

## Chapter One - Call Across the Water

The sea should not have been glowing.

That was Mai's first thought as the helicopter banked low over the coastline and the town came into view: a smudge of concrete and rusted cranes pressed between dark hills and the restless expanse of water.

Her second thought was that the pilot was lying.

"There's no power plant discharge out here," he'd told them on the way in, shouting over the engine noise. "Locals say the water's just... doing that."

Mai pressed her hand to the small, smeared window and watched the surf.

Far below, the waves rolled in heavy, late-autumn swells. Each time a breaker slowed and curled, something flashed under its skin—thin veins of blue-white light that clung to the water's surface like static before folding into foam and vanishing.

Not bioluminescence. Not reflections from the town's scattered lamps. Something else.

The pilot was still talking. She tuned him out.

"Mai," Ace said into her ear over the headset, "you're doing the frowny squint again."

Mai sat back, pulling the strap of her harness a notch tighter. "The sea is emitting a non-ionizing glow in a pattern that repeats every eighteen seconds. 'Frowny squint' is the appropriate response."

Across from her, Ace grinned and bumped her boot lightly against Mai's.

"Look on the bright side," Ace said. "At least it's not screaming. Yet."

"Your standards are broken," Mai said, but the corner of her mouth twitched.

Ace was already half out of her harness, impatience coiled in every line of her compact frame. The interior lights painted violet glints in her eyes. Her twin katanas were crossed on her back, hilts angled for quick draw even in the cramped space.

She hadn't bothered with a Foundation-branded jacket. Just a dark, weatherproof combat hoodie, fingerless gloves, and an expression that said she would cheerfully stab anything that tried to make this assignment boring.

Mai trusted her more than she trusted the helicopter, the town, or the file they'd been given.

That wasn't saying much. The file had been thin. COASTAL ANOMALOUS HYDROLOGICAL EVENT - R-NO/73-1 INITIAL CLASS: EUCLID (PROVISIONAL) PHENOMENOLOGY: PERSISTENT NON-THERMAL LUMINESCENCE OBSERVED IN NEAR-SHORE SURFACE WATERS. MINOR ELECTRICAL DISRUPTIONS (GRID FLICKER, EQUIPMENT MALFUNCTION). LOCALIZED GRAVITATIONAL IRREGULARITIES (TIDAL VARIANCE OUTSIDE EXPECTED RANGE). NOTE: MULTIPLE INTERNAL SENSORS FLAG PATTERN AS "NON-RANDOM / NON-CHAOTIC". ANALYSIS INCONCLUSIVE. DEPLOY TEAM: ACE / MAI.

No Site number. No links to known SCPs. No request for further containment structures. Just a short note at the bottom in a different font: "THIS FEELS WRONG. SEND THEM." - O5-█

Mai still wasn't sure if she liked that.

The helicopter began to drop, the town swelling to meet them. Rows of weather-beaten apartment blocks, a rusting shipyard, piers jutting into the dark water like broken fingers. A scattering of orange streetlamps that flickered in an irregular, tired rhythm.

And beyond it all, the open sea. Glowing. Breathing. Almost watching.

"Welcome to Nowhere-on-Sea," Ace said. "Population: wet and cranky."

Mai glanced at her. "You've never been here."

"I've been everywhere that smells like bad diesel and old fish," Ace said. "They're all the same."

The helicopter touched down on a cracked asphalt pad beside a squat concrete building with too many antennas on the roof. The SCP coastal safehouse looked like a power substation that had given up on itself halfway through construction.

The rotors spun down. The world narrowed to engine rumble, the hiss of wind, and the low, constant rush of the surf.

The sea glowed again. Eighteen seconds. Nineteen. Twenty. Another wave broke, and the light ran like a heartbeat along its curve.

Mai unbuckled and stood, shoulders protesting after the cramped ride.

"Ace," she said without looking back, "if the ocean starts talking, you are not allowed to flirt with it."

Ace laughed, close behind her. "No promises."

The safehouse smelled like dust, bleach, and long-expired coffee.

A single junior researcher met them in the entryway, eyes ringed with fatigue, badge skewed on his lab coat. He was the kind of pale that said "indoors" more than "north."

