



## Chapter 22: Decommissioned Teeth

The tunnel narrowed the farther they crawled.

Not in a dramatic cave-in way—more like the platform had been built in layers, and the oldest layer had been forgotten, walled off, then repurposed and abandoned again. Here, the metal smelled different: less disinfectant, more rust and old salt. The air was colder, heavy with condensation. Somewhere in the walls, water dripped in a slow, patient rhythm that refused to become three beats.

Ace went first.

She kept her katanas strapped tight, shoulders hunched, moving like a blade sliding through a sheath. Her shadow-pressure aura stayed compressed to a tight core, because the tunnel didn't have room for storms.

Mai followed close enough that Ace could feel her presence through the air.

Bright brought up the rear, his token light turned down low, a faint glow barely enough to see the seams in the steel.

Behind them, the platform's clean world hummed—distant now, muffled through layers of metal and stale air. Footsteps above became thumps you could feel rather than hear.

Searchers.

Ace's mind kept trying to put a count on them.

Two? Four? Six?

Pointless.

They were inside the body now, inside the ribs and cartilage where organs didn't like intruders. The platform was going to do what bodies did: isolate, constrict, pressure until compliance.

Mai whispered, "How far does this go."

Bright's voice was low. "To an old ballast chamber. Then a maintenance trunk that connects to the subdeck dock—different line than the one we used."

Mai snorted softly. "So we can still reach the sub."

Bright: "If it's not locked down."

Ace crawled another meter and stopped.

The steel ahead wasn't collapsed.

It was sealed.

A round hatch sat in the tunnel wall—older style, heavy wheel, paint worn away to bare metal. The label plate was scratched and half unreadable.

Ace leaned closer and traced the faint letters with her glove.

B-03: BALLAST / FLOOD CONTROL - MANUAL

Mai's voice went tight. "Flood control."

Bright's breath hissed through his teeth. "Yeah."

Ace listened.

Nothing supernatural.

Just dripping.

Just the distant pulse of machinery.

Still, her instincts screamed that this hatch mattered.

She put her hand on the wheel latch.

Cold.

Wet.

And then—very faintly—she felt something like vibration through the metal.

Not footsteps.

Not engine.

Something slower, deeper.

As if the platform itself was shifting weight.

Ace looked back at Bright. “They’re changing something.”

Bright’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know.”

Ace swallowed. “The structure. It’s...moving.”

Mai’s gaze flicked upward, listening with her whole body. “I feel it too.”

Bright cursed softly. “They’re locking us out by rerouting compartments.”

Mai’s mouth twisted. “They can do that?”

Bright’s answer was grim. “They can flood ballast. They can seal trunks. They can force you into a room and call it ‘safety.’”

Ace’s hand tightened on the wheel.

Her ribs pulsed faintly—not the hook rhythm, but her own anger answering.

Mai’s voice went low. “Open it.”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

She spun the wheel.

The hatch resisted—old seals, cold metal—then gave with a reluctant groan.

Air breathed out.

Not fresh.

Stale and wet, smelling of deep ocean storage and forgotten maintenance.

Ace pulled the hatch open.

And froze.

The ballast chamber beyond wasn’t empty.

It was full of water.

Not flooded in a catastrophic way—held back behind internal baffles, rising and falling in a controlled oscillation, like a giant lung breathing.

And mounted along the chamber walls were thick cables and sensor arrays, many of them dead,

some of them lit with faint standby glows.

A decommissioned system.

But not fully dead.

Mai stared. "This is...still active."

Bright's face tightened. "Not by normal procedure."

The water inside the chamber shifted.

A slow swell rolled along the surface, as if something had disturbed it.

Ace's skin prickled.

The three-beat pulse in her ribs brightened a fraction.

Violet behind the lock stirred, interested.

Water, Violet whispered. It likes water.

Ace clenched her jaw.

Mai's voice went harsh and quiet. "Don't tell me the thing from the harbor—"

Bright shook his head quickly. "Not that. Not physically. But—"

He didn't finish.

Because the ballast chamber's sensor lights flickered once.

Then twice.

Then a small panel on the wall blinked to life with a soft chime.

A voice—not from a speaker, but from a directwired intercom mounted inside the chamber—crackled.

"Subject A," the voice said.

The same woman's voice from Mai's ceiling speaker.

Plain. Controlled.

Too calm.

Ace's blood turned cold.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

Bright's jaw tightened. "They found the trunk."

The voice continued, unbothered by their reactions. "You have entered a restricted decommissioned space. This is unsafe."

Mai barked a short laugh. "Unsafe? You mean unmonitored?"

The voice ignored her. "Return to your quarters. Compliance reduces risk."

Ace's mouth twisted.

Because the voice wasn't coming from the platform's main system.

It was coming from here.

From this old chamber that wasn't supposed to be part of the narrative anymore.

Ace looked at Bright. "They anticipated this."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Or they're fast."

Mai's voice went cold. "Doesn't matter. It's still them."

