



Chapter 14: Offshore Rules

The boat didn't feel like escape.

It felt like a corridor that happened to float.

Open water spread around them in every direction—black, rain-stippled, featureless—and still Ace couldn't shake the sensation that they were moving through a system someone else had already diagrammed. The harbor lights had vanished behind a low curtain of drizzle. Ahead, there was only darkness, engine hum, and the occasional hiss of spray against hull.

Mai sat with her back against the deckhouse wall, arms folded like she could clamp her ribs back into place by sheer authority. Her face was the right kind of pale: exhausted, not failing.

Ace stayed standing. She didn't do it to look heroic. She did it because sitting felt like conceding ground to her own body, and right now her body was the loudest risk factor in the room.

Kato and the tech kept their eyes on the hull sensor panel like it might decide to grow teeth.

Bright's voice crackled through the overhead speaker again, quieter now, as if he'd moved to a different room with different people listening.

"You're clear of the last known trace," he said. "No harmonic shadow within two hundred meters."

Mai's laugh was thin and humorless. "Two hundred meters is an optimistic definition of clear."

Kato didn't disagree. He just said, "We're not out here to outrun it. We're out here to take the city out of the equation."

Ace's ribs pulsed—three beats, pause, three beats—as if something in the water objected to being removed from the equation.

Mai noticed the tension in Ace's throat when she swallowed. She didn't look at the floor this time. She looked at Ace's face.

"You're still hearing it," Mai said.

Ace didn't lie. "Yes."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Louder than in the container?"

Ace considered, forcing herself to answer like a sensor readout, not a confession. "Different. Cleaner. Like...less interference."

Kato's eyes flicked up. "Water carries. It always has."

Mai's gaze snapped to him. "Don't say that like it's poetic."

Kato's expression didn't move. "It's not poetry. It's physics."

Bright cut in before Mai could weaponize that into an argument. "Five minutes to rendezvous. Keep your heads down. The platform's shielded. You'll step through a dampening gate again."

Ace's fingers flexed on the rail.

The last time they stepped through a gate, the pulse dimmed.

That meant the pulse wasn't purely internal.

That also meant—uncomfortably—that something outside could make it louder.

Mai watched Ace's knuckles whiten, then said, low enough that only Ace could hear it: "If it whispers again, you don't answer. Not even 'no.'"

Ace's gaze flicked to Mai. "But saying nothing is still a reaction."

Mai's mouth twisted. "Then you give it the most boring reaction possible."

Ace's lips twitched faintly. "Silence."

Mai nodded. "Exactly. Be the world's least interesting vessel."

Ace didn't smile, but the tightness in her shoulders eased a fraction. Mai was good at this—not at comfort, but at structuring reality into manageable pieces.

The boat's engine note changed as it slowed.

Outside, the rain thinned into mist.

A shape emerged from the dark: a low offshore platform, industrial and ugly, perched on steel legs like a spider that had decided to be architecture. Floodlights were dimmed, angled down to keep the sky quiet. The platform didn't look like a fortress.

It looked like a maintenance site.

Which meant it was absolutely a fortress.

The crew maneuvered in with practiced ease. A docking arm extended with a soft whine and locked onto the boat with a metallic clunk that vibrated in Ace's teeth.

For a moment, everything went still.

No hull taps.

No whispered names.

No frost writing rhythms on metal.

Only wind and the muted slap of water.

A ramp unfolded. Two operatives in rain gear waited at the platform's edge beside a portable frame—bigger than the one at the dock, humming with a deeper, steadier field.

One of them raised a hand in greeting like this was just another Tuesday.

"Welcome to nowhere," the operative called. "Move fast."

Mai muttered, "Love the hospitality."

Kato stepped first, because people like him always stepped first. Then Mai, because Mai refused to be "escorted" like cargo. Ace followed last, because Ace didn't want anything behind her.

As they passed through the dampening frame, the air thickened around Ace's chest for half a second—

—and the three-beat pulse inside her ribs dimmed, like someone had turned the volume knob down.

