off our backs."

"Hey, Tanaka," the older mechanic called out, not unkindly, as Mei lifted her tray from the slot. "Does the commander actually make you read the pressure logs while you're down there, or is that just what third shift says?"

A few other heads along the narrow bench turned to look. Nobody lowered their gaze; on a sealed habitat where breath, water, and biometric compliance were all part of the same shared loop, Mei's celibacy timer was simply station news.

Mei kept her face composed, her dark hair pulled back into its neat knot. She did not fill the silence. She took her tray to the two-foot counter at the far end of the galley, ate her greens without looking up at the glowing blue numbers above her head, and drank two cups of water that tasted faintly of the station's mineral pack.

Beneath the gray fabric of her station trousers and long-sleeved top, however, her body felt every single one of those two hundred and thirty-four hours.

The restriction was no longer a background note. It sat low and heavy in her pelvis—a constant, warm pressure that made the seams of her clothing feel rough whenever she climbed a ladder well or squeezed sideways past a pipe manifold in the service passages. At night in her narrow bunk, with the curtain

drawn and the biometric band warm against her left wrist, she had to sleep with her hands tucked beneath her collarbones so she wouldn't reach down in her half-sleep and trip a compliance violation on the network.

Yet the strange truth—the thing none of the mechanics in the mess hall could see on the wall displays—was that the longer the ache lasted, the less Mei resented it.

At 1758, she stepped through the inner airlock into the environmental operations corridor. The air cooled immediately against her skin, carrying the familiar metallic tang of the scrubbers. When she entered the main bay, Commander Stanford was already standing at the primary console, one hip cocked against the bezel, her long blonde hair catching the pale blue light of the air-loop hologram.

Stanford didn't turn her head at the sound of Mei's boots on the grating. She didn't have to.

"You're two minutes early," Stanford said, her voice flat and unhurried. "Bring up the overnight recovery curve on Deck 5. The secondary damper was sticking during first shift."

"Already queued on the side panel, Commander," Mei said quietly, stepping into her place at Stanford's left side and angling her tablet so the screen met the commander's line of sight without either of them having to reach.

Stanford glanced down at the tablet, then sideways at Mei. That small, almost imperceptible shift moved the corner of her mouth. As she reached out to trace the damper curve on the glass, she let her bare forearm rest along the length of Mei's sleeve—warm, solid, and unhurried—and left it there while she read the numbers.

Over eight consecutive shifts, they had developed a rhythm so tight it felt to Mei like a private language inside the roar of the machinery. Mei no longer waited for instructions at the valve wall. She knew by the slight narrowing of Stanford's blue eyes when a pressure reading on Deck 7 wasn't settling fast enough; she knew that when Stanford rolled her right shoulder once, slow, around 2100, it meant the cold air in the outer hull corridor had stiffened her neck; and she knew that at 2145, without a word spoken, Stanford wanted ten minutes in the small ready room with a cup of cold electrolyte water before the night-cycle parameters locked.

In return, Stanford kept her close.

Whenever they walked the narrow service corridors parallel to the hull, where condensation beaded on the lowest pipes and dripped onto the steel grating, Stanford never made room at the access panels. She expected Mei to step directly into her heat, chest brushing arm, blonde hair spilling across Mei's shoulder or wrist while they read the manual gauges together. When a junior filter tech from Deck 4 came into the main bay on Day Nine to sign off on a canister replacement, Stanford didn't move her hand from where it was resting lightly on the back of Mei's neck at the terminal. She signed the tech's manifest with her left hand while her right thumb traced a slow, absentminded line along the base of Mei's skull—claiming her right in front of the kid as casually as she claimed the console.

After the tech left, Mei had stared at the scrolling numbers on the terminal with her heart beating hard against her ribs, feeling a quiet, fierce swell of pride that made the ache between her thighs feel like a badge rather than a penalty. Let the mechanics in the galley talk about her clock, she thought. None

of them stood here in the blue light. None of them knew how heavy and warm Stanford's palm felt when the bay went quiet.

By Day Ten, as her restriction timer rolled past two hundred and eighty hours, that pride had deepened into something fragile and all-consuming. Mei found herself watching the door of her quarters during her off-hours, counting down the minutes until 1800 just to step back into the commander's orbit.

That evening, the humidity on Deck 9 crept up by two percent during the dinner load. They spent two hours walking the secondary loops and recalibrating the manual bypass valves by hand. By the time the night cycle locked at 2320 and the bay lights dimmed to their nocturnal glow, Stanford's gray athletic top was dark with sweat between her shoulder blades, and a fine sheen caught the light along her collarbone.

Stanford closed the primary overlay and stepped behind Mei at the secondary terminal. Her hands came down on the console edge on either side of Mei's hips, boxing her in against the glass. Mei didn't lean away; she tilted her head a fraction of an inch to the right, unconsciously giving Stanford's chin room to brush past her temple.

"Deck 9 is holding inside the band," Stanford murmured, her breath warm against the shell of Mei's ear. "And your pulse has been sitting above ninety for the last hour, Tanaka."

"The air in the lower loop was warm, Commander," Mei said softly, keeping her eyes on the green line of the humidity graph.

"It wasn't the loop," Stanford said. Her right hand lifted from the console and settled squarely on the back of Mei's neck, her fingers curving around the warm skin above her collar. "Ten

days. Two hundred and eighty-six hours on the board. You're carrying a lot of pressure under that quiet face."

Mei's fingers tightened on the bezel of the terminal. When Stanford's thumb stroked once across the hollow at the base of her skull, Mei's eyelids fluttered shut for half a second before she forced them open.

"Come inside," Stanford said, turning toward the open door of the ready room. "I don't want to talk through the steps tonight. I want to see what you remember on your own."

Mei followed her into the cramped six-foot cubby. When the steel door slid shut behind them, sealing them in with the low hum of the overhead louver and the bolted bench, the rest of the station seemed to cease to exist.

The door sealed. The overhead louver hummed. Stanford sat on the edge of the bolted bench, back against the steel wall, boots on the deck plates. Mei turned between her knees. Without being told, she lowered herself onto both knees at once. Her palms settled high on Stanford's thighs, thumbs already seeking the familiar lines of tension that gathered there by the end of every shift.

Stanford's hands rested on the bench. She said nothing.

Mei slid her hands higher, pressing a slow, practiced line along the inner seams until the muscle under her left palm eased a fraction. She hooked her fingers into the waistband of the gray shorts and the briefs beneath. Stanford lifted her hips. The fabric came free and was set aside. Mei's hands returned at once to the warm crease where thigh met pelvis, holding the slight opening she already knew Stanford preferred.

She leaned in. Her mouth met the inside of the left thigh first, a dry press that lingered only long enough to feel the pulse,

then moved higher. When she reached the crease she paused for the half-second she had learned Stanford needed, then traced the outer fold with the flat of her tongue, long and slow, tasting the slick heat that had already gathered. She repeated the stroke once, narrower, until the tip settled at the top and began the tight, even circles Stanford's breath always answered.

Stanford's right hand came to the back of Mei's neck and stayed there, heavy and still. Her breath shortened exactly as Mei expected. Mei kept the circles steady, feeling the small tilt of Stanford's hips and adjusting the angle of her tongue by the same degree without being told. The tip pressed firmer on the downstroke, lighter on the return. A low sound left Stanford's throat.

Mei's free hand stayed on the right thigh, tracking the muscle. When it began to draw inward she lightened the pressure of her tongue until the thigh softened again, then returned to the same rhythm. Two slow circles, then the longer upward stroke that carried the wet heat from the entrance, then back to the tight circles. Stanford's breathing settled into the deeper cadence Mei had come to match. The hand on her neck remained, thumb resting behind her ear, unmoving.

Mei's own pulse beat hard against the biometric band. The ten-day ache sat low and heavy between her thighs, a constant warm pressure she did not touch. She kept every part of her attention on the small changes under her mouth: the way the clit swelled under the tip of her tongue, the way Stanford's shoulders dropped a fraction against the steel wall, the way the left hand on the bench edge tightened until the knuckles stood out and then loosened again.

When the thighs began to tremble at the edges, Mei slowed further without waiting for any sign. She flattened her tongue and held it there, letting Stanford press down in the small, controlled increments she always used. The first contraction arrived as a tight pulse. Mei stayed with it, the strokes shortening until they were only steady pressure. Stanford's breath caught and released in a long exhale. The hand at Mei's neck stayed.

Mei continued the light, even contact until the last aftershocks faded. Only then did she ease back a fraction, her mouth still close, breath warm against the wet skin. Stanford's fingers remained in her hair, splayed gently against the back of her head.

Afterward, the small room held the close, mingled heat of their breathing. Stanford stayed seated on the bench with her back against the steel wall, her legs stretched out slightly, her chest rising and falling in a slow, completely loosened cadence. For a full minute neither of them moved. Stanford's right hand slid slowly from the back of Mei's hair down to the side of her throat, coming to rest right over the steady throb of her carotid pulse.

Mei knelt between the commander's knees, her breath warm against Stanford's bare skin, her own body humming with a deep, throbbing emptiness that seemed to echo all the way to her fingertips. Still on her knees, she reached for the gray athletic shorts and briefs set aside on the deck, guiding them back over the commander's boots and drawing the fabric smoothly up her calves..

Stanford stood and tugged the waistband into place over her hips, then paused. Instead of stepping immediately toward the

doorway as she usually did, she reached down, hooked one finger beneath Mei's chin, and tilted her face up toward the dim overhead strip.

Clear blue eyes studied hers—unhurried, calm, and completely unreadable.

