



## Chapter 11: Steel Water

Six hours in a sealed room felt longer than six hours in a city.

Time didn't have landmarks here. No sun angles. No crowd noise. No distant sirens to remind your brain the world still existed. Just air filtered through someone else's idea of safety, and the quiet hum of systems that didn't care if you slept.

Mai tried.

She sat, then lay back, then sat again, like comfort was a puzzle with missing pieces. Every time she closed her eyes, her ribs reminded her she'd recently tried to arm-wrestle gravity and lost.

Ace didn't even pretend.

She stayed upright in the chair, shoulders relaxed, breathing steady, staring at nothing like she was watching a film only she could see.

Mai finally spoke without opening her eyes. "You're thinking too loud."

Ace's mouth twitched faintly. "I'm sitting quietly."

Mai opened one eye. "Exactly."

Ace exhaled slowly. The three-beat pulse in her ribs kept time with a patience that felt insulting.

"I'm trying to map it," Ace admitted.

Mai's eye narrowed. "Bright told you not to chase it."

"I'm not chasing it," Ace said. "I'm...cataloging."

Mai's expression said that's the same thing wearing a different hat. She didn't argue, though. She just sat up and reached out, tapping Ace's wrist once with two fingers—light contact, human and mundane.

Anchor, but gentler now.

"Catalog it later," Mai said quietly. "Right now you eat."

Ace glanced down at the half-finished protein bar in her hand like it had personally offended her. Then she finished it anyway, chewing with mechanical stubbornness.

Mai sighed. "Good girl."

Ace's head snapped up, violet eyes narrowing. "Excuse me?"

Mai smiled with teeth. "Eat your bar, demon huntress."

Ace rolled her eyes, but the corner of her mouth twitched. Tiny sparks of normality. The kind you defended like a candle in a wind tunnel.

A panel in the wall clicked.

A voice—not Bright—came through, flat and professional. "Field Team A/M. Prep for transit."

Mai stood too quickly, hissed, and glared at her ribs like they'd betrayed her. "If you ever want me to sleep, stop scheduling emergencies."

Ace rose smoothly, blades already sheathed, gear in place as if she'd never sat down.

The door opened, and two security staff waited with face shields and scanning gear. Their eyes avoided Ace's chest the way people avoided looking at a bruise they'd caused.

"Hands visible," one said.

Mai's glare could've melted metal. "They are visible."

Ace complied anyway.

The scan took seconds. The wand chirped once at Ace's sternum, faint.

The operator swallowed. "Still present."

Mai's voice went razor-flat. "And?"

“No increase,” the operator said quickly. “No active link detected.”

Mai’s shoulders eased a fraction.

Ace didn’t. Not fully. Because “no link detected” didn’t mean “no link exists.” It meant “we didn’t catch it.”

They moved through another corridor, then down a second elevator, then through a loading bay that smelled like cold metal and sea air.

That was the first good sign.

Salt.

Distance.

Outside, night had settled over the yard. Rain fell in thin needles, catching on floodlights and turning into silver streaks. Vehicles waited—two black vans and one heavier truck with a container trailer.

Mai frowned. “We’re shipping ourselves?”

A man in a raincoat approached, badge clipped under the lapel. “You’re going under radar. Container is shielded. It’ll move with normal freight.”

Mai’s mouth twisted. “This is the least romantic travel plan I’ve ever been forced into.”

Ace glanced at her. “That’s saying something.”

Mai huffed a short laugh, then winced. “Shut up.”

They climbed into the container.

Inside was not empty.

It had been fitted—minimal but intentional. Two bench seats bolted to the floor, straps, a small medical kit, a portable air unit humming quietly. No windows. No screens. A single overhead light that could be dimmed.

A coffin with amenities.

The doors closed from the outside with a heavy metallic clunk.

The sound landed in Ace’s nervous system like a fist.

A tiny, animal part of her snapped awake: trapped.

Her shadow-pressure aura tightened reflexively, a thin skin around her body.

Mai noticed instantly. She shifted closer without making it obvious, sat beside Ace, shoulder almost touching.

“Breathe,” Mai said softly, like she was talking to a wild animal that had decided not to bite yet.

Ace forced her lungs to obey. In. Out.

The three-beat pulse in her ribs persisted, steady.

Mai's hand slid to Ace's wrist again, fingers warm through fabric. Not restraining. Not petting.

Present.

"You're not alone," Mai murmured.

Ace's throat tightened. She didn't like needing reminders.

But she did need them.

"I know," Ace said.

