



Chapter 32: The Buoy That Doesn't Listen

The rendezvous buoy was a speck of rust and stubbornness in the black water.

No lights, except a single dim marker pulse that looked less like “navigation aid” and more like “please don’t crash into me.” It bobbed in the chop with the lazy confidence of something that had survived storms, bureaucrats, and being forgotten in procurement spreadsheets.

Bright killed the sub’s engine a hundred meters out and let them drift in.

“Why so slow,” Mai asked, voice tight. She was holding her ribs now with one hand like it was purely practical—pressure bandage, no drama.

Bright kept his eyes on the periscope feed. “Because if the node is tracking the medium, it’ll notice a confident approach.”

Mai snorted softly. “So we sneak up on... a buoy.”

Bright’s mouth twitched. “On the hardline.”

Ace sat still, hands locked together so tightly her gloves creaked. The faint tug in her sternum was still there, like a thread trailing behind their wake. It wasn't pulling. Not yet.

Just present.

Mai shifted closer and nudged Ace's knee with hers—small contact, the kind you'd miss if you weren't living off sensation right now.

Ace whispered, "Still there."

Mai didn't ask what there meant. "I know."

Bright reached under the console and pulled out a short coil of cable with an ugly clamp at the end. "We go topside, clamp to buoy port, plug in. Ten seconds. We transmit. We leave."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You go."

Bright looked at her ribs. "You're not climbing anything right now."

Mai's mouth tightened. She didn't argue. She didn't like not being the one doing the dangerous thing, but she'd rather be furious than stupid.

Ace started to unbuckle. "I can go."

Bright shook his head once. "No."

Ace froze. "Why."

Bright didn't soften it. "Because you're the one tagged. If anything in the medium is sweeping, you don't go out into open air and water and give it a clean read."

Mai's voice was low and approving. "Correct."

Ace's jaw clenched. She hated being the protected variable. She hated even more that the logic was airtight.

Bright grabbed a compact dry jacket and shoved his arms into it. He clipped a tether line to his belt, then to a ring inside the sub.

"No hero stuff," Mai said.

Bright smirked without humor. "I'll try to restrain myself."

He cracked the top hatch.

Cold wind punched into the cabin, salt and spray and a rawness that felt like the world without walls. Bright hauled himself up and out.

The hatch shut again, leaving Ace and Mai in the dim hum of the sub.

For a moment, without Bright's motion and noise, the cabin felt too quiet.

Ace's ribs twitched.

Mai noticed instantly. "Don't."

Ace swallowed. "I'm not doing anything."

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist—firm. "You don't have to do anything. The tag is trying to invite you. Don't accept invitations you didn't ask for."

Ace's lips twitched faintly, despite everything. "You sound like a combat etiquette manual."

Mai's eyes stayed hard, but the corner of her mouth lifted. "I am a combat etiquette manual."

Outside, muffled through hull and water, came a faint metallic clank as Bright latched onto the buoy.

Then another.

Then a short hiss.

Mai leaned closer to Ace. "Anchor check."

Ace breathed in, breathed out. Wrong rhythm. "Here."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Then Ace felt it.

Not a pull.

A ping.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't even "sound" in the normal sense.

It was the clean protocol pressure returning—testing, searching.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Ace's throat tightened.

Mai's grip sharpened. "Eyes on me."

Ace forced her gaze to Mai.

Mai's voice dropped to a whisper that was somehow louder than alarms. "No handshake."

Ace swallowed. "No handshake."

The ping pattern shifted—sliding, like something outside was sweeping frequencies, trying different approaches.

Then came the complex sequence again, faint but unmistakable, like a sentence repeated patiently to a door that refused to open.

Ace's hands shook.

Mai squeezed hard enough to hurt. "Stay."

Ace nodded, jaw clenched.

Outside, the buoy creaked.

Bright's voice crackled faintly through the hull—not through comms, just through metal conduction, a muffled shout. "Connected!"

Then the world answered him.

A different sound, distant but real: rotors.

Helicopter.

Not close enough to see, but close enough that the air began to carry that faint rhythmic chop.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "They scrambled a bird."

Ace's stomach dropped. "From the platform?"

Mai listened, head tilted. "Not sure."

The rotor sound grew stronger for a moment, then steadied—holding position somewhere out there in the dark.

