

Stolen Breath

The Echo's Wake had gone soft for the night watch. Amber strips along the deck edges painted low halos under the consoles, and the dome above the bridge showed a clean, quiet sea of stars—no flicker, no warning glyphs, no ghosts peeking from the edges of reality. Rook had left with a two-finger salute and a yawn. Kalyn mumbled something about replacing a relay “tomorrow-tomorrow” and vanished down the port corridor. Jel had actually straightened the nav plots before slipping away; the lines were, miraculously, almost straight. The ship hummed like a cat asleep on a radiator.

Mai closed the last case note with a soft tap and let the console dim. She didn't say “done.” She didn't need to. The wake of the day's fight receded and left a clean shore.

Their cabin off the bridge wasn't big and wasn't meant to be pretty, but it had the only chair on the deck that felt like it had been built for people instead of parades. A mug of tea cooled to lukewarm on the shelf. The air held the faint bite of solder and ozone from repairs that were now behind them, not in front. Ace shrugged out of her jacket and rolled her sleeves, the fabric whispering over old scars. The twin katanas leaned against the bulkhead, lacquer catching the low light. Close enough to be themselves. Far enough to not be a promise.

“Come here,” Mai said, as if she were inviting Ace to a window and not to her.

Ace went. Not because she always did, but because the word landed in her chest with the weight of permission. Mai took her hand and set it against the curve of her ribs. Then she stepped into the space the day had carved between them and closed it. Foreheads touched. Breath steadied. The ship's hum fell beneath a closer rhythm.

“I like this ritual,” Mai said. It was almost a tease, but her mouth softened on the last word.

“You hate rituals,” Ace murmured.

“I hate rehearsals,” Mai corrected, thumb sliding over the tendon in Ace's wrist. “Not this.”

Ace smiled, small and honest. “Good. Because I'm keeping this one.”

They didn't hurry. They never needed to. Ace's fingers traced the slope of Mai's shoulder, the way the red jacket always sat a little off-kilter, as if refusing to learn a lesson. Mai's hand found the back of Ace's neck and paused there, warm and certain. The kiss, when it came, carried no demand. It was relief, the kind that arrives after the last locked door clicks and the lights finally go low. It was the sound a knot makes when it lets go.

Violet warmed under Ace's skin—a soft ember rather than a voice—settling without crowding, like someone pulling a blanket to the shoulders in sleep. Mai drew back a fraction, eyes on Ace's, searching for the old telltales: the glassy far-look, that brittle shine at the edge. She found none.

“She's quiet,” Mai said, almost to herself. “Not gone. Just... nested.”

“Family adjacent,” Ace said, and earned the smallest huff of a laugh.

“Careful,” Mai warned. “Keep saying things like that and I'll make her a mug on the galley printer.”

“Do not give the demon a mug.”

“‘Demon’ is reductive,” Mai deadpanned, then kissed her again before Ace could fire a comeback.

They drifted into the chair together in a tangle that made sense only to them—Mai half-sideways across Ace’s lap, Ace’s legs bracketing hers, one arm around Mai’s waist, one hand splayed at the notch of her throat to feel the steady percussion there. The dome’s starfield washed their skin in cold light while the amber strips kept the edges warm. The tea cooled and was forgotten.

“Feels weird,” Ace said into Mai’s shoulder. “Real quiet. Not the kind with a held breath hiding inside it.”

Mai’s fingertips walked a familiar path along the small ridge of scar at Ace’s neck. “We earned it,” she said. “Pulled threads until the floor gave way. Bored the old ghosts to death. I forgot what this feels like.”

“Like we stole something.”

“We did.” Mai tipped back enough to look at her. “Is that the point? Steal a breath, then run another mile?”

Ace considered. The ship’s hum folded around them and made the thinking easier. “I don’t know about the mile,” she said. “But the breath? That we choose. Not them. Not the Voice. Not the Foundation with a form and a frequency slot. We decide when to breathe.”

Mai’s mouth quirked. “Consent as weather, not an artifact.”

