



Chapter 34: The Seam in the Medium

The helicopter's searchlight pinned them like an insect on a white card.

Wind hammered the hull. Spray slapped metal. The rotor wash churned the surface into boiling foam, turning the ocean into a loud, chaotic mess—exactly the kind of mess that ruined clean signal.

Bright's hand stayed on the hatch release.

Mai's hand stayed on Ace.

Ace's ribs pulsed—three beats trying to assert, then slipping, then trying again—caught between the responder beneath and the chaos above.

The loudspeaker crackled again. "STOP YOUR ENGINES. PREPARE TO BE BOARDED."

Mai lifted her disruptor toward the light—not to shoot, but as a statement. "Try it."

Bright didn't look up. He was staring at the instrument cluster like it held a map to a miracle.

"The responder is directly under us," Bright said, voice tight. "It's using the tag as a reference. It doesn't need sonar now. It's close enough to feel you."

Ace swallowed. "I feel it."

Mai's fingers tightened until pain flared in Ace's wrist. "Then you stay with me."

Bright exhaled hard. "We need to break the medium. We need turbulence and density shift—something that scrambles clean propagation."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Thermocline. Or—"

Bright finished it. "Or an outflow."

Ace blinked. "Outflow."

Bright nodded. "Warm discharge. Platform systems. Underwater venting. Anywhere that water is moving differently."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "You mean the platform's own plumbing."

Bright's mouth twisted. "Yes. The rig bleeds water. Cooling loops, discharge ports. If we can hit a discharge plume, signal gets noisy, and the responder's clean language turns into static."

Mai stared at him. "So we run back toward the platform."

Bright didn't deny it. "Not to dock. To pass through its waste stream like a ghost."

Mai's jaw clenched. "That's insane."

Bright nodded once. "Yes."

Ace's ribs pulsed hard. Under the hull, the water thumped—a pressure-wave so close it felt like a fist against metal.

Mai's eyes flashed. "It's here."

Bright snapped, "Now."

He slapped the engine controls, keeping power low but immediate, and the sub began to move—slow at first, then faster as it bit into the churned surface.

The helicopter's searchlight tracked them instantly.

The loudspeaker cracked again, angrier now. "YOU WILL STOP OR—"

Mai leaned toward the small external camera screen, scanning the sky. "They're not shooting."

Bright's jaw tight. "Yet. They want us intact."

Ace's stomach turned.

Because "intact" didn't mean "alive and okay."

It meant "not broken in a way that prevents calibration."

The responder beneath surged.

The sub rocked violently from below, as if something had brushed the hull—precise, not random.

Ace gasped as her sternum tightened, the tag-line pulling taut like a cable being reeled.

Mai grabbed Ace's chin, forcing her gaze. "Ace. Here."

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

Mai's whisper was brutal. "No handshake."

Ace breathed wrong. "No handshake."

Bright's eyes flicked to the depth gauge. "We can't stay on the surface. It can touch us here."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Then dive."

Bright nodded. "But shallow. Under rotor wash. In the noise."

He yanked the dive controls.

The sub dipped, taking on water pressure again, but only a few meters. The helicopter light refracted through the surface, a warped white spear following them.

Inside the cabin, the sound changed—less wind, more hull creak, more water press.

The responder's clean ping hit again, close enough that the sub's panels buzzed.

Three beats. Pause. Three beats.

Then the complex sequence—language—tight and sharp, like an ultimatum.

Ace felt the lock shudder.

Violet behind the seal stirred, delighted.

They're asking nicely, Violet whispered. Soon they'll stop asking.

Ace clenched her jaw. "No."

Mai's hand was iron on her wrist. "Stay."

Bright's eyes were wide, scanning the sonar.

"We need that discharge plume," Bright said. "If we can get into turbulent flow, its tracking collapses into probabilities."

Mai's voice was clipped. "Where is it?"

Bright's fingers flew over a crude local map display. "The rig's on the horizon—there. Discharge ports are usually down-current. We head toward the rig but offset south."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You're guessing."

Bright's jaw clenched. "Yes."

Mai's smile was sharp. "I love guesses at sea."

Ace's ribs pulsed again—harder—like the responder was tightening the loop.

The sub lurched sideways from below, a second brush, closer and more forceful.

Bright swore. "It's making contact."

