

The Shadow & The Spark - Eldritch Fragment: Azathoth

The observatory sat where the town ran out of courage.

From the harbor, you could see it black against the pale, a domed skull at the end of a ridge nobody climbed for fun. The copper had gone green and then gone beyond green, the color of old bruises and drowned pennies. Wind came off the water carrying fish, rust, and the low industrial heartbeat that kept the piers from sleeping. At night, the dome turned with a sound too smooth for its age. People told themselves it was settling metal. People tell themselves many things when they don't want the truth.

Mai parked beneath a sign that said NO PARKING in a font that had lost interest halfway through the sentence. She didn't kill the engine right away. The idle rattled the dash in time with the harbor cranes.

"Listen," she said.

Ace did. Not to the car. Past it. Past the wind. Something under the town's noises ticked like a metronome a conductor had abandoned on the edge of a stage. It wasn't loud, only stubborn. Left alone long enough, stubborn always wins.

Mai rolled her shoulders. "The last astronomer's notes said he'd found the heart rate of the universe."

"Everyone hears a different drum when they're about to do something stupid," Ace said, and smiled like a knife being polite. Her eyes were shuttered half-closed, the way they went when she was listening to the wrong frequency on purpose. "He didn't. He found a rehearsal."

"To what?"

Ace looked up the ridge. "The wrong symphony."

They walked. The hill's face had slumped over the years into terraces that had once held gardens. Now they held junk. Rusted rotors. A sink. A bicycle with no wheels and a wheel with no bicycle. The town had been feeding the observatory its dead, whether it meant to or not.

Violet moved in Ace like a tide under a tide. Sometimes she was all elbowed hunger and lure; sometimes she was only a pressure in the bones that made you think of afternoons that never happened. Today she sat in the dark, very awake, listening as if the whole sky had spoken her name in a crowded room and she were deciding whether to turn around.

"Quiet," Ace said to her, aloud.

Mai didn't ask which version of quiet. She had a disruptor holstered at her spine like an extra length of spine, runes dull as old frost. She carried a canvas bag of acceptable sins: a coil of copper, three chokes, a cracked oscilloscope she'd re-soldered until it loved her, a notebook of signals she refused to call a grimoire.

At the observatory door, the padlock had failed from salt, not malice. The chain drooped like a tired sentence. Mai popped it with a wedge and a shrug.

Inside: dust that didn't settle, the sour of old cooling systems, a sweetness like fruit left in a drawer. The floor was a ringwalk of heavy boards worn by rotations. The dome above was not a room; it was a decision. The slit in it, where the sky came in, was a vertical mouth. Someone had dragged a mattress

under the bulk of the telescope, and someone had dragged it back out again and left it, and both events had been the wrong choice.

“Charming,” Mai said. “If you want to die of damp in a beautiful way.”

Ace’s hand skimmed the telescope’s cradle. It had a name once hammered into a brass plaque: HALCYON. Brass had been fashionable the day they bought this giant; so had hope.

“You hear it?” Mai asked.

Ace shook her head. “I hear us.”

She knelt, pressed her palm flat to the floor, and felt the dome’s rotation in her wrist. The whole building was an instrument. A huge one. Made by people who didn’t understand the song but loved the shape of it.

The stairwell to the machine room had a sign that said AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY, which had never stopped Ace. Mai led. The air got colder and warmer at once as if two weathers had been arguing in the dark for a long time. At the bottom, banks of panels waited with their mouths open. Dials like watch faces stared without blinking. When Mai threw the main breaker, the room did not light. It sighed.

“Okay,” she murmured to the machine in the tone of someone acclimating a stray. “Tell me what hurts.”

Ace stood with her back to the door, which failed to be a comfort and succeeded at being a habit. The metronome tick threaded the hum of transformers. It was calmer down here, which meant it wasn’t calm at all. The wrong quiet is always patient.

Mai traced cabling with her fingers, cataloging the grafts. “Someone re-tuned the drive motors.” She crouched at a junction box, squinted. “And someone built a feedback path that never belonged here. This is... no. This is a loop.” Her mouth went sideways. “If the dome and the scope move in a particular ratio, the building sings to itself.”

“Who taught it the tune?” Ace asked.

Mai pointed, and the answer was a wall.

Pencil-marks ran across it—not notes on staves, not equations, but neither not. Circles intersecting at unkind angles. Orbits with scars. The word **APEX** written and crossed out and written again. Beneath it: *If you turn the world just so, it plays you back.*

Mai lifted the notebook from her bag and flipped to a page where she had made a vow to herself not to be surprised by men anymore. “The astronomer. Or someone worse.”

Ace’s eyes were on the margins. “What’s that?”

