



Chapter 18: Subdeck Exit

Bright moved like a man who had already decided what he was willing to lose.

No hesitation. No second-guessing. Just that sharp, utilitarian momentum you got when fear had been distilled into procedure.

He didn't take the main corridor. He took the service spine—narrower hallways, less camera coverage, more utility panels than people. The platform's hum sounded different down here, closer, as if the machinery had lungs and you were walking through its throat.

Ace followed half a step behind him, hands on katana grips out of habit, senses stretched thin. The three-beat pulse in her ribs stayed low but present—like a faint tinnitus you could ignore until someone reminded you it existed.

Mai was two corridors away, drugged, sleeping.

Ace hated that.

Being unconscious felt like being a sitting target.

Bright stopped at a hatch marked with a neutral, boring label: PUMP ACCESS. He keyed in a code, then pressed his token to a hidden reader. The lock clicked open with a polite hiss.

Inside was a steep metal ladder leading down into darker air.

Bright glanced at Ace. "Quiet feet."

Ace nodded once.

They descended.

The air grew colder with each rung, dampened by proximity to sea. The smell of salt returned, stronger now. The platform's vibration softened as they moved away from the main systems—less mechanical hum, more water slap and deep structural creaks.

At the bottom, they stepped into a cramped utility corridor. Pipes ran along one wall like arteries. A thin strip of emergency lighting painted everything in sickly green.

Bright moved fast. Too fast for someone who wanted to stay unnoticed, which meant he wasn't trying to be invisible.

He was trying to get out before anyone could aim.

They reached a second hatch, this one with a heavier wheel latch. Bright spun it with practiced ease.

The hatch swung open—

—and Ace felt the dampening field change immediately.

Not vanish.

Shift.

Like walking from a room with thick curtains into a room with thin curtains.

The three-beat pulse in her ribs brightened, just a little.

Mai's hand wasn't on her wrist right now.

Ace had to be her own anchor.

Bright stepped aside and gestured her through.

Beyond the hatch was a chamber that looked nothing like "offshore maintenance." It was all clean steel, rounded corners, and a faint blue strip-light outlining the floor.

A small dock space.

And sitting on a cradle in the center like a weapon that pretended to be a vehicle—

—was a submersible.

Compact. Dark. Smooth hull. No markings. No windows, just camera clusters and a forward sensor

dome. It looked like it didn't belong to any navy, any coast guard, any corporate research agency.

It looked like it belonged to paranoia with a budget.

Ace stared. "You have one of these here."

Bright's voice was clipped. "We have several. Get in."

A tech in a headset stood by the sub's hatch, eyes wide. "Dr. Bright—this wasn't on the schedule."

Bright didn't slow down. "That's why it works. Open it."

The tech hesitated just long enough to show they understood they were about to make enemies.

Then they opened it.

Bright moved toward the ladder into the sub's interior.

Ace didn't.

Ace's eyes had caught something on the chamber wall: a small panel with a status display.

DAMPENING ARRAY - LOCAL CONTROL: DISABLED

Ace's stomach turned.

She pointed at it. "Bright."

Bright glanced, and the tiniest fraction of his composure cracked.

"What," he snapped.

Ace's voice stayed flat. "Local control is disabled."

Bright's eyes narrowed. He crossed to the panel fast, checked it, swore softly.

"That's not possible," he muttered.

Ace's pulse in her ribs spiked—not the three-beat hook, but her own alarm response. "It's possible. It's happening."

Bright tapped in his token again. The panel refused, flashing a polite denial message.

ACCESS DENIED - OVERRIDE ACTIVE

Bright's jaw tightened. "They locked it out."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura rose, a silent flare. "They're watching."

Bright's eyes flicked toward the ceiling cameras. There were three. He hadn't noticed them on the way in.

Or he had, and he'd hoped they weren't live.

Bright turned to the tech. "Close the sub. Now."

The tech swallowed. "We can't—protocol requires confirmation from—"

Bright's voice went dangerous. "From who? The people who crawled into her dream? Close it."

The tech moved.

Ace heard footsteps in the corridor above—faint, distant, but real. More than one person. Boots. Purposeful. Not the soft tread of maintenance staff.

Bright heard them too.

"Move," Bright said to Ace, low.

Ace stepped toward the sub—

—and the chamber lights flickered once.