Ace blinked. “That’s very you.”

“It is,” Mai admitted. “And I stand by it. We’ve made too many curated rooms for monsters to perform in. Peace you schedule in a ritual isn’t peace. Peace you take is. Even if it’s crooked around the edges.”

Ace tucked a stray strand of silver hair back behind Mai’s ear and let her hand stay there, cupping the angle of jaw and cheek. “We’re crooked,” she said. “I’m fine with that.”

Mai let the quiet return, then, because it was the point. The ship’s ventilation sighed. Somewhere deeper in the hull, a coolant pump changed phase and settled. The dome made the stars look closer than they were.

“You were gone for a heartbeat today,” Mai said after a time, not accusing, just opening the door. “Not your body. You.”

Ace didn’t flinch. “I know. I felt it. Like stepping past a doorway and your foot doesn’t find floor when it should.” Her mouth folded around the next words, careful with them. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Be here.” Mai guided Ace’s hand from her jaw to her sternum and pressed it there, warm beneath fabric. “Right now.”

“I am,” Ace said, and the words didn’t wobble.

“And if she tugs again?”

“Ace,” Violet whispered from under the skin, but not in words. More a pressure like tide against ankle, acknowledging shore. The old hunger was not in it. Only attention.

"I'll tug back," Ace said. "And you'll anchor me. And if we both get pulled, we tie the rope to something stupid and heavy and make it their problem."

Mai's smile showed a row of small, crooked teeth that Ace loved unfairly. "I have many stupid, heavy things."

"You do," Ace said, and the laugh that followed knocked something loose in her chest that had been stuck there too long. She breathed around the space it left.

Foreshadowing arrived as it always does, polite enough to be ignored. A frequency kissed the copper in the walls—a note the Wake didn't sing. A star near the dome's rim blinked and returned, not a sensor failing but a distance doing something odd to light. The tea mug caught a ring, circles widening on its surface without a hand near it.

Mai's eyebrow climbed. "Did you feel—"

"Maybe," Ace said, not letting go. "Or maybe I want five more minutes of pretending the universe doesn't know our names."

"Five minutes accepted." Mai set the terms like a contract and sealed it with a kiss that shifted from gentle to deliberate. Her hand found the buttons on Ace's cuff and worked them loose, slow as honesty.

"Now who likes rituals," Ace breathed against her mouth.

"Don't ruin this for me," Mai replied, and Ace did not.

They moved in the small space they had, making it larger by refusing to give any of it to fear. Touch became language. The map of scars read and re-read, not to catalog harm but to say: this is where you were brave, this is where you came back, this is where I will meet you again and again. Their breaths found a pace that made a metronome of the moment. The world, in gratitude or spite, held still.

"Worth every scar," Ace said, later, voice low.

"Don't keep chasing new ones to prove it," Mai said, and that was how she said I love you in a way that made Ace want to stand up straighter for the rest of her life.

"Not chasing," Ace said. "Just... not running."

"Good. Because if you ever disappear into some grand speech again, I'm going to solder charms into all your pockets."

"I would never survive."

"No," Mai agreed, "you wouldn't."

They laughed, and the room learned their shapes and kept them.

The Wake gave another small, almost polite shiver; a sympathetic resonance rather than an alarm. Mai's gaze drifted past Ace to the console near the door. One diagnostic went amber for a heartbeat and settled. She did not move. She placed her palm on the console's edge from where she sat and tapped a silent thank-you anyway.

“Even the ship’s bored,” she said.

“In the good way,” Ace answered. “No rehearsals. Just naps.”

“One more day like this,” Mai bargained with no one. “Then we can have chaos.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“Someone has to.”

What came next did not knock. It arrived like a memory that wasn’t theirs, the shape of it sliding into the room in blue.

The sound reached them first: a low whoosh dragged backward through itself, like an engine deciding to be a breath. The light followed, not bulb-bright but seam-bright, a cut opening in the air at chest height in the middle of the cabin. The edges crackled not with fire but with a wet-sounding electricity that made the tiny hairs along Ace’s forearms stand and made Mai’s fillings taste like winter.