Mai's eyes went hard. "It can physically push us."

Bright nodded, voice grim. "Yes. It's not just signal."

Ace swallowed. "Then it can—"

Bright finished it. "It can breach."

Mai's face went cold, focused. "Then we give it something else to hit."

Bright's gaze snapped to the countermeasure rack. Only one device left.

A last noisemaker.

Too small.

Too weak.

Mai saw the look on Bright's face and understood instantly. "Not enough."

Bright's jaw worked. "No."

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace.

Ace felt it—felt Mai considering the one thing neither of them wanted.

Mai's voice went very quiet. "Ace. Can you bend water?"

Ace's stomach dropped. "What?"

Mai didn't sugarcoat it. "Not summon. Not open Violet. Just...shape pressure. Create turbulence. A seam. Like you did with metal."

Ace's throat tightened. "I don't know."

Bright's voice went tight. "It might be possible. Shadow-pressure doesn't care about medium. It cares about boundary."

Mai's eyes locked on Ace's. "Ace. If you can create turbulence around the hull, the responder loses clean line. It has to 'see' through noise."

Ace's ribs pulsed—three beats trying to lure her into cooperation with the medium.

Violet purred.

Ace's hands shook.

Mai's grip tightened, but her voice softened just a fraction, in a way that hurt more than harshness. "You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be ugly."

Ace swallowed hard.

She closed her eyes for a second—not to look inward at Violet, but to find the sense of pressure she'd used on steel seams. The feeling of sliding force into cracks, not exploding, not opening, just...widening.

She placed her palm flat against the sub's inner hull, feeling the vibration of water through metal.

"Okay," Ace whispered. "I'll try."

Mai's hand stayed on her wrist like a tether.

Bright kept the sub on course, eyes flicking between map and sonar.

The responder struck again—harder.

The sub jolted.

A warning light flashed.

HULL STRESS - STARBOARD

Mai snarled, "Now, Ace!"

Ace pushed.

Not outward.

Not as a wave.

As a distortion in the boundary layer around the hull—a deliberate roughening of the water's flow, like scratching the surface of a mirror so it couldn't reflect cleanly.

For a heartbeat nothing happened.

Then the water outside the hull changed.

The sub's vibration shifted from smooth to chaotic.

The sonar display fuzzed.

The responder's clean ping hit—but it broke, stuttering into static, as if the medium itself had suddenly become noisy.

Mai's eyes widened. "It worked."

Bright's voice went hoarse. "Keep it. Keep it!"

Ace's jaw clenched. Sweat beaded on her forehead despite the cold. Her ribs pulsed, the lock straining, Violet pressing against it with delighted hunger—

Yes, Violet whispered. Yes, you can shape the medium. You can be the song—

Ace snarled internally, “No.”

She kept pushing turbulence, keeping it ugly, keeping it human-wrong.

The responder’s language pattern fired again, but the sequence came through smeared and broken, losing structure.

It surged closer anyway—because it could still touch the hull even if it couldn’t speak cleanly.

But when it struck this time, it didn’t strike with precision.

It struck like a blind thing.

The sub rocked, but the contact slid off, failing to latch.

Bright shouted, “There! Discharge plume ahead!”

On the external feed, faint turbulence appeared in the water—rising bubbles, warmer outflow clouding the dark like smoke.

Bright angled the sub into it.

The ocean around them turned into a messy boil of mixed temperatures and bubbles.

Signal noise.

Medium seam.

And the responder’s clean ping finally—finally—lost its perfect shape entirely, collapsing into confused pressure.

Mai exhaled hard, ribs screaming. “Go. Go!”

Bright shoved the throttle, diving into the plume like it was cover in a gunfight.

Ace kept her palm on the hull, forcing turbulence, holding the seam open in the medium.

Her vision flashed green at the edges as Violet pressed, thrilled by the sensation of shaping water.

But Ace held the lock with ugly breath and Mai’s grip and pure spite.

Above them, the helicopter’s searchlight became a smeared glow through bubbles.

Behind them, the responder’s presence thinned—not gone, but forced to guess again.

And for the first time in what felt like hours, the tag-line in Ace’s sternum loosened a fraction.

Not because they’d escaped.

Because they’d forced the medium to stop speaking clearly.

They’d made the ocean stutter.

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