Mai followed her gaze. In among the messy circles, the astronomer had written a repeating splice of letters in vertical stacks down the wall like tally marks: AZA THO THA ZAT HOZ A—almost childish, almost prayer, almost math.

Mai uncapped a pen. “I’m going to insult this building until it gets mad enough to confess.”

“Thirty seconds,” Ace said.

“For what?”

“Before it tries to finish the song.”

The dome began to move. Not fast. Not loud. Smooth as silk pulled through a ring. The slit in the sky pivoted to a space that was only a color in the afternoon you couldn't see if you didn't know how to stand.

Mai swore. “Breaker's still down.”

“Not power,” Ace said. “Momentum.”

When she said momentum, she meant something else: the weight of intention, the way an idea kept moving after the hands that set it spinning had rotted away.

Mai ran. She leaped the last three stairs like a child daring herself and landed on the ringwalk as the dome finished an angle that felt like a chord resolving. The telescope changed its mind about where it wanted to look. Gears kissed. Fiberglass sighed. The slit in the dome found a seam in the sky.

The town's noises shifted.

It wasn't silence that fell; it was alignment. The cranes at the harbor moved their heads at the same time. A gull checked itself in the air as if remembering a step it had missed. Somewhere a bottle rolled and stopped right when a door banged and stopped right when a man sneezed and stopped right when a dead clock decided to be right for one second.

Mai drew the disruptor. Its runes woke like eyes a second before the dream they were in turned ugly. “Ace...”

Ace did not glow. Not yet. She stood with one hand on the telescope's cradle and one hand not-quite on her blade, as if touching it would finalize a contract she needed another heartbeat to read. “It's not here,” she said. “It's a spill.”

“From what?”

“The only thing large enough to overflow everywhere,” Ace said. “Don't name it.”

“I won't,” Mai said, and did not.

The first man came in through the observatory door without noticing it or himself. He wore a dock shirt with his name stitched above the pocket in thread the color of old blood. He walked straight across the floor to the ladder up to the dome, taking each rung on the beat, a metronome in flesh. Behind him came a woman with a mop, a boy holding a radio, an old lady wearing her coat wrong-way out. They all moved well, like the best kind of choir does, where each breath belongs to every mouth.

“Mari—” Ace began.

“Yeah,” Mai said. She fired a short pulse into the metal rail to make it ring and threw the beat off by the smallest possible fraction. The rail chimed a not-quite note.

The boy with the radio flinched. His face made the shape people make when they wake in a room that is not theirs and remember the second before forgetting again. Then the dome murmured, corrected, and he relaxed with the obedience of sleep.

Mai didn't shoot again. She lowered the pistol until it stared at the floor. "They're not puppets. They're a chorus. The building is conducting."

"We break the baton," Ace said.

"If I scramble the loop, the whole dome will jam."

"Good. I hate it when god-hunting machines work as intended."

"Bad. If I push the wrong harmonic, we feed the loop our own bodies. We don't know which decrement frees them and which one finishes the next bar."

Ace looked up through the slit. There was no star there. There was a texture. A kind of fat nothing. If you leaned into it with your ear, you could hear teeth in the distance. A laugh so huge it used people as flour in its recipe.

Violet stood very close inside Ace now, her breath against the hinge of Ace's jaw, intimate and awful. Let it finish, Violet said. Let it play out. If you listen to the final note, you'll never have to ask again. You'll never wonder if you're a person or a suit a god put on to attend a party it didn't want to attend. You'll know. Doesn't that sound like a kindness?

"It sounds like a kind of death that's jealous of other kinds," Ace said.

Mai glanced at her. "You're arguing with your imaginary friend again."

"She's arguing with me."

"Win."

The dockworker climbed the ladder and put his hand on the rotation release without looking at what it was. He was going to do it perfectly. The way the building wanted. The way the building had taught him in a dream or a story or the shape his life had fallen into after the second shift was cut and his rent doubled.

Ace drew her blade. No flash; only a sense in the room that something had been subtracted from polite reality. She walked without hurry, touched the dockworker's wrist with the back flat of the blade, and he stopped because his body remembered gentler rules that still lived in old bones. She helped his hand down as if they were dancing and she was better at it. He blinked. His mouth said a name that wasn't his. His eyes said **thank you** because the body knows when something worse just missed it.

Mai shot the ceiling. Not the dome, not the slit. The wood. The sound was an absence that made the people below lose the beat for a breath. In that breath, Ace reached the main wheel, put both hands to it, and shoved. The dome's rotation slowed. Not stopped. Slowed. The slit in the sky hesitated like a lover at a door, an inch from the jamb.

The town made another noise.

It wasn't human. It was human-shaped. Every boat line went taut at once; every gull turned its head left; a thousand tiny things aligned like soldiers at the end of a parade, then forgot what came next and waited for someone to tell them the next step.

