

Eldrich Fragment — Aihai

Chapter 1: The Sea That Listens

The boat had no business floating that far from shore. It drifted sideways in the black chop like a thought someone had forgotten to think through, white gunwales wet and gleaming, the deck scabbed with dried salt and a scatter of fish scales that caught the moon. No nets. No crew. Just a thermos rolling in slow arcs and a radio hissing with a noise that wasn't quite static.

From the ridge above the harbor, the village looked as if someone had drawn a line with a blade between dark and darker. House lights slit the salt air and shuddered shut one by one as evening fell and doors were barred. On the breakwater, half the town stood silent in stiff coats and oilskins, their faces turned toward the empty boat like listeners leaning to hear the end of a story.

"I don't like how quiet it gets when the tide turns," Mai said. "Like the sea is holding its breath."

Ace stood beside her with her hood down, hair damp with a fine spray that the wind couldn't quite decide what to do with. The green katana hilts crossed over her back hummed at a pitch only she could feel, a tight, expectant vibration that made her teeth ache. She watched the empty boat make another listless pivot. The radio's whisper rose for a second, a breath that found the cliff and curled back.

"It's not quiet," Ace said. "It's listening."

Mai made a face—the tiny, crooked smile she wore when Ace said something that landed too close to poetry to be comfortable. "You promised me dinner after the job," she murmured. "Not metaphysics."

"You assumed dinner would be safer."

Down on the breakwater the harbor-master's voice carried thinly. "We'll put a line on her at first light," he called to no one and everyone. "Tides go wrong at night."

A woman in a wool cap tugged his sleeve. "Not at night," she said. "You know better."

Mai's eyes flicked over the crowd—lines etched by salt and weather, hands that knew nets and knives, expressions closed like shutters at midnight. She had worked in towns like this before. You learned the rituals before you learned the names.

"What do they call it?" she asked.

Ace didn't have to ask what "it" was. The whisper of the radio had become a slow syllabic shape, a cadence just the wrong side of language.

"Aihai," Ace said. The word hit the air like a pebble thrown into a deep shaft—no echo, just depth. "They say it's a story older than the harbor. The sea's own dream. Or the sea's dreamer."

"Fishermen and their myths." Mai's voice was light but didn't carry the soft mockery she used on bureaucrats and thieves. She slid her hands into her jacket pockets and rocked on her heels. "Any paper to this?"

Ace patted the leather satchel at her hip. Inside was an oilskin bundle of charts that smelled of mildew and an older ink. She'd bartered for them at a tavern whose floorboards remembered storms. The faded lines and notes had mapped the shoals as if they were moods. Across the channel's mouth

a smear of red pencil marked a crescent shape: *no crossing when the old songs carry*. Someone else had written, in a hand that leaned downhill, *Aihai listens*.

"We don't need paper," Ace said. "We have the boat."

As if to punctuate it the empty vessel bumped the concrete wall of the harbor channel and spun slowly in the tide. The radio's hiss swelled into a sound like a throat opening to sing—and then shivered back to noise.

"They all say the same thing," Mai said softly, not taking her eyes from the boat. "When the wind swings east and the fog lies on the skin. When the nets come up light. When the dogs won't look at the water." She nodded toward a knot of boys who were pretending not to be afraid by kicking a can so hard their feet hurt. "Do we tell them this is nothing? Another unlucky week?"

Ace shook her head. The sword at her right shoulder warmed a degree, green flame rising in her mind's eye the way a thought rises when you lean toward it.

"We tell them we're here," Ace said. "And we listen back."

They went down to the tide line with the others and let the sea's breath lay damp on their faces. The breakwater stones were slick with weed and history. An older man spit into the water and muttered something in a language that had lost its verbs but not its teeth.

"Where did you hear the name?" Mai asked as they walked.

"On a chart. And in a song." Ace smiled without showing teeth. "And once from someone who had been listening so long she'd forgotten how to speak in daylight."

Mai glanced sideways. "You're not going to tell me this person was dead."

"No," Ace said. "But her shadow had learned to float."

They stopped at the very lip of the breakwater where the harbor narrowed like a throat. The sea ran past black and glossy and impatient. An eddy caught the empty boat and pressed it to the stone as gently as a parent's hand to a fevered brow. The radio hissed and cleared. A voice spoke three or four syllables that had the shape of comfort and the taste of salt water.

