



Chapter 33: The Lie in the Water

Bright didn't count down.

Counting down made it ceremonial.

This wasn't a ceremony.

This was a crime scene they were actively creating.

He thumbed the activation switch.

The patterned emitter woke with a low internal thrum, and the sub's hull vibrated as the device began to push signal into the water—clean, structured, deliberately recognizable.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Not Ace's heartbeat.

A synthesized imitation.

A lie.

Ace felt it instantly—like someone had played her private rhythm on a cheap instrument. Her stomach turned, and her ribs flinched as if the lock itself hated being mocked.

Violet behind the seal stirred, amused.

Cute, Violet whispered. They're singing your song with a broken mouth.

Mai's hand clamped on Ace's wrist harder. "Eyes on me."

Ace forced her gaze to Mai's eyes, because if she looked at the emitter's readout, if she listened too closely, she could feel herself sliding into involuntary alignment—like hearing your own name spoken from behind you.

Bright watched the sonar display.

The clean pings from outside paused.

A gap.

A moment of recalculation.

Then—

the responder answered.

A pressure-wave hit the hull, not angry, not loud, but attentive. Like a head turning.

On the sonar screen, a crisp contact blip shifted direction—subtle, then definite—moving toward the emitter's projected path.

Mai exhaled, sharp relief. "It bit."

Bright's jaw stayed tight. "It's not biting. It's indexing."

The helicopter rotor sound outside shifted again—closer, circling, trying to find them.

Mai's gaze flicked upward, then back to Bright. "Can they see our wake?"

Bright nodded. "Maybe. But we can move without engine for a bit."

Mai's voice went cold. "Then do it."

Bright killed propulsion and switched the sub to drift mode while the patterned emitter continued to sing into the water. He angled a small thruster manually, nudging them sideways in a slow, quiet slide.

Ace could feel the tag-line in her sternum twitch—still there, still present—but the responder's attention had moved. The pressure on her ribs eased by a fraction.

It wasn't gone.

It was distracted.

Mai noticed the change in Ace's shoulders. "Better."

Ace nodded, breath shallow. "A little."

Bright's eyes stayed glued to sonar. "We need it to commit farther out. We need it to follow the lie away from the buoy zone."

Mai's mouth twisted. "And the helicopter."

Bright glanced at a small passive sensor. "It's circling. Maybe they don't have lock yet."

Mai's voice was flat. "Or they do, and they're waiting for us to surface."

Ace swallowed hard.

Mai squeezed her wrist. "We are not surfacing."

Bright nodded. "No."

The responder contact moved again—faster now, sweeping toward the direction of the emitter's projected signal path.

The complex sequence—language—fired once more through the water, but this time it came from the responder's direction and didn't target Ace cleanly.

It targeted the lie.

Like it was asking the fake heartbeat a question.

The emitter answered with the same dumb rhythm: three beats, pause, three beats.

No nuance. No reply.

Just signal.

Bright muttered, "Come on. Take it."

The responder accelerated.

On sonar, the blip elongated, then sharpened, the signature becoming disturbingly clear—too geometrical, too exact.

Mai stared at the screen. "That's not biological."

Bright's voice went grim. "No."

Ace whispered, "It's not swimming."

Bright nodded. "It's traveling."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Like a torpedo."

Bright's hands tightened. "Don't say that."

Ace felt her ribs pulse again—faintly—like the responder remembered she existed, even while chasing the lie.

Mai's eyes snapped to Ace. "No handshake."

Ace swallowed. "No handshake."

Mai: "No reply."

Ace: "No reply."

Mai: "No rhythm."

Ace breathed out, ragged. "No rhythm."

The sub drifted.

The emitter sang.

The responder moved away.

And for ten seconds—ten precious seconds—the ocean's pressure against Ace's sternum eased enough that she could feel her own heartbeat again, messy and human.

Then the sonar display flickered.

Bright's eyes widened.

Mai saw it. "What."

Bright's voice went tight. "It's...splitting."

On the sonar, the responder contact didn't just chase the lie.

It shed something.

A second contact separated—smaller, faster—curving away from the emitter's path and back toward the sub's original position.

Ace's blood went cold.

Mai's eyes hardened. "It didn't bite. It learned."