"Ten days in, and I didn't have to give you a single correction," Stanford said softly. Her thumb brushed once across the flushed skin of Mei's cheekbone. "You know my body better than the primary board now, Mei. Keep working like that and the rest of this ninetyday tour is going to run very smoothly."

It was the first time the commander had used her given name.

Mei's breath caught in her throat. Above the water dispenser, the wall repeater chimed softly as the network logged the update—SATISFACTION INDEX: 99.8% (OPTIMAL) / ATTENDANT RESTRICTION: 286 HRS 40 MIN (UNBROKEN)—but Mei barely heard the tone. The touch of Stanford's thumb on her cheek and the sound of her name in that low, even voice felt like a secret seal pressed between the two of them.

"Thank you, Commander," Mei whispered.

Stanford's mouth shifted slightly. She dropped her hand, stepped out into the main bay, and powered down the primary console. "Dismissed. Get some rest. I want you fresh on the board at 1800 tomorrow."

As Mei walked down the chilled operations corridor toward the crew quarters that night, she didn't fold her arms across her chest when she passed the third-shift scrubber crew at the junction. The dull, insistent ache between her legs walked with her step for step, and her wristband continued to broadcast her

denial to every screen on the ring—Carry the pressure, she thought, remembering the warmth of Stanford's hand on her cheek. She could carry it for ninety days without a sound, so long as she was the one waiting in the ready room when the lights went down.

Chapter 3

Fourteen days into the cycle, Mei had begun to measure time by the small adjustments in Commander Stanford's posture.

During the four shifts since the tenth night—since the moment in the ready room when Stanford had tilted Mei's chin up with one finger and called her Mei—the heavy, unbroken ache beneath Mei's waistband had settled into something she carried almost tenderly. Three hundred and eighty hours on the restriction clock felt less like a public sentence and more like a wire stretched taut between the two of them. Even when she was off duty in her narrow bunk, listening to the muffled boots of third shift passing on the other side of the steel bulkhead, Mei kept her left wrist rested over her breastbone, feeling the warmth of the biometric band as if it were the commander's palm still resting at the base of her neck.

She had convinced herself she understood the architecture of their ninety days. The station got the numbers on the wall strips; Mei got the quiet hours after 2320 when the bay lights dropped and Stanford let go of the weight of command between her hands.

On the afternoon of Day Fourteen, the humidity on Deck 9 began to creep upward again— not a sudden spike, just the

same stubborn three-percent drift that had refused to settle since the filter change. At 1530, before she had even dressed for second shift, Mei checked the sub-loop routing from the small terminal in the women's locker alcove. The excess moisture was bleeding down from Deck 8's agricultural ring, where the heavy transpiration fans in Hydroponics fed wet air into the return ducts.

As she was lacing her boots on the locker bench, the inner door hissed open and a pair of junior techs from Life Support stepped in, peeling off their damp coverall jackets. The narrower of the two glanced up at the blue repeater strip bolted above the sinks, then froze for half a second when she spotted Mei sitting in the corner.

She nudged her partner's elbow. The chatter between them died at once.

Mei didn't look up from her laces. She was used to the sudden silences when she entered a room, just as she was used to the whispered bets in the galley over how high her conductivity trace would climb before day thirty. She stood, slung her tablet strap over her shoulder, and stepped past them into the forty-inch passage.

Behind her, just before the airlock cycled shut, she heard the taller tech murmur, "Damn. Four hundred hours locked down, and now Ag-Bay's getting logged on her board? That's cold."

Mei's boots slowed for a single step on the vibrating deck plates.

Ag-Bay.

A cold, hollow sensation opened behind her ribs. She did not look back at the corridor repeater strip. She kept her chin level and walked the remaining two hundred meters down the

curve of the core, her stride brisk and mechanical, until she reached the central environmental bay at 1752.

The main chamber was empty. Second shift hadn't officially begun, and the first-shift watch officer had already cleared his board. Only the towering scrubber columns hummed in the blue half-light, pushing recycled air through the closed loop.

Mei stepped up to the primary console and touched the glass. The pale blue holographic overlay bloomed between the manifolds.

Her eyes went straight to the upper corner of the display.

CHIEF, ENV-SYS: STANFORD, C. — SATISFACTION INDEX: 99.7% (OPTIMAL).

LAST ATTENUATION: 1712 HRS — LOGGED BY: LIN, SORA (HYDROPONICS / AG-BAY 3).

PRIMARY ATTENDANT: TANAKA, M. — CELIBACY MANDATE: 382 HRS 18 MIN (UNBROKEN).

Mei stood completely still in front of the glowing blue lines.

1712 HRS. Forty minutes ago.

She knew Sora Lin. Everyone on the middle decks knew Sora. She was twenty-two, three years younger than Mei, with a soft, open face, dark curls that always escaped her hairnet, and an easy laugh that carried down the ladder wells whenever the botanical crews changed shift. Sora worked in the warm, bright mist of the agricultural domes, tending the dwarf citrus and soy troughs where the air smelled of wet loam and crushed green leaves instead of cold steel and mineral packs. Only two days ago, Sora had waved at Mei across the mess hall with bright, uncomplicated warmth.

And forty minutes ago, while Mei was sitting in her bunk waiting for 1800 so she could step back into her place at

Stanford's left side, the commander had let Sora Lin bring her off in Ag-Bay 3—and had entered Sora's ID straight into the public station network for all two hundred crew members to read.

Mei's hand stayed flat on the aluminum edge of the console until her knuckles ached. In the corner of the hologram, she watched her own biometric readout betray her in real time: her heart rate climbed from sixty-eight to ninety-four, then past a hundred, while her skin conductivity flared amber on the public graph. The humiliation burned in her throat like bile. Every mechanic in the galley, both of those girls in the locker room, everyone who had watched Mei trail one step behind Stanford for two weeks now knew that the quiet attendant with the four-hundred-hour lock wasn't even the only one touching her.

At 1759 the inner airlock at the end of the corridor sighed open.

Mei pulled her hand off the console and fixed her eyes on the Deck 9 humidity log just as Commander Stanford walked into the bay.

Stanford moved with her usual unhurried, ground-eating stride, her shoulders loose in the gray station-issue top. Even before she reached the console, Mei could see the small evidence of where she had been. The ends of Stanford's long blonde hair were slightly damper and more waved than usual from the warm mist of the hydroponic bays, and when she stepped into her customary spot beside Mei, the air between them didn't just smell of standard soap. Beneath it hung the rich, green scent of damp earth, bruised mint, and warm skin.

Stanford glanced at the primary overlay, then turned her head to look down at Mei's profile.

"You're early," Stanford said, her voice even and unhurried. "And your pulse is at one-oheight."

Mei kept her mouth closed for a second, fighting to keep her voice flat before she trusted herself to speak. "The Deck 9 humidity drift was originating in the Ag-Bay 3 return duct, Commander. I pulled the transfer log."

"I know," Stanford said, tapping the holographic manifold to bring up the upper-deck air exchange. "I went up to Ag-Bay 3 at 1630 to inspect the foliar moisture valves myself. The louver actuators were gummed up with nutrient mist."

She leaned in slightly to check the recovery curve, her bare shoulder brushing Mei's sleeve. Mei did not step away—protocol forbade it—but every muscle in her back went rigid as iron under the gray fabric.

Stanford paused, her finger still resting on the projected graph. She looked sideways at Mei's jaw, then flicked her clear blue eyes up to the personnel block where LIN, SORA sat in bright blue letters above Mei's climbing timer.

"You're looking at the 1712 entry," Stanford said. It wasn't a question, and there was not a trace of awkwardness or apology in her tone. "Purging the main bio-filter on the agricultural loop takes twenty-five minutes. I had a sector budget call with Earth-side command before that, and my cortisol was running nine points high. Standing around an empty greenhouse watching a countdown clock is wasted downtime."

Mei stared straight ahead at the pale blue rings on the glass. "You don't need to explain your logs to me, Commander."

"I'm not explaining them. I'm correcting a variance in my attendant," Stanford replied mildly. She turned fully toward Mei, shifting her weight so Mei had to take half a step back

until her hips met the frame of the secondary terminal. “Lin was on duty at the misting manifold. She’s twenty-two, she’s healthy, and she was eager to help. Logging her ID keeps the station wellness database accurate. That’s how I run a section—clean numbers and zero wasted time.”

“Yes, Commander,” Mei said, the words scraping past her teeth.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, Tanaka.”

Mei lifted her gaze. Up close, Stanford’s blue eyes were completely calm—not cruel, not teasing, simply assessing a piece of equipment that had drifted three percent out of alignment.

“Ten days in, you started thinking the ready room was a private arrangement,” Stanford said, her voice dropping low over the hum of the scrubbers. “I kept you close because you’re quiet and you learn fast. You’re my primary attendant because nobody manages a six-hour shift at my elbow the way you do. That doesn’t mean I hold off on maintenance when I’m two decks up and a capable tech is standing three feet away.”

A hot, humiliating prickle stung behind Mei’s eyelids. She couldn’t stop her mind from picturing it—the warm, bright greenery of the agricultural dome, the mist beading on the glass, and young, soft-lipped Sora Lin kneeling in the smell of citrus leaves where Mei wasn’t allowed to go.

Stanford’s gaze dropped to the biometric band on Mei’s wrist, then back up to the live graph on the console.

“Look at your trace,” Stanford murmured. “Your heart rate is at one-eighteen, and your arousal conductivity just jumped six points while you were standing here angry at me. For the last

four days your baseline was flattening out into routine. Jealousy woke your nervous system right back up."

Mei tried to pull her chin back, her breath shallow. "I am fully focused on the board, Commander."

