



## Chapter 13: Salt and Silence

The truck kept moving like nothing had happened.

That was the part that made Ace's skin itch.

If reality could nearly become a drop-shaft inside a sealed container and the world outside still rolled on—engine noise, potholes, rain—then the enemy wasn't "hiding in the city" anymore.

It was learning how to ride normality.

Mai stayed on her knees for a full minute, one hand braced on the katana blade still sunk in the floor, the other holding the disruptor like a priest holding a relic he didn't trust. Her breathing came shallow, ragged, then steadier as stubbornness took over from pain.

Ace stood without moving, eyes on the doors, listening to the absence where the tap had been.

No more knocks.

No more frost.

No more violet eyes pressing close.

Just the sensation of being watched by something patient enough to stop mid-attack to make sure you understood it could start again whenever it wanted.

Bright's voice crackled again, harder now, like he'd moved closer to a transmitter. "Thirty seconds. Dock transfer. Keep your weapons live. Team will open the container from outside—standard procedure is not standard anymore."

Mai coughed a laugh that turned into a grimace. "Tell your standard procedure it owes me new ribs."

"Acknowledged," Bright said, dead serious.

The truck slowed. Turned. Rolled over a different surface—smoother, flatter. The sound changed: wet asphalt to something more hollow.

Metal decking.

Dock.

The container shuddered as it stopped. For a breath, the silence inside was so complete Ace could hear Mai's heartbeat like a distant drum.

Then the doors unsealed with the mechanical clatter of normal locks being normal.

Cold sea air punched in.

Salt. Diesel. Wet rope. The smell of harbor machinery and gulls and the kind of wind that carried no hymns, no incense, no hidden math.

A line of floodlights lit the dock in hard white. Foundation staff moved fast—no chatter, no wasted gestures. Two operatives stood with rifles up, scanning the darkness beyond the dock's reach. Another pair carried a portable field frame—something like a metal doorway that hummed faintly as it powered on.

Mai saw it and swore softly. "Portable shield gate. So we don't walk across open air like idiots."

Ace stepped down from the container, boots hitting wet decking.

For a second—just a second—her nervous system expected the dock itself to forget it was solid.

It didn't.

The world stayed stubbornly physical.

Mai followed, wincing, posture rigid with pain and pride. She nodded at the nearest operative, the universal gesture for I'm not a threat, I'm just angry at everything.

A man in a slick rain jacket moved toward them. Not one of the corridor staff. Older face. Hard eyes. The kind of posture that didn't change even when the environment did.

He looked at Ace like he was reading a report written in blood.

"Ace," he said. "Mai."

Mai's gaze narrowed. "And you are?"

"Acting Site Lead for this transit," he replied. "Call me Kato. You won't remember my full name anyway. It's not important."

Mai's mouth twisted. "That's comforting."

Kato didn't smile. "You experienced an internal pattern overlay inside a shielded container."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "So the comms were recording."

"We record everything that might keep people alive later," Kato said flatly.

Ace's voice came calm. "The overlay wasn't Order-standard."

Kato's gaze stayed on her. "No. It was cleaner."

Mai spat the word like it was poison. "Tuned."

Kato nodded once. "Yes."

He gestured toward the portable field frame. Beyond it sat a boat—black hull, low profile, no name painted on the side. It looked like a workboat until you noticed how little it reflected light. How the deck fittings were too new. Too quiet.

"How long to open water?" Mai asked.

Kato didn't hesitate. "Eight minutes."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Then why aren't we moving?"

Kato's gaze flicked toward the darkness beyond the dock lights. "Because something has been matching your route since the yard."

Mai's hand tightened on her disruptor. "It's still here."

"Not here," Kato corrected. "Nearby."

Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs answer, faint and involuntary, like a dog hearing its handler's whistle from far away.

Mai noticed the twitch in Ace's throat when she swallowed.

Mai didn't ask. She just moved half a step closer.

Anchor.

Kato raised a hand. A tech beside him lifted a small scanner—more sensitive than the wand in the corridor. It hummed, then produced a thin line on its display that rose and fell like an EKG.

The tech's face tightened. "Harmonic presence. Directional. Weak but...consistent."