Ace's breath hitched involuntarily.

Mai caught it instantly and leaned closer, not touching this time, just present.

"Better?" Mai asked quietly.

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

Mai's eyes narrowed, thinking. "So it's not just you."

Ace didn't argue. She didn't want to speak the thought aloud: If it's not just me, then it's a thread. If it's a thread, it can be pulled.

They moved into the platform's interior, a narrow corridor with bulkhead doors and rubberized flooring. The whole place smelled like wet steel and disinfectant, as if someone had tried to scrub "ocean" off metal and failed.

A medic met them at the first junction.

"Mai," the medic said immediately, eyes on her ribs like they were a schedule. "Sit."

Mai stared at him. "No."

The medic stared back. "Yes."

Mai opened her mouth to argue.

Ace said, mild and unhelpful, "You should sit."

Mai's glare swung to Ace, betrayed. "Et tu?"

Ace's expression stayed neutral. "Your breathing is shallow."

Mai looked like she wanted to bite something. Then she sat anyway, sharp and resentful, like gravity was a personal insult.

The medic's hands moved efficiently, checking bruising, listening for crackle, pressing where pain lived.

Mai hissed, then clenched her jaw. "You touch like you're trying to find spare change."

"Two fractures," the medic said calmly. "Non-displaced. You're stubborn. Congratulations."

Mai exhaled hard. "Tape me. Give me something that doesn't make me stupid. And if you suggest rest, I'll haunt you."

Ace stood beside her, eyes scanning the corridor behind the medic's shoulder. The platform felt quiet in a different way than the sealed room. Not dead. Not hungry.

Controlled.

Bright's voice came through a wall speaker, closer now. "You're on platform. Good."

Mai snapped, "You owe me that drink."

Bright's reply was immediate. "You'll get it after you stop trying to die."

Mai: "Rude."

Ace spoke to the speaker without looking at it. "Where are you."

"Two doors down," Bright said. "Debrief room. I'm coming to you."

Kato nodded to one of the operatives and moved away, leaving them with the medic and two security staff who pretended they weren't watching Ace's chest.

Mai got taped, strapped, and injected with something that took the edge off pain without taking her brain offline. She stood again, slower now, but still upright.

Ace watched her, a flicker of something soft behind her eyes.

Mai caught it and scoffed. "Don't look at me like that."

Ace's brow lifted. "Like what?"

Mai's mouth twisted. "Like you're relieved."

Ace didn't deny it. "I am."

Mai rolled her eyes, then—quietly—reached out and bumped Ace's forearm with her knuckles. Light contact. A private signal.

Anchor still here.

They walked the corridor toward the debrief room. Bulkhead doors slid open with clean hisses. Cameras tracked them without drama. The platform felt like it had been built by someone who feared superstition and therefore trusted engineering as prayer.

Then Bright stepped through a door and into the hallway.

In person he looked older than his voice. Not by age, but by accumulation. His eyes flicked over Mai's strapped ribs, then to Ace's face, then—unavoidably—to the center of Ace's chest, where the machines had been chirping.

He didn't stare.

He didn't flinch.

He just nodded once, acknowledging the problem without making Ace feel like it was her fault.

"Good work," Bright said quietly.

Mai snorted. "Define good."

Bright's mouth twitched. "You're alive. The city didn't eat you. The container didn't become a cathedral permanently. That's good."

Mai grumbled something unprintable.

Bright looked at Ace. "How's the pulse?"

Ace answered immediately. "Lower inside the dampening gate."

Bright nodded once. "So the platform's doing its job."

Mai leaned against the wall, arms folded. "Until it doesn't."

Bright didn't contradict her. He led them into the debrief room.

It was simple: table, chairs, a wall monitor with no visible feeds yet, coffee that looked less like regret than the sealed cup in Tokyo. Two armed guards outside the door. No windows. No decorations.

A room designed to keep the conversation from escaping.

Bright gestured for them to sit.

Mai sat with a controlled wince.