"You're about to be much more focused," Stanford said. Her right hand came up and settled on the back of Mei's neck, her warm fingers curving firmly around the nape just as they did every night—except tonight the grip didn't feel like a secret promise; it felt like a collar locking shut. "Fourteen days of flat abstinence is making you possessive. Starting tonight, we're updating your wellness mandate. You're still barred from climax until the thirty-day all-staff briefing, but I'm adding scheduled edging to your shift." Mei's breath caught hard in her throat.

"Not at 2320," Stanford added, glancing at the bay clock, which read 1814. "Right now. Before we walk a single pipe run. I want you walking the loops for the nextfive hours with your nerves wide open and your head completely clear about who sets the schedule."

Without releasing the back of Mei's neck, Stanford walked her backward five paces into the small, windowless ready room and keyed the door shut.

The six-foot steel cubby felt instantly airless. Stanford didn't sit on the bolted bench the way she had every night for two weeks. Instead, she turned Mei around, backed her squarely against the cold steel wall beside the water dispenser, and planted one booted foot between Mei's ankles to part her stance.

"Since you're so interested in the 1712 log," Stanford said, her flat, unhurried voice inches from Mei's ear as her hand slid down to the waistband of Mei's gray station trousers, "you're going to listen to the exact workflow notes from Ag-Bay 3 while

I bring you up to threshold. And you're going to hold still until I tell you the calibration is finished."

Stanford unfastened the top snap of Mei's gray trousers and drew the zipper down an inch—just enough room to slide her right hand inside the waistband and beneath the thin cotton of her briefs. Her left forearm came up across Mei's collarbone, pinning her flat against the cold steel bulkhead beside the water dispenser while her booted knee pressed higher between Mei's thighs.

Mei's hands flattened against the metal behind her hips. She locked her jaw and stared straight at the seam in the opposite wall.

Stanford's fingers found her already slick, the tissue swollen and radiating heat after three hundred and eighty-two hours without a single touch. The commander did not start gently. She pressed the flat of two fingers directly along the length of the cleft, gathering the moisture, and settled the pad of her middle finger against the rigid bud of Mei's clit with a firm, unhurried stroke.

Mei's spine bowed half an inch off the steel before Stanford's forearm held her in place.

"Fourteen days on lock, and you're already soaking through your briefs just from reading another tech's name on my board," Stanford said, her voice low and even against Mei's temple. "Hold your knees open against my boot. If you close your thighs before the calibration is done, I start the clock over."

She began a slow, deliberate circle—heavier and faster than the light pressure Mei used with her tongue, built to drive a starved nervous system straight up the curve.

"Ag-Bay 3 was eighty-two degrees at 1700," Stanford continued, matching the cadence of her words to the steady stroke of her fingers. "The misting nozzles had just cycled, so the glass along the citrus racks was fogged white. When I started the twenty-five-minute purge on the main bio-filter, I only intended to have Lin open her coverall and use her mouth while I stood at the manifold."

Stanford's second finger slid lower, dipping just inside the tight, pulsing entrance to coat itself in slick heat before sliding back up to join the first on either side of the clit. Mei's breath hissed through her nose; the biometric band on her left wrist warmed against her skin as her pulse surged past one-twenty.

"Lin had her own ideas about protocol," Stanford said, her thumb pressing down on the hood to trap the swollen nerve while her fingers worked a tight, relentless figure-eight. "Before I even unfastened my shorts, she insisted on stripping completely naked. She sat right down on the drainage grate, unlaced her work shoes, and peeled off her damp socks one by one. Then she stood up, unzipped her hydroponics jumpsuit, and stepped out of every stitch she had on—coverall, undershirt, bra, and briefs—until she was bare from head to heels in the warm mist."

A sharp tremor ran down the insides of Mei's thighs. Behind her tightly shut teeth, she could see it with blinding clarity: young Sora Lin standing bare-footed and flushed on the wet grating between the green leaves, completely unashamed, offering everything to the woman Mei had spent two weeks worshiping in the dark.

"She folded her clothes in a neat square so they wouldn't touch the runoff," Stanford murmured, increasing the pace of

her hand until the wet sound of her fingers filled the narrow ready room alongside the hum of the overhead louver. "When she dropped to her bare knees between my boots, the nutrient mist was beading on her shoulders and her breasts. You feel how hard your clit just jumped under my finger when I said that, Tanaka? Your conductivity trace is climbing faster than the Deck 9 gauge."

Mei's fingers curled against the cold wall, her nails scraping steel. She tried to pull her hips back half an inch from the unbearable friction, only for Stanford to press her knee higher between Mei's legs, trapping her squarely on the hand inside her trousers.

"Don't pull away from the data," Stanford said calmly. "Listen to the rest. You're careful when you work on me, Mei—measured, quiet, tracking every muscle. Lin wasn't careful at all. She pressed her bare breasts flat against my shins, wrapped both arms around the backs of my thighs so I couldn't step back against the glass, and buried her mouth in me like she was starving. She didn't use just the tip of her tongue the way you do. She used her whole mouth—hot, open lips, drawing the flesh in and sucking hard while her tongue lashed across the center."

Stanford changed the angle of her wrist, sliding two fingers deep into the slick channel and curling them sharply upward against the front wall while the heel of her palm ground directly against Mei's clit.

Mei's head dropped back against the steel bulkhead with a dull thud. Her lungs seized. The fourteen-day dam inside her pelvis was groaning under the twin assault of Stanford's ruthless

hand and the image of the naked twenty-two-year-old bringing her boss off against the misted glass.

"She kept her eyes open the whole time, looking straight up through the steam while I held the back of her head," Stanford said, her breath warm against Mei's cheek as she drove her fingers faster, riding the involuntary buck of Mei's hips. "Her bare knees were red from the grating when she finished me, and she stayed right there with her chin wet until the biofilter chimed. You want to let go right now, don't you? I can feel your inner walls clamping down on my fingers. Ten more seconds and you'd come all over my hand."

Mei couldn't stop her hips from rolling into the heel of Stanford's palm. A blinding white pressure coiled at the base of her spine, drawing her abdominal muscles tight as wire; her mouth parted in a silent, strangled gasp as the first pre-shock of climax gathered like a wave about to crest. On the wall repeater above the bench, the amber numbers blurred past ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven percent—

Right at the precipice, a fraction of a second before the first spasm could break, Stanford stopped dead.

She did not slow down or ease off the pressure; she simply opened her fingers, broke contact completely, and pulled her hand away.

When Stanford's hand finally came away, pulling free of the open waistband of Mei's trousers, Mei's knees gave out half an inch before the steel wall caught her shoulder blades.

Her lungs dragged at the thin, cool air of the ready room in ragged, silent gulps. Between her thighs, every nerve ending had been wound up to a blinding, swollen pitch and left stranded at the summit—throbbing so violently against the damp fabric of

her briefs that her vision swam under the dim overhead strip. Never in two weeks of celibacy had the ache felt like this. Before tonight, the restriction had been a heavy, dormant weight; now it was a live fire wired straight up her spine, tangled inextricably with the image of Sora Lin's mouth on Stanford's skin and the brutal, intoxicating memory of Stanford's own fingers driving her to the edge.

Stanford stepped to the small sink beside the water dispenser, rinsed her fingers, and dried them on a clean towel without hurry. Her breathing wasn't even slightly elevated.

Above the bench, the wall repeater flashed amber, then locked in the new public telemetry line across the sector network:

ATTENDANT: TANAKA, M. — CELIBACY MANDATE: 382 HRS 34 MIN (UNBROKEN).

THRESHOLD CALIBRATION (EDGING): 97.4% — LOGGED BY: STANFORD, C.

Mei stared at the glowing numbers, her chest heaving, a drop of sweat sliding down the hollow of her throat. She bit down hard on the inside of her lip so not a single whimper would escape into the small room.

Stanford turned, tossed the towel into the bin, and stepped close enough to fasten the top snap of Mei's gray trousers herself. Her knuckles brushed against Mei's trembling lower stomach through the cloth, sending an involuntary shudder through Mei's hips.

"Look at that recovery curve," Stanford said calmly, nodding toward the wall display where Mei's biometric line was still vibrating near the top of the graph. "Ninety-seven-point-four

percent, and you didn't make a sound. That's the focus I want on my board."

She reached up and rested her warm palm once against the side of Mei's flushed cheek— the exact same touch from Night Ten that Mei had treasured for four days, now transformed into something that made Mei's heart twist with equal parts helpless longing and sharp humiliation.

"Lin has a very warm mouth," Stanford said quietly, her clear blue eyes holding Mei's, "and I'll use her again whenever I'm up in Sector 8 during a filter purge. Incorporate what I just told you about how she used her lips when we come back in here at 2320. Now straighten your shirt. We have five hours on the secondary loops, and Deck 9 isn't going to balance itself."

The ready room door slid open. Mei followed the commander back out to the main environmental console on legs that felt unsteady beneath her boots—knowing that for the next five hours, every time Stanford leaned across her at the board or brushed a bare forearm against her sleeve, the raw, unfinished edge between her thighs would throb in answer.

Chapter 4

The cruelest part of the fourteenth night had not been the five hours Mei spent walking the secondary loops with her nerves rubbed raw and her briefs damp against her skin. It had been what happened at 2320, when the night cycle locked and Commander Stanford took her back into the ready room.

When the steel door sealed behind them and Mei dropped to her knees in front of the bolted bench, she had started to begin her usual routine—the quiet, measured press of lips along the inner thigh, the careful flat of her tongue waiting for the muscle to soften.

Stanford had stopped her with two fingers under her chin.

