

Chapter Five – Echo Rising

The shoreline north of the harbor was the kind of place postcards forgot.

Broken concrete chunks lay half-buried in black sand, rusted rebar jutting out like ribs. An old sewer outfall pipe, long capped and officially “decommissioned,” poked from the eroded bank like a cannon pointed at the sea. Scraps of seaweed clung to it, fluttering like defeated flags.

The wind came harder here, unshielded by the harbor structures. It smelled of salt, iron, and something else. Wet stone that had not seen air in a very long time.

Mai knelt near the waterline, bracing herself against a half-submerged slab. The waves reached and retreated, thin fingers of foam tracing her boots. The luminescence here was fainter than at the breakwater, but it was still there, a subtle glow under the water’s skin.

Ace stood just behind her, one hand resting casually on the hilt of a sword, eyes scanning the horizon and the crumbling shore with equal suspicion.

Shammy was a few meters down the beach, where the slope dropped more sharply. She stood ankle-deep in the surf, letting the waves break against her shins. The glowing water climbed her armor and slid off, reluctant to leave.

Mai dipped the sampling wand again, filling another vial. Her scanner sat open on the slab beside her, its display scrolling data in fast, cramped lines.

“Surface readings?” Ace asked.

Mai capped the vial. “Non-lethal, cognitively speaking. At this distance, at least. EM noise is high, but still within tolerable range.”

Ace tilted her head. “How tolerable?”

“Headache, nausea, mild paranoia,” Mai said. “You, in other words, on a normal day.”

Ace snorted. “Rude. Accurate, but rude.”

A larger wave rolled in, slapping against the slab. Luminescent threads flickered along its crest, then snapped downward, forming a momentary spiral around Shammy’s legs.

Shammy closed her eyes.

The air shifted. The wave hit her with more force than it should have, but she didn’t sway. The water climbed up to her knees, hugged the plates of her armor, then fell back, leaving faint glowing trails that dissolved on the sand.

Mai watched her. “Anything?”

Shammy opened her eyes. The emissive glow inside them had deepened.

“The wound is louder here,” she said. “It is not yet a mouth, but it has teeth. Small ones.”

Ace grimaced. “Baby horrors. Great.”

Shammy looked back at the water. “The Wellspring is... irritated,” she added. “The anchor below is

holding more weight than it should. It complains in every ripple.”

Mai tapped a few commands into the scanner. “I’m picking up micro-fluctuations in local gravity consistent with sub-surface void stress. The rock under us is flexing.”

“Do we need to move?” Ace asked.

“Not immediately,” Mai said. “If something gives here, we’re more likely to slide than fall. I’m more worried about the water’s behavior.”

She glanced at Shammy. “You said the wound is gathering rejected pressure. Does that include... us?”

Shammy tilted her head, considering the shore.

“The wound tastes everything at its edge,” she said. “You stand on old stone. You breathe patterns it does not understand. It will try to understand you.”

“By doing what?” Ace asked.

Before Shammy could answer, the next wave spoke.

It wasn’t sound—not at first. It was a sensation, like the memory of being shoved underwater as a child, or the lurch of missing a step in the dark. A brief, nauseating misalignment between what the body expected and what the world gave it.

The luminescent threads in the surf thickened, clustering in front of the three of them.

Mai’s scanner shrieked a warning.

“Ace,” she said sharply.

“I know,” Ace said.

The water in front of them bulged upward, higher than the wave that birthed it. It hung for a second, wobbling, then tore free of the rest of the sea like someone had yanked a piece of liquid up by invisible strings.

It didn’t look like a creature. It looked like water that had forgotten how to fall.

The hovering mass trembled, then twisted, elongating into a vaguely columnar shape. Luminescence threaded through it in spirals, sketching bones that weren’t bones and joints that didn’t belong in anything that had ever walked on land.

Mai stepped back onto the slab, bringing the scanner up like a shield. “Echo fragment,” she said. Her voice stayed steady. Her grip didn’t.

Ace moved forward, putting herself between Mai and the emerging column, katanas clearing their scabbards with a twin hiss. The green light running along the blades clashed with the echo’s cold blue, casting weird shadows on the wet sand.

Shammy didn’t move immediately. She watched.

The column shivered. Parts of it sloughed off and rejoined, as if it were constantly trying to decide

what shape it wanted to hold. At one moment it suggested a ribcage, the next a cluster of hands, the next something like a stretched, eyeless face pressed against glass.

It leaned toward Ace, drawn by something in her.

Mai's voice cut sharp through the air. "Cognitive interference rising. Don't let it touch skin."