"Dr. Tokala," he said, offering a hand. "You must be—"

"Ace," Ace said, walking right past his hand and into the corridor. She pointed at herself with her thumb. "Monster problems. Sword solutions."

Mai shook the man's unaccepted hand anyway, because someone had to. "Mai," she said. "Show me your data."

They ended up in a cramped operations room with a view of the harbor through a slit of reinforced glass. A bank of monitors hummed along one wall, displaying camera feeds from the piers, the breakwater, and a few underwater nodes Mai didn't trust.

On a central table, three laptops were arranged around a scatter of printed graphs, coffee rings blurring the ink.

The researcher—Tokala—fumbled with a chair. "We've only had forty-eight hours, but the pattern is... it's not like anything in our hydrology archives. We thought at first it might be some kind of methane release, but—"

"But it repeats," Mai said, leaning over the nearest screen. The data showed a series of spikes: luminescence intensity on the Y-axis, time on the X. Each pulse was neatly spaced, like a metronome.

She adjusted her glasses and frowned.

"It's too clean," she murmured. "No noise, no drift."

Tokala nodded rapidly. "Exactly. And, uh, then there's the structural side-effects."

He pointed to a second graph. This one showed micro-variations in local gravity—a delicate series of ripples superimposed on tidal models.

Ace had drifted to the window. She leaned one shoulder against the frame, looking out.

"You've had grid issues?" Mai asked.

Tokala nodded. "Brownouts. Transformer failures. Nothing catastrophic yet. But—"

"Any personnel anomalies?" Mai said. "Headaches, nosebleeds, auditory hallucinations?"

Tokala hesitated for a fraction of a second too long.

Mai straightened slowly.

"A few," he admitted. "Mostly staff who spend long hours near the shoreline sensors. Nausea. Vertigo. A... feeling of being watched." He swallowed. "And one technician reported hearing 'something' in the water."

Mai glanced at Ace.

Ace was still at the window, jaw working as she chewed on a piece of gum she hadn't had when they boarded the helicopter. Her violet eyes tracked the surf like a hunting cat following a dot of light on the wall.

"Ace," Mai said. "What do you hear?"

"Right now?" Ace said. "You being suspicious." She blew a bubble, popped it, and then wiped the gum off her tongue with the back of her hand, making a face. "Gross. Salt."

Tokala stared. "Did you just—how did you even—"

"Don't worry about it," Ace said. "Continue the lecture, doc. I'll write you a review later."

Mai ignored them both and stepped closer to the window.

The harbor spread out under low clouds, cranes like skeletal fingers reaching over the water. Fishing boats lay moored in crooked rows, hulls knocking gently against the piers.

Farther out, beyond the breakwater, the open sea inhaled and exhaled in long, heavy waves.

They glowed again.

The light wasn't uniform. It ran along the wave faces in lines, connecting, diverging, forming rough arcs and then dissolving. Almost like—

Almost like writing.

Mai narrowed her eyes.

"It's too regular," she said.

Tokala looked from her to his graphs. "The luminescence?"

Mai shook her head. "The delay. Eighteen seconds every time. That's not simply a natural response. That's pacing."

Ace finally peeled herself away from the glass and came to stand beside her. "You think it's talking?"

"I think," Mai said slowly, "that something out there is keeping time."

Ace tilted her head, watching the water.

The next wave rolled in. Light flared along its skin, forming an almost-ring before breaking apart.

Ace shivered, just barely. Mai felt the movement through Ace's shoulder against hers.

"Do you recognize it?" Mai asked quietly.

Ace's mouth tightened. "No."

The lie was too smooth. Mai didn't call her on it. Not yet.

Tokala cleared his throat. "We've mapped the strongest emission points." He tapped a key. The monitors switched to a top-down digital render of the harbor. Red dots winked along the breakwater and just outside it.

"The core anomaly seems to be here," he said, zooming in on a cluster near the outer tip of the breakwater. "About twenty meters offshore, depth eight to ten. We've tried remote drones, but they lose signal within seconds. Something about the water out there scrambles telemetry."