Bright snarled. "It's running a dual track. One unit follows the lie, one unit checks the source."

Ace's ribs pulsed hard, like the smaller contact had reacquired the tag-line.

Mai grabbed Ace's face again, forcing eye contact. "Ace. Stay."

Ace's voice was thin. "I'm here."

Bright's voice was clipped, urgent. "We can't drift. We need to move now. Quietly. Shallow. Under the helicopter's noise."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Under?"

Bright nodded. "We use their rotor wash as acoustic clutter."

Mai's mouth twisted. "You are insane."

Bright didn't deny it. He shoved the throttle forward at low power and angled the sub upward.

The cabin vibrated softly as propulsion returned.

Ace's ribs tightened as the smaller contact's pings sharpened—less patient now, more focused, as if it had decided the source mattered more than the decoy.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

The complex sequence followed, tighter.

Mai's grip on Ace became almost bruising. "No handshake."

Ace's jaw clenched. "No handshake."

Bright pushed them up.

DEPTH: 24m... 19m... 14m...

The rotor sound above grew louder through the water, turning into a deep, churning vibration.

Mai whispered, "They're right over us."

Bright's voice was tight. "Good."

Ace's vision blurred again—green edges—like pressure, like medium trying to connect through a line of sight that wasn't optical.

Mai pressed her forehead to Ace's again, hard contact, human static.

"Stay with me," Mai whispered.

Ace breathed wrong, ragged, refusing rhythm.

The smaller contact surged on sonar, closing fast.

Bright's fingers flew over the console. "We need one more trick."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Bright—"

Bright cut her off. "Brace."

He slammed a switch labeled EMERGENCY BLOW - SURFACE.

Mai's eyes widened. "What—"

The ballast system vented explosively.

The sub shot upward like a punched cork.

Ace's stomach lurched as gravity shifted.

The cabin rocked violently.

Bright yelled, "HOLD ON!"

The sub breached the surface with a violent slam, throwing spray over the hull.

For a heartbeat, the world was wind and darkness and rotor wash roaring overhead—

—and the helicopter's searchlight snapped onto the water, blinding white.

Mai hissed, "They found us."

Bright's voice was sharp. "They were already here."

Ace's ribs pulsed hard—three beats trying to lock—while the smaller responder contact approached beneath them, now close enough that the sub's hull vibrated with its pressure-wave.

The decoy contact still chased the lie out there somewhere, but the hunter had left a knife behind.

Mai's disruptor was up, useless against water and distance, but her posture said she'd shoot the sky out of spite.

Bright's eyes were wild. "We don't fight the helicopter. We don't fight the responder. We vanish."

Mai barked, "How."

Bright's jaw clenched. "By doing the one thing they can't narrate cleanly."

He reached for the hatch release.

Mai's eyes widened. "Bright—don't—"

Bright looked at Ace, voice low and brutal. "Ace. If you can bend architecture, you can bend this."

Ace's throat tightened. "What."

Bright's eyes flicked to the bay doors indicator—the one he'd fried—then to the open ocean, then to the buoy zone behind them.

"We need a seam in the medium," Bright said. "A place where the water's signal doesn't carry clean."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You mean a thermocline. A turbulence boundary."

Bright nodded hard. "Yes."

Mai stared at him. "And you're going to find one by opening the hatch into rotor wash and sea spray."

Bright's smile was ugly. "Welcome to my bad idea."

The helicopter searchlight burned down on them.

A loudspeaker crackled from above—human this time, distorted by distance.

"SUBSURFACE VESSEL. STOP YOUR ENGINES. PREPARE TO BE BOARDED."

Mai's laugh was a knife. "No."

Ace's ribs pulsed, the tag-line taut.

Under them, the smaller responder contact arrived close enough that the water itself seemed to tense.

Bright's hand hovered over the hatch.

Mai's grip locked on Ace's wrist.

Ace breathed wrong, heart refusing the three-beat.

And the sub rocked on black water under the helicopter's gaze, while something beneath the surface lined up its clean, patient song and prepared to ask the same question again—

only this time, close enough to rip an answer out of the hull if it had to.

—

© 2025-2026. "World of Ace, Mai and Shammy" and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace1:chapter33>

Last update: **17/03/2026 17:26**