Mai grabbed a handwheel further down, muscled it. She wasn't built for brute force; she had built her

life to negotiate with power rather than outbench it. But sometimes machines respect you more when you remind them your bones aren't made of code. Metal groaned. The wheel reluctantly admitted the day had changed.

"Hold," she breathed.

"I am," Ace said, and did.

From the machine room, a motor whined as if waking uninvited. Mai's head snapped toward the stairwell. "It's auto-correcting. The feedback loop is driving without power."

"Cut the loop," Ace said through her teeth.

"If I cut it clean, it'll snap back. If I dirty cut it, we might fry the whole building and cave the dome." Mai's jaw set. "Dirty, then."

She shoved the disruptor into its holster and ran. The dockworker stared at her like a man hip-deep in surf watching lightning consider his piece of the ocean. The woman with the mop began to hum the tick. The boy with the radio turned the volume up, but no station came in; the static settled into a beat that made his face go slack with relief.

In the machine room, Mai tore open the junction box with the screwdriver she kept behind her ear because you had to keep certain truths where you could reach them. The loop was a crude addition but stubbornly well soldered. It ran from the motor feedback to a black tin the size of a paperback and out again to the dome encoder. The tin had a face someone had drawn, not well: a circle, dots for eyes, a wide mouth. The mouth had too many teeth.

"Who brought you here?" Mai whispered.

The tin did not answer. It purred in a frequency you felt through old fillings.

She threw a choke across it and tied copper like a tourniquet. She dragged the oscilloscope to the floor and clipped quick, dirty bites onto wires live and not. The scope woke with a sigh. The wave on its screen did not look like a wave. It looked like a city seen from orbit, streets lit in a grid that had never been for people.

The wave moved. Not updown. Inward.

Mai tried the first counterpulse she trusted. Nothing. She tried the second she didn't. The wave shivered, huffed, then slipped deeper into its own center like a child pulling a blanket over its head.

"Third time charmed," she told the machine, and made the third pulse like a lie you tell a liar: with love and with a plan.

The screen hiccuped. The wave lost a step.

The motor upstairs moaned. The dome shuddered. The slit in the sky dragged a fraction away from the seam. Something behind that seam took a breath as if it had been interrupted mid-laugh.

"Ace!" Mai shouted.

Ace didn't answer. Her hands were on the wheel and her mind, which could kill a room by becoming the loudest quiet in it, was on the seam in the sky.

Violet was singing to her now. Not in a voice. In a suggestion of one. A melody you recognized from a lullaby a mother who was never yours had never sung. Let it be big, Violet coaxed. Let it be bigger than you. Let the scale finally be honest for once. Stop pretending knives matter. Stop pretending you matter. Worship is a kind of rest. Haven't you wanted a day off?

Ace's laugh was small and mean. "No."

She pushed. The wheel tried to be everything else. It tried to be a river, a throat, a game of chance. She was good at all three. The wheel moved because she told it to. The slit in the sky stuttered.

All at once, the town broke time.

A hundred clocks a century off fell into agreement and then disintegrated into themselves. A stack of pallets on the wharf collapsed inwards in a way gravity hadn't signed off on. Every dog in the neighborhood howled and then remembered they did not sing. The boy with the radio dropped it; it hit, popped, and the noise that came out of it was so happy it made Ace's eyes water.

Mai threw the fourth pulse. It was ugly. The wave on the screen snarled and split, then tried to learn itself again the way broken things do. The motor's pitch went wrong enough to be right. The tin's teeth rattled. Something far away and too close laughed and then—annoyed—listened for the source of its annoyance.

"Don't," Mai whispered to the air. "Don't notice us."

From the stairwell above, bootfalls came, careful, urgent. Not beating to the tick. Out of time, thank anything listening. Ace's voice carried down the shaft like a blade being drawn another inch.

"Now, Mai."

Mai cut the loop.

Not clean. Not kind. She made a wound in it and stuffed the wound full of bad choices and copper. The scope went white as if heaven had sat on it. The motor wailed and then spoke fluently in smoke. The lights the observatory didn't think it had flickered in fury, and then the dome stopped.

Upstairs, the slit in the sky slipped.

It moved off the seam onto a piece of afternoon that was ordinary, rude, mortal. A plane droned somewhere over the bay and flew like it wasn't being watched by anything that had ever eaten a star.

The dockworker sat down all at once as if someone had reminded him that chairs existed. The woman dropped the mop and stared at her wet hands with honest confusion. The old lady unbuttoned her wrong-way coat and began buttoning it the right way, weeping silently and without drama.

The observatory breathed.