Ace rolled her shoulders. "Wasn't planning on hugging it."

The echo pulsed once, and Ace felt... not a voice, not exactly, but an impression pressed against her mind. A flood of half-formed hungers. Not for flesh. For roles.

Victim. Drowner. Witness. Debris.

She gritted her teeth. "No vacancy."

Violet stirred behind her eyes, curious.

The echo twisted again, as if Ace's refusal had made it glitch. Luminescent paths flickered, re-routing.

It noticed Shammy.

The column leaned, stretching toward the elementally anchored figure. The glow within it flared.

Shammy's emissive eyes brightened in answer.

"Stay back," Mai snapped.

Shammy didn't.

She took one deliberate step forward, placing herself on a line between the echo and the open sea. The surf hissed around her boots.

The echo vibrated faster now, like a tuning fork held too long. Pressure built in the air, making the small hairs on Mai's arms stand up.

Ace recognized the prelude to something ugly.

"Shammy," she warned.

"It is not yet dangerous," Shammy said calmly. "It is... asking questions."

"That's never ended well in our line of work," Ace said.

Mai's scanner spat a burst of corrupted characters and froze. She slapped it against her thigh.

"Cognitive field spike," she said. "It's building a feedback loop off our presence. Especially yours, Shammy."

"Yes," Shammy said. "It is trying to put a shape to me."

Her armor hummed, faint but increasing. The channels along the plates filled with a dull glow, as if lit from within by a rising tide.

Mai took a half-step closer to Ace. The pressure in the air made her ears pop. Images flickered at the

edges of her vision—shorelines that weren't this one, cities half-submerged, bridges broken by floods.

Not memories. Proposals.

"No," she said under her breath. "You don't get to write my past."

The echo juddered, as if it had heard that and was offended.

"You see it?" Ace asked.

"Yes," Mai said. "It's trying to overwrite contextual anchors. Offer alternate histories."

"Can you say that in 'oh shit'?" Ace asked.

"If it succeeds, people who stand here long enough may start believing they always belonged to the water," Mai said. "And act accordingly."

"That's a 'no' from me," Ace said.

Another wave crashed behind the hovering mass, feeding it. The column swelled, growing more solid, more defined. The luminescent spiral within it tightened, like a noose.

Shammy lifted her hand.

The sea reacted.

Not dramatically. There was no roaring wall of water, no cinematic surge. The waves simply... missed.

The next breaker, which should have slammed into the echo and fattened it, slid sideways instead, hitting the shore a few meters to the left as if the wind had misjudged.

The one after that bent right, washing around Shammy in a broad, harmless sheet.

The echo shivered, starving.

"It feeds on thrown-away pressure," Shammy said quietly. "I can divert some. Not all."

The echo turned its not-face toward her. The feeling it pressed into the air now was sharper. Less confused.

Rejected. Resentful.

It moved.

The column lunged with unnerving speed, a liquid spear driving toward Shammy's chest.

Ace didn't think. She moved.

Shadow snapped around her feet, pushing her off the slab and across the sand faster than human muscles could manage alone. She swung one katana in a low, upward arc, the blade intercepting the column.

The sword sliced through the echo's lower half, its green edge leaving a brief, jagged vacancy in the water.

The echo shrieked—not in sound, but in the way the world tried to recoil from itself. The air vibrated, the sand under Ace’s boots bucked, and Mai’s teeth ached.

Half its mass splashed to the beach and instantly tried to rejoin the rest of its body, scrabbling like water running uphill.

Ace planted her other sword into the wet sand, channeling.

Shadow rolled out from the point of impact, like an oil slick spreading. Where it touched the spilled fragment, the water stuttered.

The luminescent threads inside the fragment flickered, lost coherence, and went out.

The water collapsed, harmless, and soaked into the ground.

“Ha,” Ace said between gritted teeth. “Bad puddle. Stay.”

The remaining half of the echo recoiled, its spiral core flashing erratically. It had learned something about Ace now.

It did not like it.

Mai found her balance again and slid down from the slab, staying behind Ace and to the side, where she could see both the entity and Shammy.

“Shadow interference is effective,” she said, mentally filing the observation even as her heart pounded. “You disrupted its internal pattern. It can’t reassemble parts cut off inside your field.”

Ace grinned fiercely. “Good to know.”

The echo twisted once more, faster. The column exploded outward, becoming a flat wave of water that stretched toward all three of them at once, a luminous sheet trying to wrap around their legs and drag them down.

Mai flinched back instinctively.

Shammy stepped forward.