Mai looked at Ace. "Shall we lose signal within seconds?"

Ace's grin came back, sharp and eager. "You had me at 'scrambles telemetry.'"

Tokala made a faint noise of distress. "I should note that the O5 instructions specified—"

Mai held up a hand. "We read them. 'Investigate. Do not escalate. Minimize footprint.' We'll walk the breakwater, sample the water, and avoid punching anything unless strictly necessary."

Ace's expression said she had different ideas about "strictly necessary," but she didn't argue.

Mai turned back to Tokala. "I want full access to all sensor logs. And any personal incident reports from staff who've been near the water more than four hours at a time."

Tokala nodded, already reaching for a login card. "Of course. They're, uh, not pretty reading."

"Anomalous reports rarely are," Mai said. "Thank you, Dr. Tokala. Try to get some sleep after we're gone."

He gave a short, humorless laugh. "If this thing lets us sleep, I'll be thrilled."

The wind on the breakwater cut straight through Ace's hoodie and into her bones.

She liked it.

There was honesty in this kind of cold—none of the damp, cloying chill of underground sites or the stagnant, recycled air of SCP transport planes. Just the sea, the sky, and the sorrowful wheeze of a gull that sounded like it regretted all its life choices.

Ace walked on the seaward edge, boots occasionally smacking loose pebbles into space. The breakwater stones fell away in irregular tiers, sharp corners crusted in salt and lichen.

On her left, concrete blocks and rusted railings. On her right, a long fall and the churning, luminous water.

Mai walked closer to the inner side, one hand lightly brushing the corroded railing posts as she counted under her breath.

"Two hundred and four meters," Mai said. "We're nearing the strongest cluster."

Ace eyed the horizon. "Feels like it."

"Define 'feels'," Mai said.

"The bit where my skin's humming and my teeth itch," Ace said cheerfully. "Very technical."

"Mm," Mai said. "I'll add it to the report."

She had her scanner out, thumb dancing over the controls. The small, ruggedized device whined at a pitch only slightly less annoying than Ace on a sugar high.

The wind kicked up spray. Droplets caught the weak daylight as they flew, each one briefly lit from within.

Ace watched one land on the back of her hand. It glowed faintly, then faded. No burn. No pain. Just... strange.

"Ocean's trying glitter now," she said.

"You'd like it more if it were green," Mai said without looking up.

"You say that like it's untrue," Ace said.

The scanner beeped, high and insistent.

Mai stopped dead. "Here."

Ace halted beside her and looked down.

At first glance, it was just more water. Rolling, heaving, that slow breathing motion that big seas had.

Then the next wave rose.

The light moved differently here.

Closer to the breakwater, the luminescence didn't just cling to the wave surface. It spiraled, drawing

tight curves within the body of the water, as if tracing lines in a three-dimensional shape.

A pattern.

Ace frowned.

The wind died for a heartbeat.

She heard it then.

Not with her ears. With the parts of her that SCPs had tried and failed to measure.

A low, deep hum. Not a voice, not really. More like a concept pressed against her awareness.

Familiar.

Ace's breath caught.

Mai felt her tense and glanced over, eyes narrowing.

"Ace," Mai said softly. "Talk to me."

Ace swallowed. Her tongue felt too dry for words.

"It's..." She hesitated. "It's not just pacing. It's... knocking."

Mai's brow furrowed. "Explain."

Ace nodded at the water. "You ever see someone tap on a window from the other side? Not random. Not a signal you understand. Just... making sure the barrier's still there."

The next wave rose. Light spiraled in its belly, turning, turning, then breaking.

Knocking.

Mai's fingers tightened around the scanner. "You think something is testing the surface tension between... what? Layers? Planes?"

"Could be," Ace said.

Could be, could be, could be.

Could be something else.

The wind returned, stronger this time. It drove the spray sideways, stinging their faces.

Mai wiped a hand across her cheek. "If it's knocking, do you know who it's knocking for?"

Ace looked out at the water.

She could have lied. She almost did.

Instead she said, "It feels like... it's hoping someone familiar answers. The way you call an old number just to see if it still rings."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "Familiar to you?"