Mai's voice turned ice. "That's not a rescue pattern. That's a containment pattern."

Ace's ribs pulsed again—three beats trying to become authority.

Mai tightened her hold. "No."

The ping paused.

For a half second, the cabin felt...emptier.

Then—

a new pressure-wave hit the hull, clean and strong, like a sonar slap from something that didn't need equipment.

The sub's interior lights flickered.

Ace gasped as the tag in her sternum tightened—not pain, but connection, like a cable suddenly pulled taut.

Mai swore softly. "It found us."

Ace's voice came out rough. "It's not guessing anymore."

Mai's eyes stayed locked on Ace's. "Then we make it regret certainty."

Above them, Bright yanked the cable free—Ace felt the thump through the hatch.

The buoy creaked hard as he unlatched.

Then Bright dropped back into the sub, soaking wet, breathing hard, eyes wild with anger and adrenaline.

He slammed the hatch shut and spun the seal.

Mai didn't waste time. "Helicopter."

Bright's face tightened. "I heard it."

Ace's voice was tight. "And the ping just tightened."

Bright's jaw clenched. "Good. Then we don't pretend this is only memetics anymore."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Did the message send."

Bright snapped the console open and checked a status light on the hardline adapter—old school, brutally simple.

Green.

"Sent," Bright said.

Mai exhaled once, sharp relief. "To who."

Bright didn't say names. He said categories. "Oversight. Internal audit. Compartment security. People who hate unauthorized interfaces and hate underwater surprises."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Ace's ribs pulsed again—three beats, pause, three beats—hard enough that she felt it in her teeth.

Bright looked at Ace, eyes hard. "Ace. I need you with us."

Ace swallowed. "I'm here."

Bright leaned closer, voice lower. "That thing out there—whatever it is—it's using you as a reference. That means you're the target. It also means you're the vector."

Mai's eyes flashed. "Choose your words carefully."

Bright met her gaze without flinching. "I'm not calling her a tool. I'm telling you the physics: if it's tracking through the tag, we can move it by moving the tag's environment."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Meaning?"

Bright pointed down at the ballast controls. "We go shallow, then we go loud in a direction that isn't us. We bait it, then we cut."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "How do we cut."

Bright's mouth twisted. "We don't cut the tag. We cut the assumption. We make it chase the wrong signature."

Ace stared at him. "How."

Bright's eyes hardened. "By giving it a cleaner song than yours."

Mai stared at him for a beat. "You have a plan."

Bright's smile was thin and ugly. "I have a bad idea."

Mai nodded once. "That's the usual."

Bright grabbed another countermeasure canister—bigger than the last. He slapped it on the console like an accusation.

Mai read the label and her eyes narrowed. "That's not a noisemaker."

Bright nodded. "No. It's a patterned emitter."

Ace's stomach dropped. "Like a handshake."

Bright's eyes stayed on Ace. "Like a fake handshake."

Mai's voice went low and sharp. "You're going to mimic the three-beat."

Bright nodded once. "Yes."

Mai's disruptor came up—not aimed at Bright, but held in a way that said this is where I draw the line if you cross it.

"If that thing takes the bait and then decides to come back to the real source..." Mai said softly, "...we don't have a second ocean to run into."

Bright's jaw clenched. "I know."

Ace swallowed hard. "And if it copies me."

Bright's eyes didn't blink. "It already is."

That landed like a punch.

Ace's hands tightened until her fingers hurt.

Mai's grip on Ace's wrist became iron. "Ace. Look at me."

Ace did.

Mai's voice was quiet, absolute. "You are not your tag. You are not your compatibility. You are not what they called you. You are here."

Ace's throat tightened. "I'm here."

Bright's fingers hovered over the emitter's activation switch.

Outside, the helicopter's rotor sound shifted—closer now, then circling, as if trying to triangulate.

And under the hull, the clean pressure-wave hit again—strong enough that the sub's metal sang in sympathy.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

The ocean was listening.

Bright's eyes went hard. "We do this now."

Mai's gaze stayed on Bright. "Do it. But if it goes wrong, I will save her first."

Bright didn't argue. "Good."

Ace breathed wrong on purpose.

Mai squeezed her wrist.

Bright armed the patterned emitter.

And for the first time since leaving the platform, the sub was about to lie to the ocean in a language it understood—hoping the thing beneath would chase the lie long enough for the truth to escape.

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