Ace sat slowly this time, deliberately, forcing her body to accept that sitting wasn't surrender.

Bright didn't start with questions.

He started with a blunt statement.

"The priest you fought," Bright said, "wasn't acting alone."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Shocking."

Bright tapped the wall monitor. It flickered to life, showing a stripped-down graph: time on one axis, harmonic amplitude on the other. Spikes. Drops. A clean pattern.

"This," Bright said, "is what you felt as 'soon.'"

Ace's jaw tightened.

Bright continued, voice steady. "Order's patterns are messy. Ritual-driven. They rely on repetition and bodies and rooms. What contacted you inside the container and under the hull..."

He paused, choosing truth over comfort.

"...wasn't ritual. It was protocol."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "As in machine."

Bright shook his head slightly. "Not machine. Not human. Something that behaves like a system. It addressed you like a node."

Ace stared at the graph. The three-beat pulse in her ribs dimmed in the platform's field, but it didn't vanish. It kept time with the line on the screen as if they were related in a way she didn't want to name.

Mai's voice cut in, low and lethal. "So what do we call it?"

Bright exhaled. "We don't have a name. But we have one useful fact: it can't sustain full contact in a dampened environment."

Mai's eyebrows lifted. "Yet."

Bright's eyes didn't blink. "Yet. Which is why you're staying here for twenty-four hours while we run controlled tests."

Mai's posture went rigid. "No."

Bright didn't argue with her emotion. He argued with physics. "You're injured. Ace is marked. Tokyo is a buffet. Out here, we have leverage."

Mai's jaw worked. She hated being reasonable in someone else's plan.

Ace spoke quietly. "What kind of tests?"

Bright met her gaze. "Observation. Sleep. Response suppression. We see if the pulse changes when you're unconscious. We see if it changes when you're calm. We see if it changes when you're angry."

Mai barked a laugh. "So: Tuesday."

Ace didn't smile.

Because the word sleep hit her like a threat.

Ace hadn't slept properly since the warehouse. Every time she closed her eyes, she felt candlelight behind her eyelids—memory trying to become present.

And now something out there had learned her name.

Bright's voice softened just enough to be human. "Ace. If you dream and the hymn tries to push through, you wake Mai. You wake me. You do not handle it alone."

Ace swallowed once. "Understood."

Mai looked at Ace, eyes hard. "You wake me."

Ace nodded. "I will."

Bright turned the monitor off. The room dimmed back into plainness.

For a moment, there was only the soft hum of the platform's systems and the distant, constant sound of water hitting steel.

Mai leaned back and stared at the ceiling like she was negotiating with the universe.

Then she said, low, almost casual: "You know what bothers me most."

Bright glanced at her. "There's a list."

Mai's mouth twitched. "It didn't try to kill us."

Ace's fingers tightened on the chair arm.

Mai continued, voice rough. "It didn't even try to take you. Not really. It just...showed up. Close enough to leave fingerprints. Close enough to say your name. Like it wanted you to get used to the idea."

Bright didn't contradict her.

Ace stared at her own hands.

Inside her ribs, muted by the platform, the three-beat pulse persisted—quieter now, but stubborn.

Violet behind the lock was humming softly, pleased in a way that made Ace feel sick.

Not because she wanted to hurt.

Because she wanted to answer.

Mai's hand drifted across the table and settled on Ace's wrist, firm.

Ace didn't pull away.

Mai's voice was low, absolute. "You are not a door."

Ace met her eyes.

And for a moment, the pulse didn't matter. The water didn't matter. The graph didn't matter.

Only the anchor did.

Ace nodded once.

"No," Ace said, steady. "I'm not."

Somewhere deep beneath the platform, the ocean moved.

And very faintly—so faintly the microphones might not catch it—something tapped the steel leg far below.

Once.

Twice.

Three beats.

Pause.

Three beats.

Ace didn't react.

She didn't answer.

But Violet smiled behind the lock like patience was a game she'd learned long ago... and was finally allowed to play again.

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Last update: **17/03/2026 16:53**