"I didn't spend twenty minutes giving you the Ag-Bay 3 notes so you could ignore them, Tanaka," Stanford had said in that calm, unhurried voice. *"Open your mouth. Use your lips the way Lin did. Show me you were listening."*

And Mei had done it. With three hundred and eighty-eight hours of denial throbbing between her own legs, she had forced herself to abandon the careful, silent precision that was the only thing she owned. Kneeling on the cold composite deck, she had wrapped her arms around the backs of Stanford's thighs, opened her mouth wide, and imitated a twenty-two-year-old botanical

tech she had pictured naked on a drainage grate—sucking hard, lashing with her tongue, enacting another woman's hunger on the body she had thought belonged to her. When Stanford's hand had tightened in her hair and a low, satisfied breath had left the commander's throat, Mei had felt a wave of self-loathing so sharp it made her stomach turn—followed, half a second later, by a terrifying jolt of pride when the wall repeater chimed at **99.8%**.

By Day Twenty-One, that contradiction had rewired Mei's nervous system from the inside out.

Every shift now began at 1810 in the ready room. Before they checked a single valve schematic on the board, Stanford backed Mei against the steel wall beside the water dispenser, slid a hand inside her gray trousers, and drove her straight to ninety-seven percent while reviewing the day's efficiency logs. Then Stanford pulled her hand away, rinsed her fingers at the sink, and made Mei walk six hours of pipe inspections suspended on a knife-edge so acute that the vibration of the deck plates through her boots felt like a physical hum at the base of her spine. At 2320, dizzy with exhaustion and frustration, Mei knelt and gave Stanford release.

The mindfuck was how quickly her body betrayed her mind.

Mei hated the 1712 Hydroponics log. She hated the new amber **THRESHOLD CALIBRATION** line that sat under her name on every corridor strip in the sector. Yet by the third week, because those ten minutes pinned against the ready-room wall at 1810 were the only ten minutes in a twenty-four-hour cycle when anyone touched her starved body, her physiology had begun to crave the humiliation like a drug. At 1755 each afternoon, her pulse and skin conductivity started climbing

before Stanford even walked through the airlock. She was salivating for the whip.

At 1640 on Day Twenty-One—with her restriction clock standing at **549 HOURS 10 MINUTES**—Mei had to climb the ladder well to the Deck 8 junction to sign off on a greywater condensate receipt.

She was standing at the junction wall panel, her tablet braced against her forearm, when the inner hatch from the agricultural ring swung open. A wave of warm, humid air smelling of wet soil and crushed citrus leaves spilled into the cold steel passage—and Sora Lin stepped out, carrying a crate of spent filter cartridges.

Mei went rigid from her boots to the base of her skull.

Sora was wearing her green hydroponics jumpsuit zipped to the collar, dark curls escaping her hairnet around a flushed, pretty face. The moment she saw Mei at the panel, her expression lit up with bright, uncomplicated warmth.

"Hey, Officer Tanaka!" Sora said, shifting the crate onto one hip as she squeezed into the narrow junction. "I was just about to comm down to your board. That tweak you guys made to the return damper on Deck 9 yesterday cleared the condensation off our south glass completely."

Mei stared at her. Because of Stanford's voice in the dark ready room, Mei didn't see a junior botanical tech holding a crate of filters. She saw Sora sitting on a wet grate peeling off her damp socks; she saw the curve of Sora's bare breasts under the misting nozzles; she saw Sora's open mouth pressed between Stanford's thighs. Every night for seven days, Mei had been forced to mimic the way this girl's lips moved.

"The damper was drifting two percent," Mei said, her voice sounding hollow and mechanical in her own ears. "Sign the condensate transfer."

Sora tapped her thumb against Mei's tablet screen, then glanced up at the blue corridor repeater strip overhead, where Mei's **549 HRS** and yesterday's **97.8% THRESHOLD** glowed in neat block numerals. Instead of the smirk the mechanics wore in the galley, Sora's dark eyes softened with genuine, sisterly admiration.

"I don't know how you carry that clock and still keep the whole sector balanced, Mei," Sora said softly, lowering her voice as if they were sharing a confidence on the same team. "Commander Stanford came through Ag-Bay 3 on Tuesday to check the misting heads, and she said nobody on the ring reads the board as cleanly as you do. Honestly, I was glad I could help take the edge off her numbers last week when she got stuck up here during the purge—she pushes herself so hard."

Mei's fingers clamped around the aluminum edge of her tablet until her knuckles turned white. *Glad I could help.* To Sora, it had been twenty minutes of pleasant, casual service in a warm greenhouse, no different from lending another department a wrench. She had no idea that Stanford had turned her naked body into a verbal scalpel to flay Mei alive against a steel wall.

"Return the cartridge manifest by 1900," Mei said tightly, turning on her heel before the biometric band on her wrist could broadcast the sudden, sickening lurch of her heart rate right above Sora's head.

She descended the ladder well to the core twenty minutes later with her temples throbbing. At 1730, as she crossed the lower ring toward Environmental, the deck plates beneath her

boots gave a low, resonant shudder that lasted four seconds—the unmistakable mechanical thump of the heavy cargo shuttle *Ares-4* blowing its umbilical seals and undocking from Docking Bay 2 on the outer hull.

Every heavy undocking bled atmospheric pressure and thermal heat from the vestibule locks, requiring an immediate manual audit of the high-pressure recovery compressors in Sector 2.

Mei's stomach dropped. Stanford had been on the main ring since 1600 for the weekly logistics meeting. Bay 2 was on her way back to Environmental.

Mei walked faster, the gray fabric of her trousers chafing against skin that already felt feverish. When she stepped into the central environmental bay at 1754, the cavernous chamber was empty, the towering scrubber columns humming under the pale blue light of the main hologram.

She didn't even have to tap the console awake. The update was already shining across the upper right quadrant of the floating display:

> **CHIEF, ENV-SYS: STANFORD, C. — SATISFACTION INDEX: 99.9% (OPTIMAL). LAST ATTENUATION: 1738 HRS — LOGGED BY: VANCE, TESSA (DOCKING LOGISTICS / BAY 2). PRIMARY ATTENDANT: TANAKA, M. — CELIBACY MANDATE: 550 HRS 04 MIN (UNBROKEN).**

99.9%.

One-tenth of a point higher than Mei had ever scored on her best night in the ready room. Twotenths higher than Sora Lin.

And the name underneath it belonged to Tessa Vance.

Mei closed her eyes for a fraction of a second, the air in the windowless bay suddenly feeling too thin to fill her lungs. Tessa Vance was twenty-six, a third-year quartermaster clerk down in Docking Logistics. Unlike Sora, there was nothing soft or deferential about Tessa. She stood five-foot-ten in her heavy hull boots—the same height as Stanford—with broad, rangy shoulders, lean muscle corded along her forearms from slinging cargo locks, and dark hair buzzed close at the nape beneath a cocky grin. In the mess hall, Tessa took up two seats on the bench, laughed loud enough to rattle the air ducts, and looked at women down the length of her nose.

Sixteen minutes ago, down in the freezing industrial echo of Docking Bay 2, Commander Stanford had let Tessa Vance put a **99.9%** on the station network.

Worse—infinitely worse, making a hot wave of shame wash straight up Mei's neck into her hairline—was what happened on the console three inches below Tessa's name.

As Mei stared at the log, the live telemetry line wired to her own wrist band flickered and surged upward. Her heart rate jumped to one-twenty-two; her skin conductivity and pelvic blood-flow index spiked straight into the amber band. Her body hadn't waited for Stanford to touch her. Seven days of conditioning had done its work: the sheer shock of seeing another woman's name on Stanford's ledger had triggered an automatic, Pavlovian flood of slick heat between Mei's legs, her starved nerves bracing for the punishment they knew was coming.

The airlock at the end of the operations corridor sighed open.

Commander Stanford walked into the bay at 1759.

She didn't carry the warm, humid scent of soil and mint leaves tonight. She smelled of the outer hull—cold hydraulic fluid, sharp ozone from the airlock plasma seals, and fresh, hard sweat. Her gray athletic top was darkened down the center of her spine, her blonde hair slightly tousled around her shoulders as if someone had gripped it without care, and just above the left side of her collarbone sat a faint, unmistakable flush where rough fingers or teeth had pressed against the skin.

Stanford stopped at the main console. She didn't roll her shoulders; her posture was loose, electric, and completely sated. She looked at the holographic board for two seconds, then turned her clear blue eyes down to Mei.

"The *Ares-4* blew a secondary gasket on the outer vestibule when she cleared the clamps at 1720," Stanford said, her voice flat and even. "I went down to Bay 2 to oversee the compressor blowdown."

Mei kept her hands locked behind her back, her nails digging into her own wrists so they wouldn't shake. She said nothing.

Stanford took half a step closer, her gaze dropping from Mei's burning cheekbones to the live biometric graph floating between them. The corner of the commander's mouth shifted.

"Look at your conductivity trace, Mei," Stanford murmured. "Last week when you saw Lin's name on the board, your heart rate spiked because you were angry. Today you walked in, saw Vance's ID and a ninety-nine-point-nine, and your arousal baseline jumped twelve points before I even walked through the door."

Mei's throat worked, dry as dust. "The Bay 2 bleed valves still need to be balanced on the manual loop, Commander."

"I know they do," Stanford said softly. She reached out and rested two fingers lightly against the racing pulse at the side of Mei's neck, right where her own skin was still cool from the hull deck. "You're already wet inside those trousers just from knowing what happens next, aren't you? Seven days of threshold calibration, and you've learned to want the correction."

