

Chapter Four – Riptide Pattern Seven

The Safehouse had exactly one decent war room, and it was currently losing a staring contest with Mai.

She sat at the center table with three laptops open, four stacks of paper fanned around her like white fortifications, and a tangle of cables that looked like someone had tried to strangle a router and given up halfway through. A cluster of portable drives blinked in anxious solidarity.

The sea pounded faintly beyond the reinforced window. The glow was less visible in daylight, but it was there, a soft, wrong heartbeat at the edge of vision.

Ace had been told to “sit still and don’t touch anything” while Mai set up.

She lasted nine minutes.

At nine minutes and one second, she was upside down in a swivel chair, legs hooked over the backrest, head hanging off the seat, watching Shammy.

Shammy stood near the window, still as an installation. She wasn’t doing anything obvious—just watching the water—but that somehow made her the most interesting thing in the room.

“You blink less than Mai,” Ace observed.

Shammy glanced at her. “I do not need to blink.”

“Creepy,” Ace said cheerfully. “I like it.”

Mai didn’t look up from her screens. “Ace, if you break your neck doing that, I’m filing it as a non-anomalous death.”

“Rude,” Ace said.

She tilted her head (relative to gravity) and squinted at Mai’s nearest laptop. From her inverted angle the graphs looked like arcane runes, which they kind of were.

“So,” Ace said, “what’s got you glaring like that? Give me the short version. I’ll pretend to understand.”

Mai’s fingers danced over the keyboard. “I found the pattern.”

“You already found the pattern,” Ace said. “Eighteen-second heartbeat, ghost rave in the surf.”

“This is the pattern underneath that,” Mai said. “The one making the waves dance.”

She tapped a few keys and the wall monitor switched from a harbor map to a rolling sequence of lines—waveform graphs, layered over each other. Some were clean sinusoidal curves. Others were jagged. They slid and meshed in a scrolling display that made Tokala’s eye twitch.

He’d drifted back in with fresh coffee at some point and now hovered near the door like a man who was seriously considering a career change to something safer, like volcano diving.

“Behold,” Mai said dryly. “Riptide Pattern Seven.”

Ace unhooked her legs and dropped out of the chair, landing on her feet with inhuman grace. She padded over to the screen.

"Looks like cardiology homework," she said.

"Hydrology, not cardiology," Tokala muttered automatically, then flinched when Mai looked at him. "Sorry. Force of habit."

Mai pointed at the graph. "The Foundation's coastal sensors have flagged six major non-random hydrological pattern sets in the last seventy years. We catalogued them as Riptide Patterns One through Six."

Ace folded her arms. "Let me guess. That thing," she flicked a finger at the new graph, "is lucky number Seven."

"Correct," Mai said. "The others were localized. Specific bays, fjords, subsurface currents. Each pattern corresponded to an anomaly—some awakened entity, some artifact, some catastrophic landscape change."

"Fun," Ace said.

"Most of them were negative events," Mai added. "Riptide Two preceded the Sardas Deep Collapse. Riptide Four appeared right before Site-█████'s lost submersible incident."

Shammy's emissive gaze followed the lines across the screen.

"And now Seven," she said.

Mai nodded. "First detected faintly three weeks ago in background noise. Became pronounced forty-eight hours ago. Stable eighteen-second cycle. Underlying phase structure suggests... intent."

Tokala shifted. "When you say 'intent'..."

"I mean the pattern is reacting to us," Mai said. "Not in response to any single ping or probe, but in aggregate. Every time we sample, every time we sweep radar or sonar, the waveform slightly adjusts. It's learning the shape of our interference and adapting."

Ace narrowed her eyes. "Like a muscle remembering impact."

"Or a system trying to dampen noise," Mai said. "Which would align with Shammy's claim that the Wellspring is trying not to drown us."

Shammy inclined her head slightly. "The Wellspring does not enjoy chaos at the surface. It prefers deep uncertainty. Quieter. Slower."

"Unfortunately," Mai went on, "there's another component."

She hit a key. A translucent overlay appeared on the waveform, offset but in phase—a secondary line, spikier, less regular.

