



Chapter 40: Shoreline Without Names

Transport on the dark craft wasn't dramatic.

That was the point.

No radio chatter. No shouted orders. No comforting "you're safe now." Just quiet machinery and people moving like they'd been trained to treat noise as a liability.

Ace sat in a narrow bench seat in a small interior compartment, Mai beside her, knees nearly touching. Bright across, leaning back with the kind of posture that pretended he wasn't exhausted. Clipboard stood near the door, one hand on a wired handset, speaking in short phrases that didn't carry.

Every few minutes, Ace felt the faint tug in her sternum test the edges of the dampeners.

Not pulling.

Checking.

Mai responded the same way every time—squeeze, eye contact, one low phrase:

“No handshake.”

Ace would answer, breathing wrong on purpose: “No handshake.”

And the tug would ease again, like something outside found their insistence tedious.

Hours later—maybe two, maybe four; time in stress became elastic—the craft slowed.

The engine tone changed. A softer idling.

Through the hull came a different sound: shallow water.

Not deep ocean slosh. Close-in ripples. Rocks. Shore.

Clipboard opened the compartment door and spoke once.

“We’re here.”

Mai’s posture tightened immediately. “Where.”

Clipboard didn’t give a name. “A place that doesn’t exist on public charts.”

Bright muttered, “Perfect.”

They moved in a tight formation.

Ace stayed between Mai and Bright. Clipboard took point. Two silent personnel appeared with no introductions—faces blank, movements efficient. No patches. No rank marks. Just function.

A hatch opened.

Cold air hit them, different from open sea—damp, pine-scented, coastal. The kind of air that meant land was close and humans had built something nearby.

Ace stepped out and the deck swayed slightly under her feet, the after-effect of hours on moving water.

Mai kept her hand locked with Ace’s.

Bright scanned the horizon reflexively.

There were no city lights. No road lamps. Just darkness and a faint low line of trees.

A narrow pier extended into the water. At the end of it sat a vehicle—unmarked, matte, boxy. Not a van exactly. Not quite military either. Something built for “moving things without discussion.”

A small floodlight lit the pier in a tight cone, shielded from the open sea.

They walked.

Ace’s sternum tugged faintly as if movement itself was a signal.

Mai squeezed her hand. “Here.”

Ace breathed wrong. "Here."

The tug loosened.

At the vehicle, Clipboard paused and finally—finally—gave them something like a human courtesy.

"This is the last transition point where there will be any exposure to open air," she said. "After that: insulated corridor, shielded rooms, hardline only."

Mai's voice was tight. "And no speakers."

Clipboard nodded once. "No speakers."

Bright snorted. "My kind of prison."

Clipboard's eyes flicked to him. "Think of it as a box that doesn't answer when the ocean knocks."

Bright's expression sobered.

Ace climbed into the vehicle first, helped by Mai because Mai insisted on doing it, pain be damned. Bright followed, then Clipboard.

The door sealed with a heavy, satisfying clunk that felt like a boundary being drawn.

Inside, it was warm. Dry. No hum of comms. No screens. Just a faint vibration of engine and the smell of fabric and disinfectant.

The vehicle moved.

Not fast.

Smooth.

Ace watched the dim outline of trees slide past the small armored window.

Mai sat close, shoulder pressed to Ace's. Bright leaned back, eyes closed for five seconds—then opened them again because his brain didn't trust sleep.

Clipboard sat opposite, clipboard in her lap like it was a weapon.

For ten minutes, nothing happened.

Then Ace's sternum tugged again—sharper this time, like the coupling signature had noticed the change in environment and was attempting to reacquire.

Three beats tried to form.

Mai's hand tightened instantly. "No handshake."

Ace's breath went ragged. "No handshake."

But this time the tug didn't ease as quickly.

It pressed once, stubborn.

Bright's eyes snapped open. "Hook attempt stronger?"

Ace nodded, jaw clenched. "Yes."

Clipboard's pen moved, but her eyes stayed on Ace's face. "Does it feel like it's coming through the water still?"

Ace swallowed. "No."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Then through what?"

Ace's throat tightened. "Through me."

A silence fell.

Bright's voice went low. "Internal channel."

Clipboard nodded once, calm as ever. "Expected. As we reduce external seams, the coupling will try to leverage internal pathways."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Meaning Violet."

Clipboard didn't deny it.

Ace's ribs pulsed, the lock vibrating like something inside was shifting position.

Not breaking.

Testing.

Violet's presence rose faintly—quiet, amused.

They're building boxes, Violet whispered. How sweet. Boxes always have lids. Lids always have gaps. You know that, don't you?

Ace's vision flashed green at the edges.

Mai squeezed Ace's wrist hard enough to hurt. "Ace. Eyes on me."

Ace forced her gaze to Mai.

Mai's voice was fierce. "Say my name."

Ace swallowed. "Mai."

Mai: "Again."

Ace: "Mai."

Mai: "Again."

Ace's heartbeat stumbled out of the three-beat attempt. Ugly, human.

The sternum tug eased—slowly—like a grip loosening reluctantly.

Bright exhaled. "Good."

Clipboard wrote one line, then looked up. "This confirms something important."

Mai's voice was cold. "Say it."

Clipboard met her gaze. "If we remove external channels, the system will attempt to use internal co-resident structures to maintain coupling. Violet is a bridge candidate."

Mai's fingers tightened. "Then we keep Violet locked."

Ace's throat tightened. "She's not a door I can just weld shut."

Clipboard's voice stayed calm. "No. But we can reinforce the lock. And we can keep you anchored to human signals."

Mai's voice was low and absolute. "That's my job."

Bright muttered, "And mine, apparently."

Clipboard didn't smile. "Yes."

The vehicle rolled on through dark trees and unseen roads.

Eventually it slowed and turned.

The air outside changed subtly—less forest, more concrete, more sealed-space smell filtering through vents.

Then the vehicle stopped.

A door opened ahead—not the vehicle door. A facility door.

Shielded corridor. No signage. No names.

Clipboard stood. "We're here."

Mai tightened her grip on Ace's hand. "Let's go."

Ace stood, interference band warm under her collarbones, dampening patch cool on her skin.

She took one breath—wrong on purpose—then stepped out into a corridor that looked like it had been designed by someone who hated sound.

Thick doors. Soft lighting. No speaker grilles. No decorative anything.

A place built not to impress.

A place built to refuse.

As they walked, Ace felt the tag-line tug faintly again—

—but the corridor absorbed it.

No echo. No relay. No answering hum.

Just the quiet thud of boots on insulated flooring, and the steady pressure of Mai's hand holding hers.

A shoreline without names.

A corridor without voice.

A temporary victory built out of silence and paperwork—

while inside Ace, Violet watched the new rules being set like fresh concrete, and smiled as if she already knew where the first hairline crack would appear.

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Last update: **17/03/2026 17:36**