Just once.

Like a blink.

The air thickened.

Ace's ribs pulsed—three beats, pause, three beats—louder now, as if the shift in dampening had given the hook more room to breathe.

Ace felt Violet behind the lock stir, delighted.

They're coming, Violet purred. We can greet them.

Ace clenched her jaw. "No."

Bright glanced at her sharply, then at the sub, then back toward the hatch they'd entered.

"Too late," Bright muttered.

The corridor hatch behind them hissed open.

A man stepped into the chamber.

Not Kato.

Different posture. Cleaner uniform. No rain gear. No sea smell. The kind of person who belonged to internal departments, not field work.

His eyes landed on Bright first, then on Ace.

He didn't look surprised.

He looked prepared.

"Dr. Bright," the man said calmly. "You are off route."

Bright's voice went flat. "Funny. I could say the same."

The man's gaze shifted to Ace's chest display on the wall panel—like he already knew what he'd see there.

"Ace," he said softly. "You had a vivid dream."

Mai's name wasn't in his mouth, but Mai's presence was implied. He knew she existed. He just wasn't talking to her.

Ace's blood went cold.

Bright's posture tightened. "Step back."

The man didn't.

He lifted one hand slightly, palm outward—peaceful gesture, perfect mirror of Bright's earlier "steady."

"I'm not your enemy," he said.

Mai would've laughed in his face.

Ace didn't laugh. Ace stared, still as a drawn blade.

Bright's voice turned sharp. "Then name your cell."

The man's expression didn't change. "Interfaces. Calibration. You already saw the routing."

Bright's jaw tightened. "So you admit it."

The man tilted his head slightly. "I confirm it."

Ace's nails dug into her palms. "You entered my sleep."

The man's gaze held hers, clinical and unblinking. "We ran a test."

Ace's voice went low. "Without consent."

The man's reply was calm enough to be insulting. "Consent is a luxury when the risk is existential."

Bright's eyes flashed. "You don't get to say that while hiding behind bulkheads."

The man's gaze didn't move. "We are not hiding. We are observing. And we observed something important."

Ace's ribs pulsed, louder.

Violet pressed against the lock like someone leaning in to hear a secret being spoken about them.

Ace forced herself to keep her face neutral. "What did you observe?"

The man smiled slightly.

"That your lock holds," he said. "And that it holds because you have an external anchor."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Mai."

The man nodded once. "Yes."

Ace's stomach turned. "Don't you say her name."

The man's gaze stayed calm. "We are not interested in her as a person. We are interested in her as a stabilizer."

Ace's shadow-pressure aura surged—a silent pressure that made the air feel heavier.

Bright stepped half a pace forward, voice dangerous. "You don't talk about my people like they're equipment."

The man didn't flinch. "Then stop putting equipment into the field."

Ace felt something in her ribs flare—not the hook. Something else. A hot, protective anger that tasted like teeth.

Mai was asleep upstairs.

Drugged.

Vulnerable.

And this man was speaking about her like a circuit component.

Ace's voice came out cold. "What do you want?"

The man's eyes flicked toward the sub. "We want you to stay on this platform for twenty-four hours under controlled conditions."

Bright laughed once, sharp. "No."

The man's voice stayed calm. "You are not authorized to refuse."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "And you're authorized to crawl into people's heads?"

The man's smile sharpened. "Yes."

Bright's fingers tightened around his token, like he wanted to shove it down the man's throat.

Ace's ribs pulsed again—three beats, pause, three beats—louder, eager, like the room itself was watching.

The man looked at Ace and spoke in a tone that was almost gentle.

"You felt it," he said. "The protocol in the water. The clean pattern. The addressing. It's not Order. It's something else. Something that can treat you like a node."

Ace's jaw tightened. "I know."

The man nodded. "Then you understand why we can't let you leave until we know if you can be pinged through her."

Ace froze.

Bright's voice went ice. "You're going to ping Mai."

The man's eyes didn't blink. "We will simulate removal of external anchor support to determine whether the lock is sustainable without—"

Ace moved.

Not a katana swing. Not violence toward flesh.

A step. A sudden shift of presence.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura snapped outward like a silent shockwave, slamming into the man's personal space with enough force to make his breath catch.

His pupils widened a fraction.

Not fear.

Surprise.