Tokala squinted at it. "The cognitive echo you mentioned?"

"Yes," Mai said. "If the primary signal is the Wellspring trying to keep the mess down, this..." She tapped the secondary line. "...is something else trying to claw its way up."

Ace traced the shape with her eyes. It looked... angry. Not in any specific way, just in the jittery intensity of it.

"It's pulling on the same tide," she said.

"Yes," Shammy said quietly. "It knows how the Wellspring moves, but it is not of it. Like mold learning the pattern of a lung."

Tokala paled another shade.

Mai exhaled. "Analogies aside, here's the situation: Riptide Seven is a composite pattern. Wellspring suppression plus hostile emergence. The longer it runs, the more energy builds in the anchor cavity. Eventually, one of two things happens."

She held up a finger. "One: the Wellspring overcompensates, slams the anchor shut, and we get a massive physical event. Tsunami, seabed collapse, localized space-time fracture. Take your pick."

She held up a second finger. "Two: the suppressor fails. The anchor cracks. All that rejected pressure and conceptual sewage rushes out at once, looking for new low-pressure zones to fill."

"Like us," Ace said.

"And anything with a mind within several hundred kilometers," Mai said. "Especially those with existing anomalous resonance."

Ace grimaced. "So we're a very attractive drain."

"Yes," Mai said.

Tokala swallowed hard. "You said Six previous patterns. Did any of them... end well?"

Mai considered. "One ended neutrally. Two ended with a new SCP in a shipping container under Greenland. Four ended with a crater. I don't recommend Four."

Ace stretched her arms over her head, shoulder joints cracking. "Okay. I hate this pattern. Let's break it."

"That is the plan," Mai said. "But we can't just go flailing at the anchor. If we disturb it the wrong way, we might trigger the Wellspring's emergency clampdown or give the emergent entity a better grip."

She pointed at Shammy. "That's where she comes in."

Shammy stepped closer to the table. The graph's lines seemed to smooth ever so slightly as she approached, like they were aware of her attention.

"I can feel where the pressure gathers most," she said. "Not in numbers. In... strain. The stone remembers being moved."

Mai nodded. "I want to map your impressions onto these readings. If your 'strain lines' match the high-energy nodes, we can predict where we need to intervene."

Tokala blinked. "How do you... map feelings onto data?"

"Carefully," Mai said. "And with more coffee."

Ace had wandered back to the swivel chair and stolen it properly this time, sitting the right way up. She spun slowly, watching.

"So, what's the play?" she said. "You do the brain thing, Shammy does the water thing, I... don't set anything on fire because it's all wet?"

"You ground the shadow," Shammy said.

Ace blinked. "That's the opposite of what people usually say."

"The wound will reach through anything that feels like it doesn't belong," Shammy explained. "Loose stones. Forgotten debts. Old anger. Ace attracts those forces. She also... tells them no."

Mai gave Ace a look. "When she remembers to."

Ace threw up her hands. "I can't believe I'm getting tag-teamed by logic and the ocean."

Tokala found his voice again. "Do you... need my help with anything? Or should I just... stay out of the way and panic quietly?"

Mai softened, just a little. "You've done good work. I need you to keep the local systems from freaking out while we're under. Regulate the sensor pings. No sudden full-spectrum blasts. Think 'whisper', not 'shout'."

Tokala nodded, visibly relieved to have concrete instructions. "I can do whisper."

Ace smirked. "Look at you, part of the heroic team."

He gave her a haunted look. "I work in coastal anomaly pre-monitoring. I did not sign up for wrestling primordial wounds."

"You'll have a great story if we live," Ace said.

"If we don't?" he asked.

"Then you won't have to file any more reports," Ace said.

Mai pinched the bridge of her nose at last. "Ace. Do not terrorize the staff."

"Gallows humor is an important coping mechanism," Ace said.

"I prefer highly structured planning," Mai said. "We can both be wrong."

Shammy watched them with that small, patient half-smile that looked like sunrise on water.

"The storm will not wait for you to finish arguing," she said gently.