Mei flinched as if she had been struck, though she didn't dare pull her neck away from Stanford's fingers. The accuracy of it stripped away the last shred of dignity she had left. She was five hundred and fifty hours without release; she had just been outscored on the public board by a loud-mouthed quartermaster clerk; and her own body was begging for Stanford's hand.

"We're not using the ready room tonight," Stanford said, dropping her hand from Mei's throat and turning toward the narrow service corridor that ran parallel to the outer hull. "Walk. We're checking the Bay 2 return lines on the hull skin."

Mei followed her out of the main chamber into the cramped, forty-inch hull passage. The temperature dropped immediately by ten degrees, the cold steel of the pressure hull radiating a bitter chill against Mei's bare forearms and face. Overhead, the heavy return pipes groaned as the compressors cycled, and beads of icy condensation dripped at irregular intervals onto the steel grating beneath their boots.

Halfway down the passage, in the dead-end shadow between the primary airlock manifold and Access Panel 4, Stanford stopped.

She didn't open the panel. She turned around in the narrow space, caught Mei by both hips, and backed her squarely against the freezing steel conduit frame. There was no room to step

sideways; the heavy greywater pipes boxed them in at shoulder height, and Stanford's tall frame filled the corridor completely.

"Five hundred and fifty hours," Stanford said, leaning in until her chest brushed the front of Mei's shirt and her mouth was an inch from Mei's cold ear. "And you want to know how Vance put a ninety-nine-point-nine on my board in twelve minutes while the vestibule lock was repressurizing."

Mei turned her head toward the dripping pipes, squeezing her eyes shut. "Commander—"

"Eyes open, Tanaka. Keep them on the pressure gauge beside my head," Stanford ordered quietly, her right hand dropping to wrench open the snap of Mei's trousers while her left hand gripped the back of Mei's neck against the cold metal. "Lin was soft and eager in the mist. You're quiet and careful on your knees. Vance wasn't either of those things. Listen closely—because tonight at 2320, I'm going to expect you to match her energy."

Stanford's right hand slipped inside the open waistband of Mei's trousers and the thin briefs beneath. Two fingers found the slick heat at once and pressed in, slow at first, then deeper, the heel of her palm grinding against the swollen rise of Mei's clit. The cold of the conduit frame bit through Mei's shirt and into her shoulder blades. Stanford's left hand stayed locked at the back of her neck, holding her head still against the metal so she could not turn away from the pressure gauge.

"Vance locked the cargo cage door with one hand while she was still talking," Stanford said, voice low and even against Mei's ear. Her fingers began a steady, unhurried thrust, curling on every inward stroke. "She didn't ask. She just put her other hand on my hip, turned me, and walked me backward until the

padded freight crate hit the backs of my thighs. Then she pushed. Hard. I went down on the padding and she was already between my knees before I could sit up."

Mei's hips jerked once against the hand. Stanford's fingers slowed but did not stop, dragging wet heat upward and circling the clit with firm, deliberate pressure until Mei's thighs began to tremble.

"She's as tall as I am," Stanford continued. "Stronger in the arms. She hooked both hands under my knees and pulled me to the edge of the crate, then stood up straight so she could use her weight. No careful circles. She put her mouth on me and drove two fingers in at the same time— fast, deep, two-handed, the way you move cargo when the clock is running. Her thighs braced the crate so it wouldn't slide. Every time I tried to lift my hips she pushed them back down and fucked harder."

The fingers inside Mei matched the rhythm Stanford described, thrusting sharp and even, the heel of the palm grinding without pause. Mei's breath came in short, broken pulls. Condensation dripped from the pipe above and struck the grating beside her boot.

"Twelve minutes," Stanford said. "The airlock was still cycling. She kept that pace the whole time—thumb on my clit, fingers curling hard, mouth sucking while she worked. I came on the padding with my hands in her short hair and her name still on the open comm channel. Ninetynine-point-nine before the vestibule light turned green."

Stanford's fingers drove deeper, then curled and held, pressing against the spot that made Mei's vision blur. The edge rose fast, sharp and unbearable after five hundred and fifty

hours. Mei's hands clawed at the conduit frame. Stanford's mouth stayed close to her ear.

"I kept picturing you in one of those cargo crates," Stanford murmured. "Wondering where I'd ship you to if I locked the door and told her to keep going."

The fingers resumed their relentless thrust. Mei's hips jerked helplessly against the cold steel— and at the exact fraction of a second her inner walls began to clench around the first spasm, Stanford pulled her hand completely free.

The high, broken whimper tore out of Mei's throat before she could lock her teeth together— echoing sharply off the wet steel pipes and cramped bulkheads of the hull passage.

Mei clapped both hands over her own mouth in sheer mortification, her eyes wide and glassy above her fingers as her hips gave one last helpless, empty jerk against the air where Stanford's wrist had just been.

For two weeks she had taken everything in dead silence. That silence had been her last wall of privacy on a station that broadcast her pulse on the mess hall screens. Now even that was gone, left hanging in the freezing draft between the condensation drips.

Stanford stood half an inch away, her chest brushing Mei's trembling forearms, watching her face in the dim blue spill of the corridor repeater strip. On the small steel display bolted above Access Panel 4, the amber numbers flashed and held:

> **ATTENDANT: TANAKA, M. CELIBACY MANDATE: 550 HRS 21 MIN (UNBROKEN). THRESHOLD CALIBRATION (EDGING): 98.6% LOGGED BY: STANFORD, C.**

A slow, unmistakable shift curved the corner of Stanford's mouth. She didn't step back to let Mei recover, and she didn't fasten Mei's trousers for her this time. Instead, she reached up, took Mei's wrists in one hand, and gently pulled Mei's hands down from her mouth.

"Ninety-eight-point-six," Stanford murmured, her blue eyes clear and unhurried in the cold halflight. "And I finally heard your voice. See what happens when you stop holding back, Mei?" Mei's chest heaved against the open waistband of her trousers, the freezing hull air biting at the slick, swollen heat between her thighs while a single tear of pure sensory overload spilled over her lower lashes and cooled on her cheek. She couldn't tell anymore where the humiliation ended and the desperate, aching need to be touched again began.

Stanford's thumb brushed the wet track on Mei's cheek once, then tapped the glass of the manual pressure gauge mounted inside the recess beside Mei's head.

"Fix your trousers and read me the kilopascals on the Bay 2 return line, Officer Tanaka," Stanford said, stepping back half a pace to open the valve schematic on her tablet. "We have five hours on the board before 2320—and tonight, when we go into the ready room, I want to feel you take me the way Vance did."

Chapter 5

For eight nights after the hull corridor, Mei learned what it meant to fail a benchmark before she even dropped to her knees.

On the night of Day Twenty-One, when the clock had locked at 2320 and Stanford had ordered her to match Tessa Vance's pace in the ready room, Mei had tried with everything she had left in her body. She had stood between Stanford's knees instead of kneeling, bracing one boot on the edge of the bolted bench for leverage, using both hands and her mouth at the same time while trying to pin the commander's hips down against the steel wall.

It had been clumsy and desperate. Mei was five inches shorter than Vance, her shoulders narrower, her wrists already aching from five hours of manual valve checks. When Stanford finally came, her breathing had been even, her hand on the back of Mei's neck calm and unhurried. Above the water dispenser, the wall repeater had chimed at 99.5%—four-tenths of a point lower than the quartermaster clerk, and lower even than Mei's own earlier numbers.

Stanford hadn't raised her voice. She had simply fastened her gray shorts, looked down at Mei's trembling forearms, and said

mildly, "You don't have the reach or the weight to move me like Vance does, Mei. Stop trying to force leverage you don't have. Go back to your own rhythm tomorrow."

The mercy in the dismissal had hurt worse than the critique.

By Day Twenty-Nine, the station's closed air loop felt as if it were running on half oxygen. Mei's restriction counter stood at 694 HOURS 12 MINUTES. After nearly four weeks without climax and fifteen consecutive shifts of threshold edging, she no longer walked the corridors so much as drifted through them wrapped in a thin, feverish skin of static. She slept in twentyminute fragments, waking whenever the circulation pumps shifted pitch beneath the deck plates, her pelvis throbbing with a dull, congested weight that never eased.

Worse, the entire habitat was counting down the hours to tomorrow's 1800 all-staff morale briefing.

At 1710 on Day Twenty-Nine, as Mei was carrying a calibrated pressure manifold down the forty-inch freight passage from the machine shop, the heavy cargo hatch from Sector 2 swung open ten paces ahead of her.

Tessa Vance stepped out into the corridor, a digital manifest slate tucked under one muscular forearm, her dark buzzed undercut damp with sweat from the loading bay. Two junior dock hands trailed behind her.

There was no side junction for Mei to duck into. The insulated coolant pipes lined the bulkhead at hip height, narrowing the steel chute until two people could barely pass without brushing chests.

When Tessa spotted Mei approaching, her wide mouth curved into a slow, unhurried grin that made the dock hands behind her exchange a look. Tessa didn't turn sideways to yield

the passage. She stopped right beneath the overhead repeater strip—where Mei's 694 HRS and last night's 98.8% THRESHOLD glowed in pale blue numerals—and hooked a thumb into the belt loop of her utility trousers.

"Careful with that manifold, Tanaka," Tessa said, her voice loud and easy in the cramped steel tunnel. "You look like you're vibrating hard enough to shake the welds loose."

Mei stopped two paces short, keeping her eyes fixed on the collar seam of Tessa's jacket. "Excuse me, Quartermaster. I need to get this unit to the main bay before 1800."