Mai's voice went low. "Direction?"

The tech pointed—toward the water.

Not toward the city.

Toward the dark surface beyond the dock, where waves slapped quietly against pylons and swallowed sound.

Ace stared into the water and felt something cold move in her mouth, like the taste of old pennies.

Mai's voice came out tight. "Don't tell me it's in the harbor."

Kato didn't blink. "It's near the harbor."

Mai snorted. "That's a very polite way to say 'it's in the water'."

Kato's eyes stayed flat. "Yes."

A gull cried overhead, and it sounded suddenly like mockery.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura rose without permission, a silent flare of readiness. The emerald edges were faint in the rain, but present.

Kato watched it with no visible reaction, then said, "We can't fight it here. Too many lines. Too much infrastructure. Too much noise it can ride. We go to open water."

Mai's jaw clenched. "And if it follows us there?"

Kato's gaze shifted to Ace. "Then we learn if it needs the city to sing...or if it can sing through a person."

The words landed heavy.

Mai's hand tightened on Ace's sleeve for the briefest moment—an involuntary grip that wasn't control, it was don't you dare feel alone in this.

Ace didn't look at her, but her shoulder pressed back once.

Acknowledged.

Kato gave a short signal.

They moved through the portable field frame.

For a heartbeat, the air felt different inside it—thicker, like walking through a strip of quiet. Ace's pulse in her ribs dimmed slightly, as if the field gate muted whatever thread was tugging at her.

Mai felt it too. Her shoulders dropped a fraction.

"Okay," Mai muttered. "That helps."

They crossed onto the boat. The deck was slick with rain. The crew—Foundation, not sailors—moved with practiced speed, lines released, engine rumbling low.

Ace's gaze went to the water again.

The harbor surface was black, broken by rain impacts and ripples. Nothing dramatic. No tentacles. No glimmering eyes. No cinematic nonsense.

And yet Ace's skin prickled like she was standing at the edge of a cliff.

Mai sat on a bench bolted to the deckhouse wall, forced by ribs and reality. Ace stayed standing near the door, a hand on the rail. Close enough to feel the sea air. Far enough from the crew to not spook them.

Kato stepped into the deckhouse and closed the door behind him. The world inside became smaller, warmer, full of engine vibration.

A speaker mounted near the ceiling crackled.

Bright's voice came through, clearer now. "You're moving. Good."

Mai snapped, "You owe me a drink."

Bright replied, "You'll get a medical consult."

Mai: "That's not a drink."

Bright ignored her. "Ace. Status."

Ace didn't answer immediately. She watched the door, listened for taps that weren't there.

Then: "The pulse is quieter inside the gate."

Bright exhaled. "Good. That means it's not fully internal."

Mai's voice went cold. "Or it means it's learning."

A pause. Bright didn't deny it.

Kato leaned against the wall like a man who didn't have the luxury of nerves. "If it's in the water, we'll feel it when we clear the harbor mouth. We've got sensors in the hull."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Hull sensors for hymns. We live in a wonderful age."

Ace said quietly, "It knocked. It spoke. It knows my frequency."

Kato's gaze flicked to her. "It didn't just know it," he said. "It used it. That's worse."

Mai's hand slid to Ace's wrist again, lighter now, but firm.

Bright's voice tightened. "You did good back there. Both of you."

Mai made a noncommittal sound, as if praise was suspicious by default.

Ace didn't respond. Praise didn't change physics.

The boat rocked as it hit a larger swell, leaving the shallow harbor waves. The engine note changed as the pilot throttled up.

The deckhouse vibrated.

A chime sounded from a panel on the wall.

Kato looked at it. The tech beside him glanced and went pale.

“Hull sensors,” the tech said quietly. “We’ve got a harmonic trace in the water column.”

Mai’s voice went flat. “Distance.”

The tech swallowed. “Forty meters. Moving parallel.”

Ace’s ribs tightened as the three-beat pulse answered—stronger now, as if the sea itself carried the rhythm better than concrete ever could.

Mai saw Ace’s jaw tighten.

Mai didn’t ask. She just said, low: “Hold.”

Ace’s voice was steady. “Holding.”