Her armor flared.

For a second it looked like she’d simply braced for impact. Then Mai realized what she was seeing.

The water hit an invisible contour around Shammy and split.

It flowed around her, over her, but never directly touched her surface. An infinitesimal skin of non-water clung to her armor, deflecting every drop without splashing.

The luminous sheet broke against that barrier, splitting into smaller streams. Half of it rushed past Shammy toward Ace and Mai.

Ace met it with a wide, sweeping cut, her sword leaving a curtain of shadow in the air. The wave hit the curtain and lost shape, falling as disorganized spray.

A few glowing droplets made it past. One struck Ace’s cheek. Another dotted Mai’s wrist.

Ace hissed. "Hot."

It wasn't temperature. It was contact. For a heartbeat, she felt something trying to slide into her skin, map her nerves, learn the direction of her heart.

Violet surged in response, snapping around the intrusion like a trap.

Mine.

The sensation shattered.

Mai felt a tug at the edges of her thoughts, a question trying to run through her like a test pattern.

Who are you when you sink?

She slammed mental doors she didn't know she had, walls built from old training and stubborn refusal.

"No," she said aloud.

The droplet on her wrist evaporated, leaving a faint luminescent smear that faded quickly.

The echo writhed in place, diminished but still present. The floating mass had shrunk to half its original size, and its inner spiral looked fractured, misaligned.

"It's weaker," Mai said. "But adaptively hostile. It's trying new approaches."

Shammy's emissive eyes narrowed. "It is a child of thrown-away things. It will keep reaching until someone tells it to stop."

"Well," Ace said, stepping forward again, shadow gathering. "Let's be good parents."

Shammy's mouth twitched. "You are not good at parenting."

"Excuse you, I've killed like three conceptual entities this year," Ace said.

"Exactly," Shammy said.

Mai almost choked on a laugh.

The echo made its last play.

It surged upward, elongating into a tall, thin shape—a caricature of a person made entirely of luminous, turbulent water. No features, just absence where eyes should be, absence where a mouth might have formed.

It tilted its head, as if listening.

Then it lunged—not at Shammy, not at Ace, but at Mai.

Of course, she thought, cold clarity cutting through the surprise. It goes for the planner. Break the mind, the rest follows.

She didn't have time to move.

Shammy did.

One long step put her between Mai and the echo. She thrust out her hand, palm open.

The air congealed.

The echo slammed into something that wasn't there. Its whole mass distorted, compressing violently. For a terrible second, it looked like it might just force its way through the invisible barrier by sheer momentum.

Shammy's jaw tightened. The channels in her armor glowed bright, then brighter, a deep aquatic blue that turned the wet sand around her into a watercolor painting.

"You do not touch my shore," she said.

The "my" hit something inside Mai she wasn't prepared to examine yet.

The echo's internal spiral shuddered. The luminescent threads tangled, then snapped.

Mai saw it—not with her eyes, but with the part of her that had been staring at graphs all morning. A pattern collapsing. Noise reclaiming stolen structure.

Ace took her cue.

She stepped in from the side, driving one sword through the center of the malformed shape, not physically but conceptually, her shadow field riding the blade like a piercing wave.

"Sleep," she said, because it felt right.

The echo imploded.

No explosion, no dramatic geyser. Just a sudden, total loss of cohesion, like a word forgotten mid-sentence.

The water fell.

It splashed around their boots, indistinguishable from ordinary seawater. The faint luminescence in the droplets winked out.

Silence crashed in after it.

The next normal wave rolled up the beach, reached timidly for Shammy's ankles, and retreated.

Mai realized she'd been holding her breath. She let it out slowly, heart pounding against her ribs.

Her scanner rebooted itself with a confused beep and came back online, no longer shrieking.

"Echo fragment neutralized," she said, the clinical phrase anchoring her. "No persistent cognitive contamination detected."

Ace flicked residual water off one blade, then sheathed both swords in one smooth motion. Her breathing was a little faster than normal, but her grin was already back.

"Nice little warm-up," she said. "Wouldn't mind if the next one doesn't try to crawl into my brain,

though.”

“That is precisely what it will try,” Shammy said. The glow in her armor faded back to its previous, quieter level. She looked at Mai, gaze going briefly, intensely soft. “Are you hurt?”

Mai checked herself. Her wrist still tingled faintly where the droplet had touched, but there were no obvious aftereffects.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Minor contact, no lasting resonance.”

Shammy frowned slightly, as if not entirely trusting self-reported data. “You said no to it.”

“Yes,” Mai said. “That’s usually how consent works.”