"Oh, we know what's on the schedule at 1800," Tessa said, leaning one broad shoulder against the coolant pipe so Mei had to squeeze directly past her front to get through. As Mei slid sideways through the gap, Tessa didn't pull her knees back; the heavy canvas of Tessa's thigh brushed squarely against Mei's hip, and Tessa lowered her voice just enough that it rode under the hum of the ventilation duct. "Stanford came down to Bay 2 again on Thursday when the supply tug docked. Said you've been working real hard trying to keep up with my numbers. Can't wait to see what seven hundred hours looks like when she takes the leash off you in front of the crew tomorrow."

One of the dock hands let out a low laugh behind them.

Mei's boots rang sharply on the grating as she cleared the junction, her face burning so hot that the chilled air of the operations ring felt like cold water splashed across her cheeks. She hated Tessa Vance with a sudden, blinding ferocity—and yet the moment she remembered Stanford's voice in the hull corridor describing Tessa's hands on that padded freight crate, the familiar, traitorous slickness gathered between her thighs

and her wrist band logged another three-point jump on the corridor boards.

She reached the central environmental bay at 1752, set the manifold down on the diagnostic table by the entrance, and walked to the primary console.

Only one more shift, she told herself, resting her fingertips on the cool aluminum bezel to steady their shaking. Six more hours at the board, one last night in the ready room at 2320, and tomorrow at 1800 the thirty-day lock would finally clear.

She tapped the glass awake. The pale blue hologram of HAB-7's air loops bloomed in the center of the chamber.

Mei looked at the upper right corner—and for a moment her mind simply refused to parse the characters on the screen.

CHIEF, ENV-SYS: STANFORD, C. — SATISFACTION INDEX: 100.0% (MAXIMAL).

LAST ATTENUATION: 1724 HRS — LOGGED BY: CHEN, MARA (MED-BAY / BIOMETRIC TELEMETRY).

PRIMARY ATTENDANT: TANAKA, M. — CELIBACY MANDATE: 694 HRS 38 MIN (UNBROKEN).

100.0%.

In the two years Mei had worked aboard HAB-7, she had never seen the station wellness software register a flat one hundred percent. She had assumed the algorithm was asymptotic— that ninety-nine-point-nine was the hard ceiling of the code.

And the technician who had put it there thirty minutes ago was Mara Chen.

A cold sweat broke out beneath Mei's gray shirt, chilling her spine. Sora Lin had been an accident of humidity and timing in

the agricultural ring; Tessa Vance had been twelve minutes of rough physical convenience down by the cargo locks.

Mara Chen was neither of those things.

Mara Chen was twenty-four, quiet, neat, and surgical. She sat three decks up in the sterile, positive-pressure hush of Med-Bay's telemetry bridge, her dark hair pinned back without a single stray strand, her sharp dark eyes reflecting the rows of biometric monitors. Mara was the junior specialist assigned to audit the ninety-day attendant protocol. For twenty-nine days, every single time Mei had knelt in the ready room, every time her pulse had raced in the mess hall, every time she had whimpered against the cold pipes of the hull corridor at ninety-eight-point-six percent, Mara Chen had been sitting at the central server desk watching Mei's nervous system strip itself bare on her glass.

And now Stanford had walked into Med-Bay and let the woman who monitored Mei's cage touch her.

At 1758 the airlock sighed open and Commander Stanford stepped into the bay.

She looked pristine. Her long blonde hair brushed her shoulders in clean, dry waves; her gray athletic top sat smoothly across her collarbones without a crease or a damp spot. When she stepped up to the console beside Mei, she smelled faintly of Med-Bay—isopropyl antiseptic, pure medical oxygen, and beneath it, the deep, unmistakable warmth of a body that had been wrung out to the last drop of tension.

Mei stood at attention, her jaw clenched so hard her back teeth ached, waiting for Stanford to grab the back of her neck and march her into the ready room for the 1810 calibration the way she had every evening for two weeks. Despite the sick

hollow in her stomach, Mei's starved body was already leaning toward the commander's heat, her thighs trembling inside her trousers in shameful anticipation of the hand that was about to touch her.

Stanford glanced at the holographic board, then down at Mei's flushed face.

"Deck 7 oxygen held at twenty-point-eight through the afternoon shift," Stanford said, her voice flat, calm, and completely unhurried. "Open the scrubber maintenance schedule for Sector 4. I want to audit the canister hours before dinner."

Mei blinked. Her fingers hovered half an inch above her tablet. "Commander?"

"The Sector 4 canister log, Tanaka," Stanford repeated mildly, not moving her hands from the edge of the console. "We have a full board tonight before tomorrow's briefing. Let's get started."

She didn't take Mei into the ready room at 1810.

She didn't take her into the hull corridor at 1900, or at 2000, or during the ten-minute water break at 2145.

It was the most devastating adjustment Stanford had made yet. For fifteen days, Stanford had trained Mei's body to expect the sharp, overwhelming relief of her fingers at the start of every shift—and tonight, on the twenty-ninth day, with 100.0% — CHEN, MARA burning in pale blue letters six inches above Mei's eyes, Stanford simply withheld her hand.

For five straight hours they worked the bay. Stanford stayed within arm's reach the entire time— leaning across Mei to tap a schematic so her chest brushed Mei's shoulder, letting her blonde hair spill across Mei's bare wrist as they checked the

manual gauges, resting her warm forearm along Mei's at the secondary terminal—acting as if nothing were different while Mei slowly came apart at the seams. Without the 1810 edge to organize her nerves, the six hundred and ninety-nine hours of backed-up pressure inside Mei's pelvis became a physical torment so acute she had to brace her hip against the console bezel just to keep her knees from shaking. Twice, when entering the Deck 9 humidity setpoints, her fingers trembled badly enough that she struck the wrong key and had to clear the line.

Stanford noticed both mistakes and said nothing.

At 2320, the night cycle finally locked. The main bay lights dropped to their lowest nocturnal blue, turning the towering scrubber columns into dark steel shadows around the glowing ring of the primary hologram.

Mei stood at the main console, her breathing shallow, a fine sheen of sweat cooling along her collarbone. Her clock on the display rolled to 700 HOURS 00 MINUTES.

Stanford closed the secondary valve overlay and stepped directly behind Mei's right shoulder.

She did not walk Mei toward the ready room door. Instead, right there in the open bay beneath the ten-foot projection of the station's air loops, Stanford planted her left hand on the console beside Mei's hip and brought her right palm up to rest squarely on the back of Mei's neck.

At the first touch of that warm skin against her nape, a violent shudder ripped down Mei's spine. Her eyelids dropped shut; her head tipped back automatically against Stanford's shoulder.

"Seven hundred hours," Stanford murmured, her voice low and even against Mei's ear. "Look at your hands on the glass,

Mei. You've been shaking for three hours just waiting for me to touch you."

"You didn't—" Mei's voice cracked, barely a whisper over the deep hum of the scrubbers. "At 1810, you didn't—"

"I didn't need to calibrate you at 1810," Stanford said calmly, her left arm sliding around Mei's waist to unfasten the snap of her gray trousers right in front of the glowing console. "Because watching you stare at Mara Chen's name on my board for five hours did half the work for me."

Stanford's hand slipped inside the open waistband and beneath the soaked cotton of Mei's briefs. When her fingers made contact with the swollen, aching flesh, Mei's knees buckled so hard that only Stanford's forearm locked across her ribs and the solid wall of Stanford's body behind her kept her from sliding to the deck grating.

"I went up to Med-Bay at 1645 to sign the thirty-day biometric compliance audit for tomorrow's briefing," Stanford said, her voice clinical and unhurried against the side of Mei's throat as her fingers began to move. "And you want to know how Chen put a flat one hundred on the network."

Stanford's left arm stayed locked across Mei's ribs, holding her upright against the console. Her right hand worked inside the open trousers, two fingers sliding deep into the swollen, dripping heat while the heel of her palm ground slow circles against Mei's clit. The pale blue hologram of the air loops spun above them, casting cool light across the wet skin of Mei's lower belly and the dark fabric bunched at her hips.

"Chen had the diagnostic table already prepped when I walked in," Stanford said, voice low and clinical against the side of Mei's throat. Her fingers thrust in a measured, unhurried

rhythm, curling on every inward stroke. “She told me to strip from the waist down and lie back. Then she strapped the high-sensitivity leads to both my thighs—right here.” Stanford’s free hand briefly left Mei’s waist to brush the inside of her own thigh through the gray shorts, then returned. “The leads fed straight to the telemetry monitor beside the table. Every contraction, every spike in pelvic blood flow, every fraction of a degree in core temperature. She watched the numbers while she worked.”

Mei’s hips jerked helplessly against the hand. Stanford’s fingers slowed but did not stop, dragging wet heat upward and circling the clit with firm, deliberate pressure until Mei’s thighs shook against the console edge.

“She used her mouth first,” Stanford continued. “Slow, precise strokes with the flat of her tongue while she watched the graph climb. When the conductivity line flattened she added two fingers—curling exactly against the anterior wall, no wasted motion. She kept her eyes on the monitor the entire time. Adjusted the angle by a millimeter when the pulse dipped. When the numbers hit ninety-eight she sealed her mouth over my clit and sucked in a steady rhythm while her fingers drove deeper. I came with the leads still strapped to my thighs and the telemetry reading a flat one hundred. She didn’t stop until the aftershocks dropped the line back into the green.”

The fingers inside Mei matched the described pace for three hard thrusts, then eased again, holding her at the edge. Condensation from Mei’s breath fogged the glass of the console. Her knees threatened to buckle; only Stanford’s arm kept her standing.

Stanford's mouth stayed close to her ear. "Afterward she unstrapped the leads and wiped her fingers on a sterile towel. She said she'd been watching your restriction graph every night for a month. Said the way your conductivity climbs when you walk past the ready-room door is cleaner data than anything in the protocol manuals."

