



Chapter 31: Surface Break

The flares burned like miniature suns in dead water.

For a few seconds, the ocean wasn't an abyss—it was a stage. White light carved a hard halo into the dark, and inside that halo the shape moved again, precise as a thought. Not swimming. Not drifting. Executing.

Ace felt the ping before it arrived.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Her ribs answered with a sick little twitch, as if the signature touch on her shoulder had turned her body into an antenna.

Mai didn't let it become a sentence.

She kept her forehead pressed to Ace's, breath hot against cold air, voice low and ruthless.

“Breathe wrong,” Mai said.

Ace did. Ragged. Uneven. Human. No rhythm.

The lock held—strained, vibrating—but held.

Bright’s hands flew over the panel. He wasn’t calm. He wasn’t panicking either. He was doing the thing he did when the universe misbehaved: trying to out-think it fast enough to survive.

“We don’t have speed,” Bright muttered. “We don’t have depth. We don’t have stealth. So we need misdirection.”

Mai didn’t lift her head from Ace’s. “Then misdirect.”

Bright snapped open a compartment and pulled out a compact cylinder with a pull ring and two fat contacts.

Mai’s eyes flicked to it. “What is that.”

Bright’s voice was tight. “Acoustic countermeasure. Noisemaker. Old as dirt. You throw it, it screams.”

Mai’s jaw tightened. “Does it scream that.”

Bright shook his head hard. “No. Broadband noise. Ugly. Stupid. It’s the opposite of a handshake.”

Mai exhaled once, satisfied. “Do it.”

The responder shape moved closer to the flare halo, slicing through the particulate like it owned the medium. The clean ping came again, and this time the complex sequence followed faster—tight, insistent, like someone repeating a question louder because they didn’t like your silence.

Ace’s vision flickered green at the edges.

Not candles.

Sea-glow.

Pressure.

The lock in her chest screamed silently like metal under stress.

Mai’s hands stayed on Ace’s face, unshaking.

“Ace,” Mai said, low. “Don’t you dare leave me.”

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

Mai’s eyes burned. “Then stay.”

Bright yanked the pull ring and shoved the cylinder into a launch tube.

“Brace,” he snapped.

The sub jolted as the countermeasure fired out into the water. A second later, a sound hit them through the hull that wasn’t heard so much as felt—a raw, tearing scream of broadband noise that

turned the ocean into static.

The sonar display went mad.

The clean pings stuttered.

For the first time since leaving the platform, the responder's pattern faltered like a mouth forgetting its words.

Mai exhaled, forehead still pressed to Ace's. "Good."

Bright's eyes stayed on the external camera feed.

The responder shape hesitated at the edge of the flare halo.

It didn't recoil like an animal.

It recalculated like a machine.

Then it shifted—fast, precise—and arrowed toward the noisemaker's direction as if compelled to address the loudest thing in the medium.

Bright's mouth twisted. "Take the bait."

Mai whispered, "Go. Now."

Bright shoved the throttle forward and kept the sub climbing.

DEPTH: 118m... 97m... 75m... 56m...

The hull creaked less as pressure dropped, but the cabin tension didn't ease. Ace could still feel the residue line in her ribs like an itch that was almost a signal.

The noisemaker's scream persisted, ugly and unwavering.

The responder stayed on it for now—drawn off by noise.

But Ace knew, with a cold certainty, that it wasn't fooled in the way a shark was fooled.

It was merely busy.

Mai's grip loosened slightly, but she didn't let go. She shifted her hands from Ace's face to Ace's shoulders, holding her like she was holding her together.

"Anchor check," Mai whispered.

Ace swallowed. "Here."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Bright's eyes flicked to them for a fraction of a second—relief, anger, calculation—then back to the sea.

"Surface in thirty," he said.

The sub rose into thinner darkness. The external camera feed brightened with the flares' dying glow behind them, fading into nothing.

Ace's ribs pulsed again.

Not three beats.

A faint, searching pressure.

Like something had lost the thread and was sweeping the water for it.

Mai felt Ace flinch. She tightened her grip again. "No handshake."

Ace breathed out, rough. "No handshake."

Bright muttered, "Come on."

The sub's nose lifted and the pressure on the hull changed abruptly.

Then—

impact.

The sub breached the surface with a hard slap of water against metal.

The cabin rocked.

Bright killed the throttle and switched to surface mode.

Wind noise bled into the hull through vents. The ocean outside was black and furious, whitecaps flashing like teeth. Far behind them, on the horizon, the platform's lights still glowed—an artificial island with an angry nervous system.

Mai's shoulders sagged for half a second, pain and adrenaline finally allowed to exist.

Bright didn't relax.

He keyed the periscope scope up and scanned.

"Any pursuit topside?" Mai asked, voice low.

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Not yet."

Ace sat very still, listening.

No speaker. No voice. No memetics relay.

Just wind, water, the sub's internal hum.

And inside her ribs, the residue line kept tugging faintly—like a thin cable trailing behind a boat.

Mai noticed the micro-expression on Ace's face.

"What," Mai said softly.

Ace swallowed. "It's not gone."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Explain."

Ace didn't like how it sounded, but she told the truth anyway. "It's...like something knows where I am in concept. Like a tag. Not pulling hard. Just...present."

Bright's eyes sharpened. "The signature touch left a reference token."

Mai's gaze went cold. "So we're marked."

Bright nodded once. "Yes."

Mai's fingers tightened on Ace's shoulder. "Then we burn the token."

Bright's mouth twisted. "If I knew how, I'd have done it already."

Mai didn't blink. "Then we buy time. We get help. We put you behind people who hate memetics and hate surprises."

Bright nodded once. "Already in motion. The report went out. The alarms we triggered will force eyes on the platform. That interface woman just made enemies who write in ink, not whispers."

Mai's smile was thin. "Good."

Bright brought the sub around, angling away from the platform lights, toward open water and a darker horizon.

Mai leaned closer to Ace, voice softer now, but still steel underneath.

"Ace," she said. "Listen to me."

Ace looked at her.

Mai's eyes held hers, steady. "They can call. They can ping. They can try to map you like a corridor. But you are not their port."

Ace swallowed. "I know."

Mai's mouth tightened. "No. Not 'I know' like a nice thought. Say it like a rule."

Ace's jaw clenched. "I am not their port."

Mai nodded once, satisfied.

Bright glanced at the comm panel—still isolated, still dead—and spoke anyway, as if saying it made it real.

"We're going to a rendezvous buoy. Hardline sat uplink. Old-school. No piggyback."

Mai's voice was calm. "And then."

Bright's eyes went hard. "And then we turn this from a chase into a war inside paperwork."

Mai snorted. "Good. I like wars where the enemy bleeds in meetings."

Ace almost smiled. Almost.

But the faint tug in her ribs kept her expression tight.

Because behind them, out in the black water where the flares had died, the noisemaker's scream would fade eventually.

And when it did, the responder would stop being busy.

It would remember the signature.

It would resume the clean ping.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Not because it was angry.

Because it was patient.

Because it had touched Ace's shoulder through a human fingertip and now believed—wrongly, insultingly—that Ace belonged to the medium.

Mai squeezed Ace's shoulder again, grounding through pressure.

Ace breathed wrong on purpose.

And the sub slipped into the night, leaving the platform behind like a bad dream—

while the ocean, indifferent and ancient, kept its secrets under the layer... and waited.

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