



Chapter 36: Hardline Rendezvous

The waypoint wasn't a place so much as a shape.

A patch of water where the waves didn't behave the way they should—less chop, more disciplined roll, like something big below was cutting the surface pressure into a different pattern. Bright found it without looking confident, which was how Ace knew he was very confident.

He kept the sub on minimal power, drifting more than driving, letting the ocean do some of the work.

Mai stayed close enough that Ace could feel the heat of her through the thin foil blanket. Her hand hadn't left Ace's wrist in ten minutes. It was borderline ridiculous.

It was also the reason Ace's ribs weren't singing three beats right now.

Bright spoke without turning. "If we see a surface light, we do not approach it directly."

Mai's voice was tight. "They're friendly."

Bright's mouth twisted. "Friendly doesn't mean safe. Friendly means protocol-heavy."

Ace swallowed. "Good."

Mai glanced at her. "That's the first time you've said 'good' about protocol."

Ace's lips twitched. "Don't get used to it."

The receiver light blinked again—two short pulses, one long.

Bright exhaled. "They're close."

Outside, the ocean was black and thick and loud in its own way. Wind slapped the hull. Spray ticked the periscope tube.

Then—far off—something moved in the dark.

Not a searchlight.

No helicopter chop.

A low presence.

A silhouette that wasn't a wave.

A long, flat shadow cutting across the surface without wake, without fuss, like it didn't push water so much as negotiate with it.

Bright stiffened. "There."

Mai leaned forward, eyes narrowing at the external feed. "Boat?"

Bright's voice went flat. "Not a boat."

The silhouette slid nearer and a light came on—not bright, not theatrical, just a controlled, shielded beam pointed at the water, then angled away again.

A signal. Not a threat.

Then a second light blinked twice, slower.

Bright muttered, "That's them."

Mai's jaw unclenched by a millimeter. "Finally."

Ace listened.

No clean ping.

No three-beat pressure.

Just water and wind.

And the faint tug in her sternum—tag slack, present, like a leash someone hadn't decided to pull yet.

Bright brought the sub closer, careful, angling to approach from the side, not straight on. The other craft remained almost motionless, riding the sea like it was on rails.

When it was close enough, Ace could see its shape on the camera feed: low profile, matte dark hull, no visible markings, no normal navigation lights—like a thing designed to exist without being noticed.

A hatch opened on its deck.

A figure stood there, silhouetted, and raised a small lamp that flashed a code.

Bright answered with a quick blink from the sub's external signal.

The figure paused, then gestured.

"Dock line only," Bright said. "No comms."

Mai's voice was dry. "I'm starting to think you enjoy this."

Bright didn't smile. "I enjoy being alive."

They eased alongside.

A line splashed into the water, slapped against the sub's hull, then hooked into a latch point with practiced precision. Metal clicked. Tension tightened.

The sub rocked once, then steadied, tethered to the larger craft like a parasite finally finding a host.

Bright nodded. "We're attached."

Mai's disruptor stayed in her hand, but lowered now, not because she trusted them blindly—because she trusted Bright's fear enough to assume he'd have bailed if this was wrong.

Ace swallowed. Her mouth was dry. "What now."

Bright's eyes flicked to her. "Now we let someone else carry the weight."

Mai snorted softly. "That'll be the day."

A knock sounded on the hatch.

Not banging. Not urgent.

A measured, polite, infuriatingly calm tap-tap.

Bright glanced at Mai, then at Ace. "Remember: no story. No speculation. Raw facts."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Ace blinked. "You two are terrifying when you agree."

Bright unsealed the hatch.

Cold air punched in, carrying sea spray and the faint scent of diesel and antiseptic—like someone had tried to sanitize the ocean.

A figure climbed down into the sub.

Not in tactical gear.

In a dark water-resistant coat, hood down, face plain. A woman, maybe late thirties or forties, eyes sharp but not theatrical. She carried no visible weapon.

What she carried was worse.

A clipboard.

A small sealed case.

And the kind of calm that didn't need permission.

Her gaze moved once over all of them—Bright, Mai, Ace—then she spoke.

“Dr. Bright,” she said, voice level. “Agent Mai.”

Bright's jaw tightened. “Agent—”

She cut him off without raising her voice. “Don't.”

Bright shut his mouth. That alone made Ace's stomach tighten.

The woman's eyes settled on Ace. Not hungry. Not reverent. Not “compatible.”

Clinical.

Assessing.

“Subject A,” she said.

Mai's disruptor rose a fraction.

The woman didn't flinch. She simply looked at Mai like Mai was a variable that could be respected without being indulged.

“Agent Mai,” she said calmly, “if you point that at me, you will escalate a situation I came here to de-escalate.”

Mai's eyes narrowed. “Then don't call her ‘Subject.’”

The woman nodded once, as if taking the correction like an input. “Ace,” she said instead.

Ace's throat tightened. “Yes.”

The woman's gaze moved to Ace's shoulder, as if she could see the signature touch through fabric. Ace felt a faint twitch in her sternum like the tag noticed being observed.

The woman opened her case and pulled out a small device—no screen, no branding, just a sensor head and a set of leads.

“Hands,” she said, to Ace, not unkindly.

Mai's hand tightened on Ace's wrist.

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai's eyes held hers: Stay here.

Ace extended her hand.