Mei made a small, broken sound. Stanford's fingers resumed their slow, relentless circles.

"She has more than graphs," Stanford said. Her left hand left Mei's ribs and tapped the edge of the console. A secondary overlay bloomed on the glass—small, private, not the main air-loop projection. Grainy shower-bay footage filled the corner of the screen: Mei, months earlier, standing under the narrow water jets with her back to the hidden lens, one hand between her own thighs. Another clip replaced it—Mei's head tipped back, mouth open, fingers moving faster. A third: the same narrow stall, Mei's free hand braced on the tile while she came in silence.

"Mara pulled these from the medical-file archive," Stanford murmured, still working her fingers inside Mei. "Hidden camera in the crew showers. Every time you touched yourself before I arrived. She said they belong in your biometric baseline. Look at them, Mei. Look at how pretty you used to be when you still thought your body belonged to you."

Mei's eyes stayed fixed on the flickering clips. Stanford's fingers drove deep again, curling hard, then dragged upward in one long, wet stroke that pushed her past ninety-nine. The edge rose so sharply that white light flashed behind Mei's eyes. Her hips bucked once, twice—then Stanford's hand yanked free, leaving the slick, aching flesh exposed to the cool bay air.

At **99.4%**, stranded in the dark with the shower clips still flickering on the glass, something inside Mei snapped in half.

She didn't clamp her mouth shut the way she had after Hydroponics, and she didn't cover her face in shame the way she had in the hull corridor. Seven hundred hours of public celibacy, fifteen nights of suspended agony, and the unbearable image of Mara Chen watching the biometric screens while bringing Stanford to perfection tore the last vestige of Officer Tanaka's careful discipline to shreds.

As Stanford took half a step back from the console, Mei twisted around blindly, her trousers still unfastened, and caught Stanford's wrist with both trembling hands.

"Please," Mei gasped, her voice breaking open in the cavernous bay, raw and unrecognizable. Her forehead dropped against the warm gray fabric of Stanford's shoulder as hot tears spilled over her lashes. "Commander—please don't stop. Not tonight. I can't—my whole body is burning up. Please just put your hand back—"

Stanford stood completely still, letting Mei clutch at her wrist without pulling away, looking down at the dark head pressed against her collarbone.

"You're asking me to break a logged station mandate twelve hours before the thirty-day lock, Tanaka?" Stanford asked, her tone mild and even.

"Not in front of them tomorrow," Mei sobbed, her fingers tightening desperately around Stanford's forearm as her hips gave an involuntary, aching throb against the commander's thigh.

All the quiet silence she had guarded for a month poured out of her in a frantic rush. "Here. With you. Just let me finish once

in the dark with you—I'll do the whole ninety days over, I'll do whatever Lin and Vance and Chen can't do, just please touch me for five more seconds—please, Commander—"

On the main holographic display above them, Mei's biometric trace hung jagged and pulsing in the crimson band: 700 HRS 19 MIN — THRESHOLD: 99.4% (CRITICAL).

Stanford's free hand came up and settled on the back of Mei's neck. Her warm palm curved around the damp skin at the nape, her thumb stroking once, slow and deliberate, along the base of Mei's skull until Mei's ragged sobs hitched into a shivering gasp.

"Listen to yourself," Stanford murmured, a quiet, unmistakable note of satisfaction warming the flat edge of her voice. "On Day One I couldn't get four words out of you at the airlock. Now I have you begging against my shirt."

Mei lifted her tear-streaked face, her dark eyes wide and pleading in the blue light, still thinking—for one delirious second—that the stroke of Stanford's thumb meant mercy.

Instead, Stanford calmly pried Mei's fingers off her wrist, stepped around to Mei's left side, and reached past her to shut down the primary console overlay.

"You don't need to come in the ready room tonight—Chen already cleared my numbers to a hundred for the cycle," Stanford said, her chest brushing briefly against Mei's trembling shoulder before she stepped back toward the corridor. "And you're going to save that voice for 1800 tomorrow, Mei. All forty-two people in this sector have been watching your clock for a month. They deserve to hear how it ends."

Stanford paused at the entrance to the operations passage, looking back once as Mei sagged against the dark terminal with

both hands braced on the aluminum edge to keep from falling to her knees.

"Fix your uniform and try to get some sleep," Stanford said. "Tomorrow is going to be a very long report. Dismissed."

Chapter 6

By 1745 on the thirtieth day, the central environmental bay no longer belonged to the two of them.

Mei stood at her post at the left edge of the primary console, her arms folded tightly across the front of her gray station shirt to hide the tremor in her hands. She had not slept a single minute since 2330 the night before, when Commander Stanford had shut down the terminal and left her shaking in the dark with the ghost of those grainy shower-stall clips still burned into her retinas.

Beneath the waistband of her gray trousers, her body felt less like flesh and more like a pressurized vessel with its relief valves welded shut—every heartbeat sending a dull, heavy throb from her swollen clit straight up into her lungs.

Above her head, expanded to three times its normal shift scale so it could be read from the rear bulkheads, the pale blue hologram floated between the scrubber towers:

> **HAB-7 ENVIRONMENTAL SYSTEMS 30-DAY SECTOR BRIEFING OXYGEN LEVELS: 20.8% (NOMINAL) | LOOP HUMIDITY: STABLE ATTENDANT: TANAKA, M. CELIBACY MANDATE: 719 HRS 48 MIN (UNBROKEN) LIVE BIOMETRIC AROUSAL TRACE: ACTIVE (91.2% BASELINE)**

Every twenty seconds, the inner airlock at the end of the operations corridor sighed open to admit another cluster of staff.

In a windowless steel drum built to house machinery rather than assemblies, forty-two people turned the bay into a pressure cooker. Hull mechanics from Sector 2 crowded in beside the physical valve wall; scrubber technicians leaned shoulder-to-shoulder along the secondary terminal; life-support clerks backed up all the way to the open doorway of the small ready room where Mei had spent twenty-eight nights on her knees. Within ten minutes, the Deck 9 return fans had to kick into high cycle just to handle the load. The closed-loop air grew thick and warm with the shared breath and body heat of the crew, pressing in against Mei's flushed cheeks until she felt as if she were breathing through damp wool.

Nobody spoke above a low murmur, and nobody looked at the oxygen graphs. Every pair of eyes in the chamber tracked between the giant **719 HRS** counter overhead and the quiet woman standing rigid beside the console.

"Look at her baseline," Miller from primary scrubbers whispered near the valve manifold, his voice carrying clearly over the deep hum of the deck plates. "Ninety-one percent just standing there with her arms crossed. If somebody bumps the console she's gonna go off like a blown seal."

Mei kept her chin level and stared straight past their shoulders toward the green indicator light on the corridor airlock. *Do not look at them,* she told herself, digging her fingernails into the gray sleeves over her ribs. *Keep your mouth closed. Do not move.*

Then the front row parted near the diagnostic table, and the three women stepped into the clear space four paces in front of the console.

On the left stood Sora Lin, her dark curls tucked neatly beneath her hydroponics cap, her soft face warm with sympathetic concern as she caught Mei's eye and gave a tiny, encouraging nod. Beside her stood Tessa Vance, boots planted wide on the grating, thumbs hooked in her utility belt, her broad shoulders relaxed as she looked Mei up and down with a slow, proprietary grin that reminded everyone within ten feet who had put the **99.9%** on the board in Bay 2.

And on the right, closest to the secondary terminal, stood Mara Chen.

She wore her clean Med-Bay smock over her gray station trousers, her dark hair pinned back with surgical neatness, her hands folded calmly in front of her waist. She wasn't smiling like Tessa, and she wasn't offering sympathy like Sora. Mara wasn't even looking at Mei's face. Her dark, observant eyes were tilted slightly upward, calmly reading the jagged amber oscillations of Mei's pelvic conductivity trace on the hologram the exact same way she had watched those hidden shower tapes on her server desk.

At the sight of Mara's composed fingers—the fingers that had strapped the high-sensitivity leads to Stanford's thighs twenty-four hours ago and driven the commander to a flat **100.0%**—a wave of cold, visceral terror cut straight through Mei's discipline.

Before she could stop herself, Mei's gaze jerked away from the airlock and locked in sheer, naked panic onto Mara Chen.

Above the crowd, the holographic heart-rate line surged from 112 to 138 in two seconds, the conductivity bar flashing crimson.

At that exact moment, the corridor airlock sealed with a soft sigh, and Commander Stanford walked into the bay.

The low murmur among the forty-two crew members died instantly. Stanford moved through the narrow lane they parted for her without hurry, her long blonde hair falling past her shoulders in loose waves under the blue-and-violet overhead strips. She wore her standard gray athletic set, her shoulders bare and relaxed, taking ownership of the packed chamber as effortlessly as she had claimed the empty corridor on Day One.

As she stepped up to the primary console, Stanford's clear blue eyes flicked once to Mei's face—catching her wide, panicked stare fixed on the right side of the front row—and then lifted for half a beat to the crimson spike still trembling on the biometric display.

That small, familiar shift moved the corner of Stanford's mouth.

She did not touch Mei. She stopped half a pace to Mei's right, turned to face the assembled staff, and rested one hand lightly on the bezel of the console.

"It's 1800," Stanford said, her flat, even North American voice carrying cleanly to the back bulkheads without needing to be raised. "We have eighteen minutes of environmental and workflow telemetry to lock for the thirty-day sector report. As all of you can see on the board, Officer Tanaka's first thirty-day celibacy mandate reaches seven hundred and twenty hours at the conclusion of this briefing."