Ace's voice was low, shaking with restrained fury. "You will not touch her."

The man swallowed once, then steadied. "If you cannot tolerate the test, you are proving you cannot be deployed responsibly."

Ace's teeth bared. "Try me."

Bright's hand came up quickly, touching Ace's shoulder—firm, grounding. "Ace. Anchor."

Ace's breath hitched. Not because she was losing control, but because she was so close to letting anger become signal.

She forced her lungs to slow.

Mai's voice, real voice, echoed in her head: Be boring.

Ace lowered her aura, compressing it back inward like swallowing a storm.

The man watched, fascinated.

"Excellent," he murmured. "You can down-regulate."

Bright's voice was a growl. "Get out of my way."

The man glanced toward the corridor behind him. Footsteps were closer now. More bodies approaching. He was stalling for reinforcements.

"You can leave," the man said. "After the test window. Twenty-four hours."

Bright's eyes hardened. "No."

The man's voice softened into something almost pitying. "Then you will be restrained. Both of you. And the anchor will be removed by force."

Ace's stomach dropped.

That wasn't a threat.

That was a procedure.

Bright's jaw clenched. He looked at Ace, and in that look was a whole conversation: If they touch Mai, we burn the platform. But if we burn the platform, you both become liabilities in their eyes. And that's what they want.

Ace's voice came out quiet, controlled. "Bright."

Bright's eyes flicked to her. "What."

Ace's gaze went to the sub.

Then back to Bright.

Then to the man.

Ace spoke slowly, choosing words like knives.

"You said the dampening array local control is disabled," Ace said, voice flat. "Which means you've already prepared this room as an interface."

The man's smile didn't change. "Correct."

Ace's ribs pulsed, and she forced herself not to react.

Ace continued, colder. "So you expect us to panic. To fight. To give you data."

The man nodded slightly, pleased. "Yes."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Then we deny you data."

Bright's brows drew together. "Ace—"

Ace's voice sharpened. "We go quiet."

The man's smile widened a fraction. "Quiet is data too."

Ace's gaze turned knife-sharp. "Not the data you want."

Bright stared at her, then—slowly—understood what she was offering.

A different kind of move.

Not running.

Not fighting.

A controlled refusal inside their control box.

A choice that made their calibrated system useless.

Ace looked at the man.

"We'll stay," Ace said calmly.

Bright's head snapped toward her. "Ace—"

Ace didn't look at Bright. She kept her eyes on the man. "On one condition."

The man's eyes narrowed slightly. "You don't dictate conditions."

Ace's voice stayed steady. "You want calibration. You want controlled conditions. Then you keep the anchor untouched. No sedation changes. No isolation from Mai. No 'simulation.'"

The man's smile faded. "Unacceptable."

Ace's eyes went hard. "Then you restrain us and you get nothing. Because I will open my lock on your schedule."

Bright inhaled sharply—realizing what Ace had just threatened.

Ace didn't blink.

The man stared at her for a long beat.

Then he spoke carefully, as if he was suddenly aware he was dealing with a weapon that could choose when to misfire.

"You would endanger the platform," he said softly.

Ace's reply was ice. "You already did."

The footsteps in the corridor above stopped. Someone was listening at the hatch.

The man's jaw worked once. His calm was real, but it was being tested.

Finally, he said, "You are not to leave this platform."

Ace nodded once. "Fine."

Bright stared at her, fury and disbelief tangled.

Ace didn't soften. She held the line, because this line was protecting Mai while she slept.

The man's gaze flicked toward the sub. "You will return to your quarters. Both of you. Under observation."

Ace nodded again. "Fine."

The man turned slightly toward the corridor hatch, and Ace saw it—the fraction of attention shift, the micro-moment where his body assumed the threat had been managed.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura coiled inward like a spring.

Not to attack him.

To prepare.

Because “fine” was a word that bought seconds.

And seconds were currency.

Bright’s gaze met Ace’s.

Ace didn’t speak.

But her eyes did.

When.

Bright’s jaw clenched.

He nodded, barely.

And somewhere deep in Ace’s ribs, the three-beat pulse tried to purr in satisfaction—

—because the system thought it had them.

It didn’t know yet that Ace and Mai’s specialty wasn’t compliance.

It was finding the seam in the world—

—and cutting it.

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