The woman attached a lead to Ace's finger and another to her wrist. The device emitted a soft click.

Ace felt...nothing.

But the device's indicator light pulsed.

Once.

Twice.

Then it blinked in a pattern that made Bright's face harden.

Mai noticed instantly. "What."

The woman didn't look up. "There is a persistent coupling signature."

Ace's stomach dropped. "So I am tagged."

The woman nodded once. "Yes."

Mai's eyes went cold. "By who."

The woman finally looked at Bright. "By something you're going to describe to me without euphemisms."

Bright exhaled, then spoke in the blunt, ugly way he only used when lying would get people killed.

"An embedded node in platform architecture," Bright said. "Non-Foundation design. It pinged through the hull. It attempted structured communication in water. It responded to a three-beat cadence. It split pursuit behavior—decoy chase plus source reacquisition. It can physically contact a hull."

The woman listened without reacting, like she was filing each sentence into a folder that already existed.

Then she looked at Mai. "And the memetics component."

Mai's jaw tightened. "An interface handler. Violet eyes. Drugged me. Routed us. Used us as a key. Touched Ace and confirmed 'compatibility.' Used relay speakers. Tried to trap us in a node chamber."

The woman nodded once. "Name."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Unknown. But she has access above her pay grade."

The woman's expression finally shifted—tiny, but there: irritation.

"Of course she does," she murmured, as if speaking to the universe directly.

Ace found her voice. "What happens now."

The woman's gaze returned to Ace. It was sharp, but not cruel.

"Now," she said, "you will be moved to a quiet environment that does not listen to the ocean."

Mai scoffed softly. "Good luck."

The woman didn't smile. "We have luck, and we have engineering, and we have people who hate being surprised."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Oversight."

The woman nodded once. "Yes."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And what about the thing in the water."

The woman paused, and that pause was honest.

"We do not have it contained," she said. "We do not understand it fully. And it has a reference token keyed to Ace."

Ace's sternum tugged faintly again, as if agreeing.

Mai's fingers tightened hard on Ace's wrist. "So we're not safe."

The woman met Mai's gaze. "You are not safe in the sense that nothing will ever try again."

Mai's eyes didn't blink. "Then what are you offering."

The woman's voice stayed calm. "Time. Separation. And a paper trail sharp enough to cut people who thought they could play calibration games on a live platform."

Bright let out a short, humorless laugh. "That last part might actually work."

The woman reached into her case again and withdrew a small patch—thin, matte, with a faint metallic thread pattern.

She held it out to Ace.

"This will not remove the coupling," she said. "It will dampen it. Not silence. Damp."

Ace stared at it. "Like making the tag quieter."

The woman nodded. "Like putting cloth over a bell."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "And if it doesn't work."

The woman's gaze stayed steady. "Then we will know quickly."

Ace didn't love that answer.

But she took the patch anyway.

Mai watched like a hawk as Ace pressed it onto the skin near her collarbone, close to where the

interface had touched. It felt cool. Slightly heavy. Like a coin on the skin.

For a moment, Ace felt the tug in her sternum dull—still there, but less sharp.

Mai exhaled slowly. “Better.”

Ace swallowed. “Yes. Better.”

Bright leaned back slightly, exhaustion finally trying to claim his posture. “So what’s the next step.”

The woman pointed upward. “You come aboard. Medical assessment. Debrief. Compartment isolation.”

Mai’s mouth twisted. “And if the helicopter finds us.”

The woman’s eyes didn’t change. “It won’t.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened. “You sure.”

The woman’s voice was flat. “It is currently following a decoy track that I arranged the moment your hardline packet arrived.”

Bright blinked once. “You—”

She cut him off again. “Don’t.”

Bright shut his mouth again, and Ace decided she liked this woman a little just for that.

The woman stepped back, giving them space to climb out.

Mai moved first—because of course she did—hauling herself up through pain with stubborn brutality. Bright followed, then offered Ace a hand.

Ace took it.

As she climbed onto the deck of the dark craft, wind hit her face, cold and real. The sea stretched around them like an endless sheet of black metal.

The platform’s distant lights were barely visible now.

Ace looked out over the water and listened.

No clean ping.

No three-beat hymn.

Just ocean.

Static ocean.

But in her sternum, under the dampening patch, the faint tag remained—quiet now, not gone.

Mai stepped close beside her, shoulder brushing hers.

“Still here?” Mai murmured.

Ace nodded. “Yes.”

Mai’s voice was low and certain. “Then we stay louder than it.”

Bright climbed up behind them, eyes scanning the horizon.

The woman with the clipboard turned and began walking toward the craft’s interior hatch, already talking into a wired handset that didn’t broadcast into the air.

Ace caught one phrase as she passed:

“—unauthorized interface handler. Immediate freeze. Audit sweep. Bring me every access log. Every sedation authorization. Every speaker relay map.”

The kind of words that killed careers.

Maybe saved lives.

Ace followed, foil blanket snapping in the wind like a flag of bad decisions survived.

And as the hatch closed behind them and the ocean became a sound outside instead of a medium around them, Ace felt something shift in her ribs—subtle, almost polite.

Not a ping.

Not a command.

A patient awareness.

Like something far below had noticed the dampening patch and simply...adjusted its expectations.

Not gone.

Not defeated.

Just waiting for the next clean seam.

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