“Okay,” Mai said, already on her feet, body between the light and Ace not because Ace needed the protection but because reflex is its own love language. She reached for the little console out of habit, fingers flipping a switch that wasn’t connected to anything that could have helped. Numbers danced and refused to mean anything. “Not Wake. Not Index. Not any known arc. The topology is wrong.”

“Different wrong,” Ace agreed, standing into her weapons without quite picking them up. The katanas remained against the wall. She found, to her surprise, that she didn’t want steel in her hands for this. She wanted Mai. She took that instead, catching her wrist. “Hey.”

Mai looked. The blue seam widened. The room’s loose things tugged toward it—paper corners lifting, a coil of wire uncurling like a waking snake, the surface of the tea shivering in concentric oaths.

A silhouette flirted with the threshold. Not a body, not fully. A suggestion of a long coat, a tilt of a head, a hand lifted in some old-fashioned greeting that could have been invitation or apology. The voice came as if spoken far down a hallway that had somehow bent itself into the cabin.

“The threads pull again,” it said, syllables carrying a smile that wasn’t unkind. “Come through.”

Mai’s mouth shaped a question; Ace shook her head once. Answers were never free with rooms like this. They were always traded for time.

“How sure are you,” Mai asked, “that this isn’t a trap?”

Ace thought of all the doors she’d kicked and all the doors that had opened because they were meant for her, and how often the difference only mattered in hindsight. She looked at the dome and at the stars pretending to be as they always were. She thought of Rook’s yawn, Kalyn’s “tomorrow-tomorrow,” Jel’s straight lines. She thought of the Foundation frequency buried in a channel somewhere, waiting to ring a bell none of them would hear tonight. She thought of the way the Wake had been theirs when they needed it, and how it would go on being itself without them.

“Not sure at all,” she said. “But I’m sure about this.”

“This?”

Ace lifted their joined hands. “You and me, going the same way.”

“Always,” Mai said, and in that one word put down her fear and picked up her choice.

They stepped as one. Not into the portal. Into each other’s pocket of gravity, the way they always did before the world moved. Then they turned, still touching, and faced the seam.

It did the rest.

Blue took the room. The cabin stretched and unstitched. Their stomachs fell up while their bodies did their best to remain politely where physics had left them. The sound grew and collapsed and became silence shaped like a bell. For a fraction of a fraction they were nowhere at all, and in that nowhere Violet leaned, curious as a child at a window, and did not pull.

Then they were somewhere, and the somewhere was wet and loud and bright in ways space refused to be.

Rain hammered like a thousand small agreements being signed at once. Neon wrote its name on everything it could find—pavement, puddles, the slick sides of towers that climbed out of the dark to wear advertisements like saints wore wounds. Air tasted like metal and heat and old electricity. A drone screamed past overhead, strips of light writhing along its belly. Signs in languages Ace didn’t know lied with conviction. Steam rose from a grate and hugged the ankles of strangers who did not look at them. Wires drooped like vines, humming their own weather. Far away, sirens braided and unbraided.

They hit the ground not gracefully but together, a tangle skidding on rain-slick stone, water soaking clothes in a single merciless second. The seam snapped shut behind them with an unceremonious click. No echo’s wake. No familiar hum.

Mai’s hand found Ace’s. Ace’s hand found Mai’s. Katanas stayed sheathed because the city itself was a blade.

“Mai?” Ace said, because names are doors and she needed one to open right now.

“I’m here,” Mai answered, already dragging them both to their feet, already squinting through rain to get a read on a street that refused to be read. “We’re here.”

A holo six stories high blinked and reassembled into a face that promised salvation for a fee. A bike howled down the lane in a ribbon of water and light. Somewhere close, a laugh went wrong and turned into shouting.

Ace squeezed once. Mai squeezed back. They didn’t need a plan to hold their ground for a heartbeat and make the city come to them.

The rain got harder. The neon brightened to answer. And the interlude ended.

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