The container shuddered as it was lifted. A brief sensation of weightlessness, then a settling thud as it was placed on the truck bed.

The engine started. Vibration rolled through the floor into their bones.

Mai leaned back, eyes half-lidded. "Boat after this."

Ace's gaze stayed on the metal doors as if she could see through them.

Mai followed her gaze. "Thinking about the priest."

Ace nodded once. "He jumped."

Mai's voice was dry. "He fell."

"He chose it," Ace said.

Mai's jaw tightened. "He chose to deliver a template."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "And he chose to let something down there...taste me."

Mai's fingers tightened on Ace's wrist. "And you chose not to answer."

Ace exhaled slowly. "Yes."

Mai's expression softened a fraction, then hardened again because Mai didn't trust softness to survive. "Good."

The truck rolled, and the container became a moving box with sound and vibration as its only landmarks.

Minutes passed.

Then, somewhere in the dark, the three-beat pulse in Ace's ribs did something new.

It synced.

Not with the truck's vibration.

With something else.

A faint rhythm layered under the engine noise, too steady to be mechanical.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace's breath caught.

Mai felt it—not the pulse itself, but Ace's reaction.

"What," Mai said instantly.

Ace swallowed. "It's...responding."

Mai sat up, eyes sharp. "Responding to what?"

Ace closed her eyes for a second, focusing.

The truck vibration was messy, irregular. This new rhythm was clean. Precise. Intentional.

And it wasn't inside her alone.

It was in the air.

A faint thrum that made the container's metal skin feel like it was humming.

Mai's disruptor runes flickered, reacting even though the weapon was holstered.

Mai muttered, "No."

Ace opened her eyes. "We're being pinged."

Mai's jaw clenched. "But this is shielded."

Ace's voice went cold. "Then the ping isn't coming from outside."

A silence fell that had nothing to do with the container's lack of windows.

Mai's gaze snapped to the corners of the container, scanning for devices, seams, anything that could carry signal.

"Talk to me," Mai said, voice low, controlled. "What do you feel?"

Ace pressed a palm lightly to her sternum. The pulse there was steady—and now it was harmonizing with the new rhythm in the air like two instruments tuning to the same pitch.

"It feels like..." Ace began, then stopped, searching for the honest words. "Like a sonar click. Like something is calling into a dark ocean and waiting to hear what echoes back."

Mai's mouth tightened. "And Violet?"

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Violet is listening."

Mai's voice sharpened. "Is she pushing?"

Ace inhaled slowly, checking the lock.

Violet was behind it, pressed close now, interested.

Not pushing to seize.

Pushing to speak.

To answer the sonar.

Ace felt the temptation like warmth in her blood: just a small reply, just a little resonance, just enough to see who was calling.

Ace's teeth clenched.

"No," Ace whispered, more to herself than anyone. "Not answering."

The container's overhead light flickered once.

Then twice.

Mai's gaze snapped up.

A thin line of frost—impossible in this air—began to creep along the metal seam near the doors, crawling like a slow vein.

Mai's voice went flat with disbelief. "Tell me that's condensation."

Ace stared at the frost.

"It's not," Ace said.

Because in the faint white crystals, a pattern was forming.

Not random.

Not natural.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

The frost was writing the rhythm onto the door.

And from the other side of the metal—through layers of shielded freight container and moving truck and night rain—

—came a sound.

Not an engine.

Not a city.

A breath.

Close enough to fog metal.

Mai's hand tightened on the disruptor. "Bright," she snapped into her comm. "We have an internal event. Repeat: internal. Our shielded container is being contacted."

Static answered.

Mai tried again, voice sharper. “Bright!”

Nothing.

Ace’s shadow-pressure aura rose around her like a second skin, emerald edges faint in the dim light.

Mai looked at Ace, eyes hard. “Tell me you can hold Violet.”

Ace’s jaw tightened. “I can hold her.”

Mai didn’t blink. “Tell me again.”

Ace met her gaze. “I can hold her.”

Mai nodded once, satisfied enough.

The frost line reached the center of the doors.

Then the metal tapped from the outside.

Not a knock.

A single, gentle tap.

Like someone testing whether the door was real.

Ace’s pulse answered, involuntary—one stronger beat under her ribs.

Violet purred behind the lock, delighted.

They found us.

Mai raised the disruptor, aim steady at the doors, and whispered, “Whatever is out there...”

Ace’s voice came out low and lethal.

“...is not coming in.”

The door seam glowed faintly—

—and began to open from the outside.

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