Ace snorted.

Shammy’s lips curved, just a little. “Many do not. They let the echo offer them new shapes. They mistake losing themselves for being found.”

Mai felt a chill that had nothing to do with the wind. “Have you seen that before?”

“Yes,” Shammy said simply. “In other waters. Other wounds.”

Ace rolled her neck, as if trying to loosen an invisible collar. “Well, good news: we’re not most people.”

“No,” Shammy agreed. “You are very loud people.”

Mai shook out her hand, dispelling the last of the tingling. “From a technical perspective, that was extremely informative.”

Ace stared at her. “We just fought an angry ghost puddle and you call it ‘informative’?”

“Yes,” Mai said. “We confirmed several hypotheses. One: echo fragments can be disrupted by targeted shadow interference. Two: they respond to Shammy as both kin and barrier. Three: their primary method of propagation is cognitive re-anchoring, not physical force. Four—”

Ace held up a hand. “Okay, okay, I get it. Science good, puddle bad.”

Shammy looked out at the water. The glow under the surface had not vanished with the fragment’s dissolution. If anything, it pulsed slightly faster, as if annoyed.

“We have disturbed the wound,” she said. “It knows you now. All three of you.”

“Was that avoidable?” Mai asked.

“No,” Shammy said. “You could not touch the edges without waking something. The only choice was what you woke.”

Mai blew out a breath. “Then we chose the data we needed.”

Ace stretched her arms over her head. “And we chose to not die. Always a plus.”

A gull wheeled overhead, crying once, harsh and lonely. The sky remained stubbornly gray. No

lightning. No sudden storm.

From the safehouse, a crackling noise came over Mai's earpiece. Tokala's voice followed, slightly tinny.

"Dr. Tokala to Field Team," he said. "I, ah, saw a pretty nasty spike on the monitors just then. Should I be... evacuating?"

Mai tapped her earpiece. "Negative, Dr. Tokala. Situation under control. We encountered and neutralized a local echo formation. Log it as 'Type-EF-1, preliminary classification.'"

There was a pause. "You make it sound so normal," Tokala said weakly.

"Normal is relative," Mai said. "Keep the sensors on low power. No wideband pings. We're heading back to analyze the interaction."

"Copy that," he said. "I'll... make tea."

The line clicked off.

Ace sheathed the last of her intensity, letting her shoulders relax.

"Not bad for a first date with a conceptual wound," she said.

Mai gave her a look. "Do not call it that."

"But—"

"No," Mai said.

Shammy watched them, something like amusement playing at the corners of her mouth. She turned toward the sea.

The next wave reached her boots and lapped against the armor, seeking pathways. She let it.

"You are angry," she murmured, barely audible over the wind. "And lonely. And you think you are the only thing that was ever broken by being forced into a shape."

The water didn't answer, not in any language humans would recognize.

It surged once, then eased.

Shammy stepped back, turning away from the surf to follow Ace and Mai up the beach.

Mai fell in beside Ace, their shoulders almost brushing.

"That thing went for you," Ace said quietly.

"It went for the easiest vector," Mai replied. "Shadow is slippery. Water is too big. I'm the one with the neatly catalogued mind."

Ace glanced at her. "You okay?"

Mai nodded. "Yes. It tried to rewrite. I said no."

Ace's lips curved. "That's my girl."

Mai rolled her eyes, but there was color in her cheeks that wasn't from the wind.

"And you?" she asked. "It touched you first."

Ace shrugged. "Violet didn't like it. That helped."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "How much did she... intervene?"

"A little," Ace said. "Enough to bite back. She was curious, not hostile."

"That's not reassuring," Mai said.

"It's honest," Ace said.

They walked in silence for a few meters, boots crunching on wet sand and broken shells.

Behind them, Shammy's heavier steps made a different sound, like waves hitting rock.

"You both did well," Shammy said.

Ace snorted. "We didn't drown in weird thoughts. I'll take it."

Mai allowed herself a small breath of pride. "We also confirmed that your presence modulates the wound's behavior. It sees you as both path and obstacle."

Shammy nodded. "Yes. That will be... important below."

Mai's stomach did a small, unwelcome flip at the reminder of what "below" entailed.

Ace clapped her lightly between the shoulder blades.

"Hey," she said. "We just slapped an echo in the face and walked away. Whatever's under that anchor? It can try its worst."

Mai huffed. "That sounds like a challenge."

"It is," Ace said.

Shammy's emissive eyes flicked toward the horizon, where the glow under the waves pulsed, patient and relentless.

"It will accept," she said.

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