The intercom crackled again, the woman's voice slightly sharper. "Agent Mai, your emotional state remains elevated."

Mai stepped toward the hatch opening, stared into the chamber like she wanted to march in and tear cables out with her hands.

"My emotional state," Mai said softly, "is perfectly calibrated."

Bright's hand lifted slightly—warning, restraint.

Mai didn't attack.

She did something smarter.

She pointed her disruptor at the intercom unit, not firing—just holding it in sight.

"You're talking to us through a decommissioned ballast intercom," Mai said. "That means you're closer than you want to admit."

The voice paused, as if considering whether to acknowledge.

Then: "We are where we need to be."

Mai's smile sharpened. "So are we."

Ace's ribs pulsed again, faintly. Three beats tried to catch.

Ace forced her breathing wrong.

No rhythm.

No handshake.

Bright stepped closer to the hatch, eyes scanning the chamber's walls. "This chamber has manual controls."

Mai glanced at him. "And?"

Bright's jaw tightened. "And if they're rerouting compartments by ballast adjustments..."

He didn't finish, but Ace understood.

If the enemy could manipulate the platform's body with water, then water could be manipulated back.

Mai understood too.

Her eyes narrowed, and for the first time since waking, the edge of a grin appeared—the kind she wore when a problem finally got interesting.

Mai's voice was low. "We can make the platform hiccup."

Bright's mouth twisted. "Yes."

Ace looked into the chamber again. The water surface rolled, faint and patient.

The three-beat pulse in her ribs brightened, like it recognized the medium.

Violet purred.

Let me, Violet whispered. I can sing through water.

Ace's jaw clenched so hard her teeth ached.

"No," Ace whispered internally. "Not you."

The voice in the intercom cut in again, sharper. "Do not tamper with flood control. You will endanger the platform."

Mai looked at the intercom. Her voice was soft as velvet, sharp as glass.

"You already endangered it," Mai said. "You just called it calibration."

Bright leaned in close to Ace's ear, whispering. "We need a window. A distraction. Something that forces them to respond elsewhere."

Ace's gaze stayed on the ballast water.

"Then we give them one," Ace whispered back.

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace. "Ace. You still holding."

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

Mai's voice went quiet. "Good. Then you don't open. You don't answer. You don't let them make you the story."

Ace's lips twitched, faint. "So what do I do."

Mai's eyes went hard. "You become the knife."

Ace didn't ask what she meant.

Because in the next second, Mai moved.

Not toward the intercom.

Toward the wall panel beside the hatch—a manual control box, old-style, with physical toggles labeled in fading ink.

Mai's fingers hovered over one toggle.

BALLAST FLOW - EMERGENCY PURGE

Bright's eyes widened slightly. "Mai—"

Mai's gaze flicked to him. "I'm not flooding it. I'm purging flow into the secondary baffles. It'll force them to reroute. It'll make the platform's movement visible to everyone."

Bright's jaw tightened. "It'll trip alarms."

Mai nodded. "Exactly."

Ace felt her pulse spike—not the hook, her own adrenaline.

The voice in the intercom sharpened. "Do not—"

Mai flipped the toggle.

The chamber responded instantly.

A deep mechanical groan traveled through the platform's skeleton.

Water surged behind the baffles, rushing like a controlled avalanche.

The tunnel shook.

Ace braced instinctively.

Above them, somewhere in the platform's clean corridors, alarms began to chirp—soft at first, then escalating as systems noticed their own body doing something unexpected.

The voice in the intercom snapped, suddenly not calm.

"Stop. Now."

Mai smiled, small and vicious. "No."

Bright whispered, "Move."

Ace grabbed the hatch wheel, yanked it wider, and slipped into the ballast chamber with Mai and Bright right behind her.

The air inside was colder, wetter, louder. Water roared behind metal baffles like a beast breathing.

Ace's ribs pulsed harder now—the three-beat rhythm trying to lock onto the water's movement.

Violet pressed forward, thrilled.

Ace forced herself to stay boring. Stay human.

Mai moved fast along a narrow catwalk skirting the chamber wall, boots slick on wet steel. Bright followed, scanning for secondary exits.

A maintenance trunk opened at the far end—a dark rectangle of corridor leading away.

Mai's purge had done what she wanted: it forced the platform to respond.

They'd just announced themselves to every system on the rig.

But that was the point.

If you were going to be hunted, you made sure the hunters had to look away from the exact place you wanted to slip.

They reached the maintenance trunk.

Bright shoved the door open.

They spilled into the next corridor—

—and behind them, the ballast chamber intercom crackled one last time, the woman's voice tight with something that sounded very close to frustration.

"Subject A," she said. "You are degrading stability."

Ace didn't turn.

She didn't answer.

She just kept moving forward into the decommissioned teeth of the platform, letting the alarms sing above them like a false hymn—

—while somewhere deep under her ribs, Violet hummed along, delighted that the world had finally started to shake.

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