Ace bent over the wheel and let her forehead rest on the cold iron for a count of five. Violet did not withdraw. She retreated the way wild animals do when they decide not to take the food you've left in your yard tonight. A choice, not a defeat.

Mai clattered back up into the dome, hair stuck to her neck in silver ropes, disruptor out even though there was nothing left to shoot but the idea of what had almost happened.

"Talk to me," she said.

Ace straightened. Her face had gone very calm; on her, calm looked like blasphemy that had found a church to say itself in.

"It wasn't looking," Ace said. "We were the ones looking."

Mai's mouth twisted. "If it had looked back—"

"We'd be instruments," Ace said. "Not players."

The dockworker scrubbed his face with his palms and left clean streaks on skin salted by old labor. He stared at Ace and Mai, at the blade and the pistol and the smell of gentle smoke. "What did we do?" he asked, as if he'd never heard English before and wanted to try it.

"You almost finished a song that never ends," Ace said. "It would have made you its cadence and then lost interest."

He tried to nod like a man nods at a mechanic who explains why the belt squealed. "Do we... should we...?" He gestured helplessly at the dome, at God, at his own chest.

Mai took a breath that made her ribs think of cages and opened her hands like emptying them. "Go home," she said. "Sleep in a room with the radio on. Not loud. Barely audible. Human noise keeps certain other noises shy."

The woman with the mop let out a laugh that hurt. "Human noise," she said, as if she'd forgotten where to find any.

They left. Not all at once. In pairs. Looking at their shoes. Trying to walk like people who had always used their legs that way.

Mai and Ace stayed.

They didn't have to. They did anyway. Mai ripped the black tin out of its wiring with a set of pliers she did not apologize to. The tin fought her with static that broke into laughter and then died like a joke too long told. She carried it outside and buried it under the biggest rock she could roll, then stacked two smaller ones on top like punctuation a god might trip over if it came through in the night.

Ace sat on the observatory steps with her blades across her knees and watched the water taste itself. She said nothing for long enough that Mai came to sit beside her and imitate her silence.

Eventually: "She wanted to hear it."

Mai knew who *she* was. She put her shoulder against Ace's gently. "You didn't let her."

"She's not used to being told no by things smaller than a sun."

"She'll learn," Mai said. "We teach fast."

Ace's hand found the seam of Mai's palm and traced the scar there from a job that had gone sideways and come out upright in spite of itself. The touch was small. It did not need witnesses.

"Will it notice?" Mai asked finally, without looking at the slit that was now only a piece of sky shaped like nothing special.

"Maybe," Ace said. "Maybe not. It can't be insulted. That helps. Only the little gods get petty."

Mai let out a breath that had been doing bad math in her chest. "Let's keep our heads down for a few nights anyway."

"Neon's loud," Ace said, which sounded like a non sequitur until you remembered who they were and where they were going.

"Louder than this?" Mai asked.

Ace tilted her chin toward the harbor, where a forklift backfired on a count it hadn't agreed to and a man cursed with feeling. "Different loud," she said.

They walked back down the ridge. The town, uncoiling, remembered how to misalign. A bus missed its light by a whisper and the driver shrugged instead of making a new religion out of the failure. The cranes creaked out of sync. A gull cried late to its own thought. The world returned to its preferred incompetence.

At the car, Mai paused with her hand on the door. "We didn't fix it," she said, meaning everything.

"No," Ace said. "We remembered how to be small."

Mai smiled without teeth. "It's funny how hard that is."

"It's a craft," Ace said.

They drove. The observatory dwindled into a punctuation mark at the end of the ridge, then into nothing, then into a noise only the harbor could hear. As they took the coastal road, the sun considered whether to bother and decided to file a partial report. Light bled out of the east with the look of someone telling you a story and then remembering the part they had left out, and then deciding it didn't matter as much as they thought.

Halfway to the highway, a radio in some farmhouse on a hill caught a station it should not have been able to catch, out of Idaho or a war or a different century. A woman sang in a language no one there knew, and no one changed the dial, because it made the kitchen forks feel heavier in a nice way. In the motel two towns over, a sleepless man realized he had, finally, forgotten the name that had been tapping on the inside of his skull for weeks. He cried without understanding why and slept like a boat whose moorings had been tied by hands that loved it.

Ace rolled her window down. Wind wrote its name on her teeth. She closed her eyes, not to listen to what waited behind the sky, but to hear the engine, the road joints, Mai's breath, the way her own heart refused to find any other beat but the one it made itself.

Violet sat in the dark and, for once, did not press her face to the door. Her silence was not sulking. It was thought.

"You're quiet," Mai said.

Ace nodded. "I like this song."

"What's it called?"

"Alive."

Mai grinned at the road and the road grinned back in the way only things built by tired hands can. "Play it again."

They did.

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