



Chapter 29: Launch Lock

They climbed into the auxiliary sub like it was a burning building and the hatch was the only clean air left in the world.

Bright went first—because he always went first—dropping into the cramped cockpit and yanking switches with practiced fury. Mai followed, grimacing as her ribs protested the twist, then forcing the pain down like a file shoved into a drawer. Ace came last, one hand on the hatch ladder, the other on her katana grip out of reflex, as if blades could cut a voice in a speaker.

Bright slapped the hatch control.

The circular hatch swung inward and sealed with a heavy thunk.

For a second, the world became smaller.

Just metal. Breath. Dim instrument glow.

The platform's alarms muted to a distant vibration through the hull.

Ace felt her heart still trying—stubbornly, treacherously—to sync into three beats.

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist again immediately, fingers firm. "Eyes on me."

Ace nodded, swallowing hard.

Bright's fingers flew over the console, hitting manual overrides, forcing systems to accept physical authority.

The sub's screens lit with status text.

AUX CRADLE: DISENGAGED BALLAST: READY EXTERNAL BAY DOOR: OPEN LAUNCH LOCK: UNKNOWN STATE

Bright swore. "Console's fried. We don't have a clean read on lock status."

Mai's voice was flat. "So brute it."

Bright's mouth twisted. "That's what I'm doing."

He shoved the throttle forward slightly. The sub vibrated.

Nothing moved.

A deep metallic clunk sounded from beneath them, like the cradle still had its teeth in the hull.

Bright leaned closer to the manual lever assembly—old-school, analog, labeled in faded text.

CRADLE CLAMP - MANUAL RELEASE

He grabbed it with both hands and pulled.

It resisted.

Then moved an inch with a scream of metal.

Bright grunted, jaw clenched, and yanked again.

The lever dropped fully.

The sub lurched free by a fraction.

Mai exhaled once, sharp. "Good."

Then the speakers inside the sub crackled.

Not the platform's distant speakers.

The sub's internal comm.

And the interface voice slid into the cabin like smoke.

"Subject A," she said calmly. "You will not be able to contain the response if you leave."

Ace's blood went cold.

Mai's eyes flared. "How the hell are you in here."

Bright's face tightened. "They patched the sub comm to platform routing."

Mai's voice went savage. "So we rip it out."

Bright didn't answer. He just reached under the console and yanked a cable harness free with a hard jerk.

The speaker crackled, hissed—

and the voice persisted, faint but present, as if it had found another path.

"Confirmed compatibility," the interface said. "The node has a reference. It will ping again."

Ace's ribs pulsed hard in answer.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Violet behind the lock stirred, thrilled.

We're leaving the stage, Violet whispered. The audience won't like that.

Ace's jaw clenched. "Mai."

Mai's hand tightened. "I'm here."

Ace forced her breathing wrong. Ragged. Human. No rhythm.

Bright slammed another switch. "Ballast. Blow."

The sub's ballast system whined, then released with a deep rumble.

The hull rose slightly as internal tanks shifted.

Bright pushed the throttle again.

This time the sub moved.

Slow.

Grinding.

A reluctant slide forward off the cradle and into the open bay.

Metal scraped.

The sub's exterior cameras flashed images across a screen: the bay doors yawning open, black ocean beyond, spray and wind.

But the moment the sub's nose crossed the threshold, the platform reacted.

A deep, structural groan rolled through the water.

The bay doors began to close.

Fast.

Mai snapped, "They're closing it!"

Bright's eyes widened. "I see it!"

He shoved the throttle forward harder.

The sub surged.

The closing bay doors loomed on the external feed—two massive slabs of steel trying to bite shut.

Ace felt a sudden pressure in her ribs—three beats sharpening into a knife—like the node beneath had reached up through water and steel and grabbed her heart.

Her vision flickered green.

The cabin lights dimmed for half a second.

Mai's voice cut through the haze, harsh and real. "ACE!"

Ace blinked hard, focused on Mai's eyes. "Holding."

Mai squeezed Ace's wrist like she was anchoring her with pain if she had to. "No handshake. No reply."

Ace swallowed. "No handshake."

Bright snarled, "Come on—come on—"

The sub shot through the bay doors with barely a meter to spare.

Steel slammed shut behind them with a thunderous boom that rattled the cabin.

Then—

black water.

Open sea.

The sub dropped into the ocean like a stone.

A moment of weightlessness.

Then impact.

Water pressure wrapped them.

The sub's hull creaked as it adjusted.

Bright gripped the controls, knuckles white, eyes on depth readouts.

DEPTH: 12m... 18m... 26m...

Mai exhaled slowly, ribs aching. "We're out."

Bright didn't answer.

His eyes were fixed on the sonar display.

A clean ping echoed through the screen—too regular, too perfect.

Not their sonar.

Something outside, responding.

A pattern.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace's ribs pulsed in answer without her permission.

Mai saw Ace's flinch instantly. "Ace."

Ace's voice was tight. "It's...still calling."

Bright's jaw clenched. "Of course it is."

The interface voice returned—fainter now, but still present, like it was riding the edge of the sub's comm system through residual routing.

"You cannot outrun the node," she said softly. "It is not bound to the platform. It is bound to the medium."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Medium."

The interface continued, almost gentle. "Steel. Water. Signal. And you."

Ace's throat tightened.

Bright slammed a switch labeled COMMS ISOLATION.

The cabin speakers died instantly—silence.

Mai exhaled, relieved.

But the sonar didn't stop.

The clean pings continued, patient and precise, like something was tracking them through the water by matching a signature it had tasted on Ace's shoulder.

Bright stared at the display.

Mai whispered, "That's not them."

Bright's voice was grim. "No. That's the other player."

Ace felt Violet behind the lock stir again, amused.

See? Violet whispered. You're compatible. The world keeps telling you.

Ace clenched her jaw so hard her teeth ached. “Shut up.”

Mai leaned closer to Ace, shoulder pressed against hers, voice low and fierce. “Don’t listen to it. Don’t listen to her. Listen to me.”

Ace swallowed, forcing air in and out, wrong and human. “Okay.”

Bright’s eyes didn’t leave the sonar. “We need distance. We need to get below the layer where their pings can ride.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened. “How deep.”

Bright’s mouth tightened. “Deep enough that the platform’s nonsense is a memory.”

Ace’s ribs pulsed again—three beats trying to align—and she felt, for the first time, a sick certainty:

The platform was gone.

The memetics voice was cut.

But the tone beneath—

the clean protocol in steel and water—

was still with them.

Not loud.

Not angry.

Just patient.

As if it had all the time in the world to learn the shape of Ace’s heartbeat.

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