Above them, the clock clicked over: **720 HRS 00 MIN ELIGIBLE FOR CALIBRATION RELEASE**.

Mei's knees trembled so hard beneath her gray trousers that the heels of her boots tapped faintly against the vibrating deck grating.

"To ensure zero wasted time between the sector report and the morale protocol," Stanford continued mildly, her blue eyes sweeping across the front row, "I need one of my logged secondary attendants at the console to bring Officer Tanaka to threshold while I review the monthly numbers."

In the center of the front row, Tessa Vance uncrossed her arms and shifted her weight onto the balls of her boots, ready to step forward.

Stanford's gaze slid right past her and settled squarely on the right end of the line.

"Chen," Stanford said. "You've been auditing her baseline curves and her medical archives all month, and you already know how to read a live monitor to one hundred percent. Step up here and prep her by hand."

A quiet, electric rustle went through the forty-two people packed against the walls as Mara Chen nodded once and stepped smoothly out of the front row.

Mei's breath froze in her throat. She tried to press her spine further back into the aluminum edge of the console, her arms tightening convulsively across her chest.

Stanford glanced sideways at her. "Uncross your arms, Tanaka. Step one pace forward into the light and brace your wrists behind you on the console rail. If your hands leave the metal before I finish my report, we hold your release over until Day Sixty."

With forty-two pairs of eyes pinned to her skin, Mei forced her arms to unhook. She took one wooden step forward so she stood directly beneath the pale blue projection of the station's air loops, reached behind her back, and gripped the cool metal lip of the console with sweating palms.

Mara Chen stopped directly in front of her. Up close, Mara smelled of sterile soap and cool MedBay air. She didn't offer a teasing word or a cruel look; her dark eyes flicked up once to check the starting baseline on the giant display overhead, then dropped to the waistband of Mei's gray station trousers.

With calm, clinical efficiency, Mara unfastened the top snap, drew the zipper down, and hooked both thumbs inside Mei's trousers and damp cotton briefs—pulling them straight down past her hips and thighs until they pooled around her boot tops, leaving Mei completely bare from the waist down under the bright blue glare of the bay.

A collective intake of breath rippled through the front rows of technicians. Even from four paces away, the glistening, swollen heat between Mei's thighs was unmistakable after thirty days of unbroken lock and sixteen nights of edging.

Beside them, Commander Stanford tapped the primary hologram with one finger, calling up the monthly environmental graphs right beside Mei's live telemetry trace.

"Deck 7 oxygen variance held within zero-point-one percent of the twenty-point-eight nominal baseline across all three shifts this cycle," Stanford began in her calm, unhurried cadence —at the exact second Mara Chen dropped smoothly to her knees on the steel grating between Mei's boots.

Mara's hands settled on the backs of Mei's thighs and pulled her forward half a step so the swollen, dripping flesh was level

with her mouth. The first touch of her tongue was cool and precise—a single, flat stroke from the entrance upward that ended in a tight circle around the clit. Mei's grip on the console rail whitened. Above them the ten-foot biometric graph jumped from 91 to 94 in a single spike.

Stanford's voice continued without pause. "Deck 9 secondary humidity loops remained inside the revised three-percent band after the filter history was pulled on Day One. Manual bypass valves on the outer hull corridor held seal integrity through four full night-cycle locks."

Mara added two fingers, sliding them in to the second knuckle and curling once, testing. The graph climbed to 96. She watched the line, then sealed her mouth over Mei's clit and began a slow, steady suction timed to the rise and fall of the conductivity bar. Every time the jagged amber line flickered toward 98 she eased the suction by a fraction and lightened the curl of her fingers until the number dropped back. Mei's knees shook. Sweat slid down her spine under the gray shirt. She could feel the eyes of the front row—Tessa's grin, Sora's quiet stare, the mechanics along the valve wall—tracking every involuntary twitch of her hips.

"Bay 2 compressor seals were inspected after the Ares-4 undock," Stanford said, still reading the graphs. "Secondary gasket replacement logged at 1738. Recovery pressure restored to nominal within eleven minutes. No further variance recorded on the high-pressure loop."

Mara's free arm locked around Mei's hips, holding her still against the console. Her tongue worked in short, ruthless strokes while her fingers drove deeper, then stopped, then drove again—each motion calibrated to the live trace ten feet

above the crowd. The graph held at 97.4, then 98.1, then eased. Mei's breath came in short, audible pulls. A low sound escaped her throat before she could stop it. Somewhere in the back of the bay a technician shifted; the grating creaked. Mei's mind fractured into pieces: the cold metal under her palms, the wet heat of Mara's mouth, the endless even cadence of Stanford's report, the knowledge that every person she worked with was watching the exact second her body betrayed her.

"Overnight recovery curves on Deck 5 remained stable after the damper adjustment," Stanford continued. "Scrubber load across Sector 4 stayed within the green band for the full thirty-day cycle. Canister hours audited and logged."

Eighteen minutes stretched. Mara never rushed. She watched the giant display and held Mei at the edge with surgical patience—tongue flattening when the line threatened to crest, fingers curling harder when it dipped, suction increasing by millimeters until Mei's vision tunneled and her thighs trembled so hard the boots slid wider on the grating. The ache that had lived in her pelvis for seven hundred hours became a single, blinding point of pressure. She whimpered again, louder, the sound raw and helpless against the scrubber hum. Her thoughts dissolved into static: Stanford's calm voice naming pressure readings, Mara's dark hair moving between her thighs, the crimson bar locked at 99.2 and refusing to fall, the entire sector witnessing the moment Officer Tanaka stopped being able to stay quiet.

Stanford's report moved into the final summary of workflow metrics. Mara's fingers drove deep and held, her mouth sealed tight, keeping the graph pinned at 99.8 while the last technical sentences filled the bay. Mei's head hung forward, sweat

dripping from her hairline onto the console glass, her body locked in a continuous, shaking almost-climax that never arrived. Every muscle from her calves to her shoulders burned. The only thing left in her mind was the need for the number to break and the absolute certainty that it would not, not until Stanford finished speaking.

"—which brings overall sector workflow and leadership wellness to a sustained ninetynine-point-nine percent for the thirty-day cycle," Stanford concluded, her flat voice ringing clearly across the breathless chamber as she tapped the environmental text column closed.

Only the giant crimson biometric graph remained floating above the console, its jagged line screaming across the upper limit at **99.8% CRITICAL THRESHOLD**.

Stanford looked down at the kneeling med-tech.

"Thank you, Chen. That's ninety-nine-point-eight. Step back to your mark."

Mara released Mei's hips, withdrew her fingers and mouth cleanly without a single tapering stroke, and stood up, stepping neatly back into her spot beside Tessa Vance and Sora Lin in the front row.

Left abruptly untouched in the cool draft of the scrubbers, exposed and dripping before forty-two silent witnesses with her nervous system coiled at ninety-nine-point-eight percent, a broken, devastated sob tore out of Mei's chest. Her head hung down between her trembling shoulders; she thought, in her delirium, that the briefing was over and Stanford was going to leave her stranded there in front of them all.

Then the shadow beside her moved.

Commander Stanford stepped directly behind Mei's right shoulder.

The solid, unmistakable heat of Stanford's body pressed flush against Mei's sweat-dampened back, taking her weight before her knees could fold. Stanford's left hand came up and settled squarely on the bare skin at the back of Mei's neck, just above the collar of her shirt. Her palm was warm, heavy, and absolute. Her thumb moved once in that slow, deliberate stroke along the base of Mei's skull, then curved firm fingers around her nape, tilting Mei's chin up so her tearstreaked face was lifted straight toward the watching crew and the towering blue hologram above them.

"Look at the board, Mei," Stanford murmured, her mouth brushing the shell of Mei's ear, her voice low enough to feel intimate yet clear enough in the dead silence of the bay for the entire front row to hear. "Seven hundred and twenty hours. You kept every loop in this sector inside the green band, and you gave me every drop of focus you had."

Stanford's right arm slid down across Mei's trembling ribs and abdomen. Her hand passed between Mei's parted thighs and pressed home—two long fingers driving deep into the slick, spasming heat that Mara had prepared, while the heel of Stanford's palm ground squarely down against the engorged bud of Mei's clit.

"You're mine on this board, Officer Tanaka," Stanford said against her throat, curling her fingers hard against the front wall and driving upward in one ruthless, unhurried stroke. "Let them hear it. Come for me. Now."

The thirty-day lock didn't merely open; it shattered like a viewport blowing out into vacuum.

A raw, ragged scream tore from the bottom of Mei's lungs, echoing off the steel bulkheads, the towering scrubber columns, and the high pipe manifolds of the environmental core as the first massive contraction slammed her spine back against Stanford's chest. White light detonated behind her eyes, erasing the forty-two faces in the bay, erasing Sora and Tessa and Mara, leaving nothing in the universe except the iron vise of Stanford's palm on the back of her neck and the relentless hand driving between her thighs.

Stanford did not slow down and she did not pull away. She held Mei pinned upright in full view of the sector and worked her straight through the flood, her fingers thrusting deep and steady as wave after violent, convulsive wave ripped through Mei's pelvis, soaking Stanford's hand and wrist and splashing warm across the steel grating between their boots. Mei's heels lost their purchase completely; she hung suspended in the commander's grip, her head thrown back against Stanford's bare shoulder, sobbing and gasping through a second, deeper crest that locked every muscle in her thighs and abdomen in a blinding, electric spasm that refused to end—while ten feet above the silent crowd, the biometric display flared brilliant white at **100.0% ATTENUATION COMPLETE**, bathing the steel walls and the two locked figures at the console in a steady, pulsing glow.