Mai's finger moved toward the disruptor holstered under her jacket; she didn't draw, but the weapon answered her like a tuning fork touching bone. "Language," she said. "Or close enough to trick us into answering."

"She needs you to answer," Ace said. "Or it does."

They stood with the harbor making its ancient noises around them and listened until their ears hurt. The voice did not come again, but the sea leaned close as if to whisper. The harbor-master cleared his throat and said he'd station two men on the pier until dawn. No one met his eyes. The crowd broke apart in brittle clumps, muttering the way gulls do when they don't want to admit they're watching the same scrap.

Ace and Mai didn't go back to the rented room above the net-mender's shop. They walked the breakwater twice and the far beach once, boots sinking a little in the soft places where the tide had recently thought better of itself. When the moon pushed a pale rib through the clouds, they found the first mark: a semicircle of pebbles arranged with school-teacher precision around a lump of driftwood

the size of a man's thigh. On the wood someone had carved four lines that looked like tally marks until you realized they crossed each other wrong, like a net with no knots.

Mai crouched. "Ritual," she said. "Or bait."

Ace slid her palm across the driftwood. The green flame inside her wavered as if it had felt a draft. "A window," she said at last. "Or a mouth pretending to be a window."

"In case someone looks through." Mai straightened, dusted her hands, and looked out to the offing where the water wore its late-night black. "We're standing in the center of a rumor that wants to be a cathedral."

Ace's laugh was a short exhale. "Remind me to steal that line."

"You can have it for dinner." Mai's mouth quirked again. "I require oysters."

"The last time you asked for oysters we had to fight a priest with a spear made of lightning."

"Worth it," Mai said.

The wind came onshore, a fat-bellied push that carried damp and kelp and something else: a tone at the very edge of hearing, the kind that makes your spine tell you to stand up straighter. They turned together. Out beyond the harbor mouth, beyond the bobbing channel marker that blinked its red eye twice and then, unnervingly, not at all, the water lifted in a long deliberate curve that was not wind or tide.

"Not alone," Ace said.

Three figures came with the next swell, their silhouettes wrong in ways that made the brain search for comparisons and dislike all of them. Not tall, not short, fluid where joints should have said no. They walked because the sea let them. As they reached the wet sand their feet made prints that filled with water from underneath as if the beach were thirsty for them and only them.

Mai slid the disruptor free in one smooth, affectionate motion. The etched runes along the barrel stirred, each mark a sleeping insect waking to flex its legs. Light pooled in the chamber and waited.

Ace did not draw yet. She watched the way the three moved—the hesitation and the correction, as if listening for instructions that came from far below their ankles. When they were ten paces away they stopped. The one in the center tilted a head that had too many slopes, as if it had borrowed a skull and was still measuring where to put the thoughts.

"Good evening," Mai said, voice level in the way that had talked down assassins and seduced informants and once persuaded a stone door to open out of sheer curiosity. "You're a long way from home."

The center figure opened a mouth. Water ran out. When the sound came it was the radio's hush given throat: not words but the promise that words existed if you leaned close enough.

"Aihai listens," Ace said softly, not to them but to the night that had bent nearer.

The two flanking creatures turned at the sound like dogs hearing their names mispronounced. They stepped forward. Their faces were not faces, no more than a wave's crest is a smile, but under the moon their surfaces broke into a texture like scales trying to remember they had once been hands.

Mai adjusted the disruptor's grip by a millimeter, the kind of movement Ace loved to watch because it meant Mai was letting her precision show. "We're not volunteers," Mai told the sea's messengers. "You'll need to formalize the invitation."

They came on together.

Ace drew.

The katanas left their scabbards with a sound that always surprised people who expected thunder. It was somewhere between breath and a match head's sigh. The green fire bloomed along the blades without smoke, without heat, an underwater glow the exact color of a broken promise. The sand hissed where it fell.

The first of the three struck low, an elbow that didn't have a joint scything toward Ace's knees. Ace pivoted around the emptiness that the strike left behind and turned, both blades biting through the wet air and finding the place where the thing was real enough to argue with. The edge dragged as if cutting through an old story. Green light guttered blue for a heartbeat.