Mai sighed. "You're right."

She rearranged the clutter on the table into something that looked suspiciously like a battle plan.

"Here's what we do," she said.

The room listened.

"Step one," Mai went on. "Shammy gives us a three-dimensional sense of the wound—depth, direction, intensity. I translate that into coordinates and potential access routes."

She tapped the old sonar map. "The Foundation has logs of disused maintenance tunnels, historical dredge plans, half-abandoned sewer lines. If we're lucky, there's a route that gets us closer to the anchor without swimming blind through open water."

Ace perked up. "Dungeon crawl."

"This is not a game," Mai said automatically.

Ace grinned. "Everything's a game if you're bad enough at dying."

"Step two," Mai continued, ignoring her. "We test the water from progressively closer points. Not just for luminescence, but for cognitive interference. I want to know what this thing does to the human mind before we're breathing its neighborhood."

Tokala nodded, scribbling notes as if they might protect him.

"Step three," Mai said, "we find the point of entry. Could be a collapsed drainage shaft. Could be an old service tunnel. Could be a crack in the breakwater foundation. Whatever it is, we stabilize it physically and metaphysically as much as we can before going down."

"And step four?" Ace asked.

Mai met her eyes. "We improvise around the anchor based on what we find."

Ace smirked. "Now you're speaking my language."

Shammy's emissive eyes tightened in a way Mai was starting to recognize as concern. "Improvisation at that depth is... risky."

"So is everything else on the table," Mai said. "But I'd rather improvise with data than with ignorance."

Ace hopped off the chair and stretched, energy crackling around her like static.

"Field mission, then," she said. "We walk the shoreline, poke the water, listen to the whispers, try not to get our brains eaten. Classic Tuesday."

Mai checked the time. "It's Friday."

"Time is fake," Ace said. "Danger is real."

"Please stop," Tokala whispered.

Shammy stepped away from the window, toward them. With every pace, Mai felt a slight change in the room—humidity, air pressure, an indefinable sense of density.

"When do we go?" Shammy asked.

Mai looked at the harbor on the screen. The Riptide Pattern Seven waveform pulsed on the monitor, steady in its wrongness.

"Incoming tide turns fully in..." She glanced at a smaller display. "...twenty-three minutes. I want to be on the outer shoreline before that. See how the pattern behaves at the edge of its influence."

Ace rolled her shoulders. "So: right now."

"Yes," Mai said.

Tokala stood, swaying a little. "I'll keep the systems humming. And... pray quietly to a religion I don't have."

Mai squeezed his shoulder once. "You're doing fine."

Ace tossed him a lazy salute. "If anything weird shows up on the sensors, call Mai first. If she doesn't pick up, call me. If I don't pick up, run."

Tokala made a noise that might have been a laugh if it hadn't sounded so close to a sob.

They stepped back out into the corridor: Ace first, all coiled motion and restless energy; Mai behind her, a moving vector of focus; Shammy last, a silent tide in armor.

As they walked, the safehouse plumbing gave a faint shudder. A radiator somewhere rattled. The emergency exit sign flickered once, then steadied.

"You're doing that, aren't you," Mai said to Shammy without looking back.

"Doing what?" Shammy asked.

"Everything," Mai said.

Shammy considered this. "I am... smoothing. Water does not like sharp corners in fear."

Ace snorted. "You're emotionally regulating the building."

Shammy tilted her head. "Yes."

Mai tucked that away with everything else on her swelling mental list of "things to panic about later."

They reached the outer door. Cold air shoved its way in as Ace cracked it open.

The sea's glow was stronger now, visible even from here as a faint, wrong brightness under the gray sky. The waves rolled, breathing, counting.

Eighteen seconds.

Eighteen seconds.

Eighteen seconds.

Mai paused on the threshold.

"Pattern Seven," she murmured, half to herself. "Let's see what else you have to say."

Ace glanced over her shoulder, a grin flashing, dangerous and excited.

"Careful," she said. "It might just say 'hi' back."

Beyond them, the ocean waited.

Watching. Remembering. Measuring three currents walking toward it together for the first time.

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