Kato’s eyes stayed on the panel. “It’s matching speed.”

Mai leaned forward, elbows on knees, face hard. “So it can follow open water.”

Kato nodded once. “Yes.”

The chime sounded again. The trace on the panel brightened.

Then, through the deckhouse floor, came a sound.

Not a knock on a door.

A tap on the hull.

One gentle tap.

Mai’s eyes widened, the first honest flash of are you kidding me fear she’d shown all day.

Then another tap.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Bright’s voice came through the speaker, suddenly sharp. “That’s it. That’s your trace. It’s right under you.”

Ace’s shadow-pressure aura rose, emerald edges lighting the deckhouse shadows.

Mai stood despite ribs, because fear made pain negotiable. She aimed her disruptor at the floor like it mattered.

Kato’s voice went calm, too calm. “Don’t shoot the hull.”

Mai snapped, “I wasn’t going to—”

A whisper slid up through the deckhouse like cold mist creeping under a door.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just close enough to fog glass.

“Ace,” it whispered.

Mai’s blood ran cold. “It knows your name now.”

Ace’s throat tightened. The three-beat pulse in her ribs surged, trying to answer. Violet behind the lock pressed close, smiling like someone hearing an old friend outside.

Open, Violet whispered inside her. Just a crack. Just enough to speak.

Ace’s hands tightened on the rail.

“No,” Ace said aloud, voice low and shaking only a little. “Not talking.”

The hull tapped again, gentler this time—as if pleased she’d responded at all.

Kato’s eyes narrowed. “It got a reaction.”

Mai snapped, “It got a refusal.”

Kato didn’t look convinced. “Refusal is still signal.”

Bright’s voice came through, tense. “Ace. Don’t engage. Not even verbally.”

Ace stared at the floor like she could see through steel into black water.

Too late.

It had already heard her.

The whisper came again, and this time it wasn’t just a name. It was a sentence, shaped carefully like a lure.

“You closed the doors,” it murmured. “So I learned to be water.”

Mai’s voice went ice-cold. “You’re not water.”

A faint sound—almost like laughter—vibrated up through the hull.

Then the boat tilted.

Not from waves.

From pressure.

Something under the hull rose just enough to lift one side, making the deckhouse skew a few degrees.

Crew shouted outside. Boots thudded. The engine note wavered as the pilot corrected.

Mai braced herself against the wall, ribs screaming, disruptor still aimed at steel she wasn’t allowed to

shoot.

Ace's aura surged, shadow-pressure pushing downward instinctively, as if she could pin the thing through the hull.

The pulse in her ribs flared in response—like the hook recognized she was reaching.

Ace snapped her aura back immediately, like yanking her hand away from fire.

Mai saw it. "Don't reach," Mai hissed. "It bites."

Ace's jaw clenched. "I know."

The boat leveled again.

A breath passed—ten seconds of tense silence.

Then the hull tapped one last time, soft and almost affectionate.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

And the whisper slid up again, velvet over steel:

"Soon."

The trace on the hull panel dimmed. The harmonic presence drifted away, falling behind as the boat sped up—like it had accomplished what it came to do.

Not to kill them.

Not to take Ace.

Just to prove it could come this close whenever it wanted.

Mai's hands shook, then stilled as she forced control back into her muscles.

Kato stared at the panel like he wanted to punch it.

Bright's voice came through, quiet and angry. "It's testing boundaries."

Ace swallowed once, slow.

Inside her ribs, Violet was humming softly, pleased.

Not because they'd been threatened.

Because they'd been noticed.

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist again, hard this time.

"Listen to me," Mai said, voice low and absolute. "You are not a door."

Ace met her eyes.

For a beat, the three-beat pulse tried to drown the moment in rhythm.

Ace forced it down.

“No,” Ace said, and this time her voice didn’t shake. “I’m not.”

Mai nodded once, satisfied.

Outside, the boat cut into open water, leaving harbor lights behind.

The world became sea and rain and engine noise.

A cleaner map.

But Ace understood now—clean map didn’t mean safe.

It only meant the enemy had fewer places to hide...

...and therefore fewer reasons to pretend it needed to.

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