



Chapter 30: Below the Layer

Bright pushed them down.

The sub's nose dipped. The ballast system groaned, and the hull creaked like it was complaining to the ocean about new responsibilities.

DEPTH: 41m... 55m... 72m...

The water outside turned from black to a thicker kind of dark—pressure-dark. Light died in layers. The external cameras became almost useless, showing only drifting particulate, occasional flashes of micro-life like distant sparks.

Inside, the cabin narrowed psychologically. Every sound mattered: the hum of circulation fans, the faint rattle of a loose panel, Mai's controlled breathing through pain.

And the sonar.

That clean ping kept arriving like a polite knock from something that wasn't polite at all.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace sat strapped into a side seat, hands clenched so tight her knuckles whitened. Mai sat close enough that their shoulders touched; she'd insisted on it without speaking, just by positioning herself there. Bright stayed at the controls, eyes fixed on readouts and curves.

Mai's voice was low. "Tell me what you feel."

Ace swallowed. "It's...not inside me." She hesitated. "It's outside. But it's like it has a line to me."

Bright's jaw tightened. "A reference channel."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "From the touch."

Ace nodded once.

Mai's mouth twisted. "Signature touch."

Ace's throat tightened. "Yes."

Bright leaned forward, scanning the sonar display. "We're still in the platform's acoustic halo. The rig is a giant antenna in the water—steel, cavities, resonance. It carries signal in ways the surface doesn't."

Mai's voice was flat. "So we go deeper."

Bright nodded. "Below the layer where the rig's structure can propagate it cleanly."

Ace's ribs pulsed hard, like the idea of going deeper made the node's pings more eager. Violet behind the lock was silent again—watching, waiting.

Mai's hand slid over Ace's wrist, fingers firm. "Anchor check."

Ace forced a breath. "Here."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Bright pushed the sub deeper.

DEPTH: 93m... 112m... 139m...

The hull creaked again, a deep groan that made Ace's teeth ache. The pressure gauge climbed. The ocean pressed in like an idea.

The sonar ping shifted subtly—same pattern, but clearer now.

Not losing strength.

Gaining it.

Bright's eyes narrowed. "That shouldn't happen."

Mai's voice went sharp. "Meaning?"

Bright didn't look away from the screen. "Meaning we're entering a medium where the signal travels

better. Not worse.”

Mai’s jaw clenched. “So deeper is worse.”

Bright’s mouth twisted. “It might be.”

Ace swallowed hard. “Then why does it want us deeper.”

Bright’s fingers tightened on the controls. “Because the node isn’t just connected to the rig. It’s connected to something in the water.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened. “Something bigger.”

Bright didn’t deny it.

The ping came again.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

This time, the sub’s internal systems responded—small indicator lights flickering in rhythm as if the signal was inducing tiny currents in the wiring.

Ace felt it in her ribs as a pressure wave, and her lock strained again, vibrating at the edge of resonance.

Mai saw Ace’s face tighten. She leaned in close, voice low, fierce. “Ace. Do not sync.”

Ace’s voice came out thin. “I’m trying.”

Mai’s fingers squeezed hard. Pain anchored. Human anchor. Ugly anchor.

Ace hissed a breath. “Mai—”

Mai didn’t apologize. “Stay.”

Bright flicked a switch. The sonar display changed modes.

He whispered, “Passive only.”

The sub went quiet electronically—no outgoing pulses, no active sweeps.

For a second, the clean ping stopped.

Ace’s chest loosened slightly.

Mai exhaled.

Then the ping returned anyway.

Not from their sonar.

From outside.

A pressure-wave handshake that didn’t require their equipment to ask.

Bright's jaw tightened. "It's not responding to us. It's probing us."

Mai's voice went cold. "Like memetics did in her dream."

Bright nodded once, grim.

Ace felt the vibration in her ribs rise.

Three beats tried to become her heart.

Violet behind the lock whispered faintly, almost affectionate.

It's the same song. Let it take you. It's easier when you stop fighting.

Ace clenched her jaw. "No."

Mai's voice cut in instantly. "Ace. Say it."

Ace swallowed. "No handshake."

Mai: "Again."

Ace: "No handshake."

Mai: "Again."

Ace: "No handshake."

The ping came again.

And then something changed.

The pressure-wave was followed by a second pattern.

Not three beats.

A longer sequence, complex, almost like a coded phrase.

Bright's eyes widened. "That's...structured."

Mai's brow furrowed. "Meaning it's not random signal."

Bright's voice was low. "Meaning it's a language."

Ace's skin prickled. "It's talking."

Bright nodded, pale. "Yes."

Mai's eyes hardened. "To what."

Bright looked at Ace for the first time in minutes. "To you."

Ace's throat went tight.

The sequence repeated—complex, patient.

And with it came a sensation in Ace's chest—not Violet, not the three-beat hook—something like an attempted mapping of her internal partition. Like fingers reading braille over a sealed door.

Mai's hand tightened. "Ace."

Ace whispered, "It's trying to read the lock."

Bright's voice went tight. "Then we don't give it time."

Mai snapped, "Surface."

Bright hesitated half a second. "If we surface, we go back into the rig's control envelope."

Mai's eyes went savage. "Better than becoming a port."

Ace's ribs pulsed—three beats trying to lock, while the complex sequence continued, patient, exact.

Bright made the decision.

He yanked the controls and angled the sub upward sharply.

The hull groaned, protesting the sudden change in pressure vector.

DEPTH: 146m... 141m... 133m...

The ping pattern changed again—faster now, more insistent, like the "speaker" had noticed they were leaving.

The complex sequence repeated, tighter, like a demand.

Mai's voice was low and vicious. "It doesn't like losing you."

Ace's breath hitched. "It—"

She stopped.

Because the sensation in her chest shifted.

The pressure-wave didn't just knock.

It latched.

For half a second, Ace felt a clean line in her sternum, like someone had plugged a cable into the signature touch and found purchase.

Her vision flashed green.

Not dream green—deep water green.

Violet behind the lock laughed softly.

Ace's hands clenched into fists so hard her nails bit through glove lining.

Mai grabbed Ace's face with both hands, forcing her gaze.

“Ace,” Mai said, low and brutal. “Stay with me.”

Ace’s voice came out strained. “I’m here.”

Mai’s eyes burned. “No handshake.”

Ace swallowed. “No handshake.”

Mai: “No reply.”

Ace: “No reply.”

Bright’s voice was tight with urgency. “We need interference. Something physical. Something loud.”

Mai’s eyes flicked to a panel. “We still have emergency flares?”

Bright nodded. “Yes—external.”

Mai’s jaw clenched. “Do it.”

Bright slammed the emergency release.

The sub’s exterior ports opened, and two bright flare canisters shot out into the water, igniting in harsh white light that stabbed the dark.

The cameras flared with bloom.

The water outside lit up—

and for an instant, in the flare’s halo, Ace saw a shape.

Not the rig.

Not a fish.

Something long and angular, like a shadow made of structure.

It moved too precisely in the water, as if it didn’t swim so much as execute a trajectory.

Mai’s breath caught. “What the hell is that.”

Bright’s voice went hoarse. “That’s the responder.”

The shape shifted once, and the sonar ping hit again—strong enough to rattle a cup in a holder.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Then the complex sequence.

And Ace felt the lock strain like a door under a crowbar.

Mai pulled Ace’s forehead against hers—hard contact, human, grounding through pressure and proximity.

“Breathe wrong,” Mai whispered.

Ace did.

Ragged. Ugly. Human.

Because down here, below the layer, the ocean wasn't just water.

It was medium.

And something in it had learned Ace's signature.

And it was coming closer.

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