Ace didn't answer directly. The silence was answer enough.

Mai exhaled slowly, clouding the cold air. "I see."

"You're going to keep poking it, aren't you," Ace said, voice lighter than she felt.

"Of course," Mai said. "That's literally my job description."

The scanner squealed again, display spiking. Mai frowned at it.

"This is odd," she said. "We've got a secondary resonance component in the signal. It's not pure hydrological distortion."

"Secondary what now?" Ace said.

Mai angled the device so Ace could see. A rolling graph showed a complex waveform with two distinct peaks overlaid.

"Primary spike is the water itself," Mai said. "Pressure fluctuations. Energy influx. The usual anomalous ocean nonsense."

"And the other one?" Ace asked.

Mai hesitated. "Cognitive echo, maybe. A pattern in phase with the primary—but not the same source."

Ace chewed that.

"So," she said, "something in the water, and something riding the wave?"

"In crude terms... yes," Mai said.

The next wave rose. The light inside it curved again, fuller this time, forming something close to a ring before collapsing.

Ace leaned forward, gloved hands on her knees. "You ever get the feeling someone's trying to spell your name from another universe and keeps forgetting what alphabet you use?"

Mai's mouth tilted. "More often than is healthy."

She stepped closer to the edge, squinting through the wind-whipped spray. "I want a sample from this zone. Direct surface contact."

Ace straightened. "We could get you a bucket from the safehouse like normal people."

Mai glanced at her. "Do you see a normal person here?"

Ace swept her arm around as if surveying an imaginary crowd. "Just me, my incredibly balanced girlfriend, and forty billion liters of glowing anxiety juice."

Mai snorted, despite herself. "Stand guard and don't let anything eat me."

She knelt, braced one knee against the rough concrete, and extended a slim sampling wand over the

edge. The device's reinforced tube dipped into the next swell, filling with water that glowed faint blue for a heartbeat before fading to normal.

The scanner beeped approvingly. "Sample acquired," Mai said. "If we can analyze—"

She stopped.

"Ace," she said.

"Yes," Ace said.

"Did you feel that?"

The air around them had changed. Not colder, not warmer. Thicker. As if the atmosphere had taken on weight.

The hair on Ace's arms rose.

She straightened slowly and turned her head, not toward the sea this time but back along the length of the breakwater.

There was someone sitting on the rocks at the very end.

Too far to see clearly. Just a silhouette against the pale sky.

Tall. Still. Facing the water.

"Dr. Tokala said this area was restricted, didn't he?" Mai said quietly.

"Yep," Ace said.

The wind gusted, and for a heartbeat the spray parted just right. The distant figure's outline sharpened.

A long, armored frame. One knee drawn up, an elbow resting on it. Hair moving oddly in the air, like it still remembered water.

And faintly, so faintly Ace almost thought she imagined it, a pair of eyes glowed in the distance. Not the cold stutter of the sea's luminescence.

A steady, gentle, emissive blue.

Ace's heart stumbled.

"Well, shit," she whispered.

Mai raised the scanner. "Is that—"

"That," Ace said, voice gone thin with a feeling she didn't want to name yet, "is not in your briefing packet."

The sea breathed, light coiling around the breakwater's stones like fingers.

The figure on the rocks did not move. Did not look at them.

Did not need to.

Ace already knew.

“Hey, Mai,” she said softly, eyes locked on the distant silhouette. “Remember when I said the ocean felt like it was knocking?”

“Yes,” Mai said, her voice very steady.

Ace swallowed.

“I think someone finally opened the door.”

The next wave rose, light spiraling, and the sound of the surf shifted—just enough that Ace could almost, almost hear a laugh she’d thought was lost with the river of a different coastline, twenty years and a lifetime behind her.

She smiled without meaning to.

“Hi, Shammy,” Ace whispered to the wind, too quiet for Mai to catch.

On the far rocks, the tall figure’s head tilted. Just slightly.

As if it had heard.

The wave crashed. The light went out.

And the breakwater suddenly felt much, much more crowded than it looked.

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Last update: **27/03/2026 16:04**