"Not material," Mai called. Her voice was almost cheerful. "Not entirely."

"Mostly chorus," Ace said, ducking as the second creature's arm elongated to become the idea of a rope and tried to bind her from shoulder to hip. She cut through the idea and the rope remembered it was water and collapsed.

Mai fired once into the sand at the thing's feet. The disruptor didn't make noise so much as a correction in the night; the runes along its skin brightened and dimmed. In the soft crater that bloomed, the creature stumbled and for a brief medical instant its outline held, as if gravity had reminded it to choose. Mai shot again and the outline rang like a struck glass.

"Resonance," she said. "They hold shape when the song peaks."

"So we interrupt the song," Ace said. Her blades crossed, then parted, slicing two green parentheses through which the night peered back. She stepped into the nearer of the flanking creatures, let it feel the heat of her presence, and whispered, "Tell your dreamer we're rude."

The creature's chest—or where a chest would be if you planned correctly—shuddered. The shape inside pushed outward, as if something in there wanted to be bone again. Then it collapsed into a man-shaped puddle and crawled back toward the water like a wound trying to reach a scar.

The center figure hadn't moved. It stood with its head cocked, listening. Its mouth opened a little wider. The tone in the air deepened into something almost like a chord. Mai felt it in the hinge of her jaw and behind her eyes.

"Enough," she said calmly to the pistol. She thumbed the modulation ring with a tenderness that would have embarrassed her if anyone but Ace had seen it. The runes shifted like fish changing direction. She aimed at the space an inch to the left of the figure's head and fired.

The shot hit the chord the way a thrown stone hits a bell. The night answered. The sea inhaled. For a second the figure solidified completely, and in that second Ace saw a dozen faces flicker across the surface—weathered, bearded, freckled, smooth, young, old—each one wearing the same stricken, listening expression.

"Crew," Ace said, low.

Then the faces sank, and the thing looked at them with a blankness that wasn't indifference but an invitation to provide content.

"Aihai," Mai said, and because she knew how names work, she said it like a boundary and not like a greeting. "You need an audience. We decline."

The figure made a sound that would have been a laugh if anyone had taught it about lungs. The radio in the empty boat down the channel hissed loud enough to make the gulls startle from their piles of net. Without moving its legs, the figure receded the way a tide recedes in time-lapse, each fraction of a second scrubbing a little more detail away.

"See you at dawn," Mai said to the part of it that remained.

"Before," Ace said. She was looking past the harbor mouth where the red blinking marker had found its courage again and stuttered back to life. Far beyond it, at the seam where sea met sky, a vertical line of dark was rising like a wall.

"Ah," Mai said. "The cathedral is arriving."

Ace slid the katanas home. The green light dimmed to a memory that sat against her ribs and hummed.

"We'll need to find the song," Ace said. "And the place where it hears itself."

Mai's smile this time was not crooked but frank. "We might also need raincoats."

Ace lifted a brow. "You planning to get wet?"

"I'm planning for you to promise me oysters," Mai said. She holstered the disruptor and turned up her collar against the wind's new teeth. "And then I'm planning to make you keep the promise."

They stood for a moment with the sea breathing toward them and the village at their backs holding its breath. Somewhere an old radio whispered that it had learned a new word and was practicing it. The vertical wall on the horizon paused, considering their attention like a cat deciding whether to accept affection.

"Let's go look at your charts," Mai said. "If an ocean is dreaming, there'll be a place where the dream is shallow."

"And if Aihai is listening," Ace said, "there'll be a place where the ear breaks the surface."

They walked back along the breakwater. Halfway to the lamplight Ace paused and turned. For an instant the night ahead and behind felt like two hands pressed to either side of a door.

She didn't bow. But she did say, softly and without reverence, "We hear you."

The sea did not answer in words. It answered in the language of pressure and depth, a push against the bones that hold the heart in place. Far out where the wall hung, a seam opened and closed.

The empty boat's radio clicked, sighed, and went silent.

Ace and Mai kept walking. The village swallowed them up like the surf takes back a footprint, and out beyond the harbor the thing that called itself by a borrowed name settled one degree closer to waking. —

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