



Chapter 35: Static Ocean

The discharge plume wrapped around them like a dirty miracle.

Warm water, bubbles, turbulence—industrial ocean breath that turned clean signal into mush. The sub slid through it, hull vibrating with chaotic flow, every instrument needle twitching like it had stage fright.

Bright kept them angled low and steady, following the plume's direction as if it were a river under the sea.

Mai's shoulders were tense, ribs screaming with every jolt, but her hand stayed locked on Ace's wrist like she'd made a vow in blood.

Ace kept her palm pressed to the inner hull.

Not pushing harder.

Pushing uglier.

Scratching the medium's smoothness so it couldn't mirror her.

Every time her ribs tried to fall into three beats, she shattered it with breath and friction and Mai's grip.

The responder's clean ping hit once more—

—but it arrived distorted, smeared into a dull thump that didn't know what it was anymore.

The complex sequence tried to form.

Failed.

Turned into noise.

Bright's eyes darted to sonar. "Contact is...uncertain."

Mai's voice was tight. "Meaning?"

Bright swallowed. "Meaning it's still there, but it can't lock on. It's oscillating. Searching."

Ace's throat tightened. "It's guessing."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Good. Let it guess itself to death."

A moment passed.

Then another.

The cabin felt like it had been holding its breath with them, and for the first time the air didn't taste like panic.

Ace's sternum still had the faint tug—tag present—but loosened now, like a leash with slack.

Mai leaned closer, voice low. "Anchor check."

Ace breathed wrong, messy, real. "Here."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Bright's hands eased just slightly on the controls. "We stay in plume until we're out of the helicopter's immediate search grid. Then we go deeper and quiet. Passive only."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And the platform."

Bright's mouth twisted. "We don't go near it again. Not unless we come back with people who do not take 'compatibility' as a goal."

Mai's smile was thin. "Good. Because if I hear that word again I'm going to start breaking throats with it."

Ace almost smiled—almost—then her ribs twitched.

Not three beats.

Something else.

A faint, distant pressure-wave.

Not coming at them.

Passing somewhere behind, like a huge thing moving in the dark.

Bright's eyes narrowed at the sonar. "It's moving away."

Mai blinked. "The responder."

Bright nodded slowly. "Yes. It's sweeping. It didn't commit. The plume broke the track enough that it's doing a broader search pattern."

Ace whispered, "It'll come back."

Bright's voice was grim. "Yes. But now it has to work for it."

Mai's fingers tightened on Ace's wrist again, as if she could choke the tag to death by sheer will. "And we have a new rule: if your ribs start to fall into three beats, I don't ask nicely."

Ace exhaled shakily. "Deal."

Bright guided them out of the plume gradually, moving into colder, darker water again, but not diving deep. Just enough to stop the surface chaos from being their only cover.

The helicopter searchlight faded into nothing above, lost in distance and bubbles and bad luck.

The ocean became quiet again—quiet in the way only deep water can be, where silence feels like pressure.

Ace's palm slid off the hull, fingers aching.

Mai didn't let go of her wrist yet. She waited, watching Ace's face like a hawk watches a tremor in grass.

Ace swallowed. "I'm...okay."

Mai's eyes stayed hard. "Define okay."

Ace tried to be honest. "I can breathe. The tag isn't pulling hard. Violet is...quiet."

Bright's gaze sharpened at the last part. "Quiet how?"

Ace hesitated. "Not asleep. Just...watching."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Like she's learning."

Ace didn't deny it.

Bright muttered, "Everything is learning tonight."

He reached into a drawer and pulled out an emergency thermal blanket—cheap foil material—and tossed it to Ace without ceremony.

“Wrap,” he said. “Shock hits later.”

Ace did, hands shaking.

Mai shifted closer, shoulder touching Ace’s, the contact deliberate. Not romantic. Not soft. Operational anchor turned human anyway.

“Stay with me,” Mai murmured.

Ace nodded. “I’m here.”

Bright adjusted course again, heading toward the coordinates the buoy transmission had implied—an extraction corridor, not a location, something moving to meet them.

He glanced at a passive receiver light.

Still nothing.

Then the receiver flickered.

A tiny green pulse.

Bright’s posture changed instantly.

“We got a reply,” he said.

Mai’s eyes snapped to him. “From who.”

Bright’s jaw tightened. “From people who don’t use ceiling speakers.”

He listened, eyes narrowed, then spoke softly, reading the minimal coded return:

“Proceed to waypoint. Maintain radio silence. Hardline only. Identify with phrase—”

He paused, almost amused despite everything.

“—‘Unscheduled deviation confirmed.’”

Mai snorted. “That is the most Foundation sentence I’ve ever heard.”

Bright’s mouth twisted. “Yep.”

Ace hugged the thermal blanket tighter. “Are they coming to get us.”

Bright nodded once. “Yes. And more importantly: they just got my packet about an unauthorized interface and an underwater node.”

Mai’s smile was thin and dangerous. “Good. Let the adults come.”

Ace’s ribs twitched again—faint—but no three-beat rhythm took hold.

Mai felt it anyway, and her grip tightened for a second, then loosened when Ace’s breathing stayed wrong and human.

For now, the ocean was static.

Not silent.

Not safe.

But noisy enough that the responder had to search like a blind thing.

The platform was behind them, its lights distant, its memetics voice cut off.

The node beneath had been denied a clean channel.

And somewhere ahead, in black water and cold wind, a different set of eyes was moving to intercept—eyes that might finally call this what it was:

Not a containment exercise.

Not a calibration.

A breach inside the Foundation's own bones.

And Ace, wrapped in foil and adrenaline, stared into darkness and understood something with ugly clarity:

This wasn't the end of the chase.

This was the end of pretending she was just a passenger in it.

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