

## Chapter Six – The Anchor Rumor

By the time they made it back to the safehouse, Mai's hair smelled like salt, smoke, and something she didn't want to put a name to.

Tokala met them in the entry corridor, clutching a mug with both hands like it was the only thing tethering him to reality. He looked from Ace—damp, grinning, a small cut on one cheek—to Mai—glasses smudged, scanner hanging from her shoulder—to Shammy, who simply existed like a problem the building hadn't learned how to solve yet.

"You're alive," he blurted.

"A-plus observational skills," Ace said, brushing past him. "How's the building? Any spontaneous baptisms while we were gone?"

Tokala blinked. "What?"

Mai waved a hand. "She means did anything manifest inside the plumbing."

Tokala shuddered. "Please don't say things like that out loud."

Shammy walked past them, and as she did, the radiator at the end of the hall gave a small, relieved sigh and stopped rattling.

Tokala stared. "That's... new. It's been making that noise for three months."

"You're welcome," Shammy said gently.

The operations room felt warmer when they stepped in. Some of that was body heat, some of it was the kettle, and some of it was the subtle way the hum of the electronics had smoothed out.

Mai ignored all of that and headed straight for the central table, dropping the latest sample vials into their labeled tray. The scanner connected to her laptop with a soft chime.

"Show me," she murmured.

The data rolled in, a fresh wave of numbers overlaying the previous runs.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ace hop back up onto the file cabinet like it was her throne. Shammy took up her now habitual position near the window. Tokala hovered awkwardly in the doorway, clearly torn between fleeing and watching.

Mai tuned them out and fell into the patterns.

Surface EM spikes. Gravitational micro-fluctuations. Cognitive interference signatures. She stacked graphs over graphs, watching where they lined up and where they refused to.

Riptide Pattern Seven pulsed on the wall monitor, painted in digital lines. The echo encounter had left a visible bruise in the waveform: a brief, jagged disruption where the global curve dipped and then regained rhythm.

"Good news," Mai said eventually, breaking the silence.

Ace perked up. "You say that like it's not sarcastic."

"It's mostly not," Mai said. "The echo we neutralized was a local formation. A symptom, not a structural component. We didn't make the wound worse by destroying it."

Tokala let out a breath he'd apparently been holding for ten minutes. "And the bad news?"

Mai tapped a few keys. The display zoomed in on a sub-section of the harbor. A cluster of bright points blossomed beneath the breakwater. One of them pulsed slightly brighter than the rest.

"The underlying pressure pattern is still building," she said. "The anchor cavity is concentrating more energy every cycle. We've bought ourselves time and information. Not a solution."

"Story of our lives," Ace muttered.

Shammy's emissive eyes fixed on the bright point. "That is where it hurts the most."

Mai nodded. "Agreed."

She pulled a worn paper map from one of the stacks and smoothed it over the tabletop. It was older than most of the tech in the room, edges frayed, annotations in several different handwritings.

"Harbor construction plans," she said. "Foundation records scraped these from municipal archives when we built the safehouse. Most of it is useless bureaucracy. Some of it is gold."

Ace rolled onto her side on the cabinet, propped up on one elbow. "Dungeon map?"

"Something like that," Mai said.

The map showed the coastline as it had been forty years ago—before the latest pier extensions, before some of the apartments. Lines marked storm drains, sewer mains, maintenance tunnels.

Mai circled the current anomaly locus on the wall monitor with a quick, precise motion, then found the corresponding spot on the old paper.

"Here," she said.

On the map, that patch of sea sat just beyond the end of the breakwater, above a cluster of converging lines: a main stormwater conduit, an access shaft, and a note in faded blue ink.

Tokala leaned in. "What is that?"

Mai squinted. " 'Pre-existing sub-surface cavity. Stabilize with poured concrete. Access sealed. No further excavation.' " She snorted. "Always reassuring."

"Pre-existing cavity," Ace repeated. "That's bureaucrat for 'we found something and decided not to ask questions.'"

"That, or they hit an old sinkhole and didn't want to spend money on reinforcement," Mai said. "Either way, humans built directly above a natural void."

Shammy shook her head. "Not natural."

Mai looked up. "You're sure."

"Yes," Shammy said. "Anchors are not accidents. They are placed. Carefully."

Ace whistled low. "So someone put a metaphysical piton in the seabed and then humans came along and said 'great place for a breakwater.'"

Tokala pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course we did."

Mai traced the lines connecting shore to sea. "The stormwater conduit here leads from an inland catchment basin. The access shaft should connect somewhere behind the harbor warehouses." She tapped another spot. "And this piece... is interesting."

The map showed a narrow line branching off from the main conduit, running under the breakwater itself.

"Maintenance tunnel," Mai said. "Big enough for one person, maybe two. Marked as 'collapsed, abandoned' twenty-three years ago."

Ace grinned. "Collapsed tunnels under cursed water. Classic dungeon crawl."

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

Shammy leaned over the map, studying the inked lines with an intensity that made the paper crisp.

"The stones here remember hands," she said, tapping the breakwater foundations. "Not just water's. Yours. Your kind. You moved them. Stacked them. You thought you were building a wall against the sea."

"We were," Tokala said defensively.

"You were rearranging pressure paths," Shammy said. "You pressed your weight where the Wellspring already pressed. Now the anchor holds more than it was meant to."

Mai drummed her fingers on the table. "So the maintenance tunnel might run right past the anchor cavity. Or through its upper edge."

"If it still exists," Tokala said. "If it's not completely collapsed or flooded."

"It will be flooded," Mai said. "We're under the water table. The question is: how flooded, and with what."

Ace hopped down from the cabinet. "So the play is we find the tunnel, get into it, follow it until the world starts feeling wrong, then improvise around the anchor before things crack."

"More or less," Mai said.

"And if the tunnel's completely blocked?" Ace asked.

Mai shrugged. "Then we find another route. Or we make one. But this is our best chance at approaching the anchor from stone side instead of water side. That minimizes direct exposure to the wound until the last possible moment."

Shammy straightened. "Stone side is... safer. It remembers slower."

Tokala looked like he wanted to argue with the laws of geology and then realized that was not his lane.

“How far is the access point from here?” Ace asked.

Mai tapped the inland end of the conduit. “Nine hundred meters northwest. There should be a locked maintenance hatch behind warehouse C-7. Assuming they didn’t pave over it.”

Ace cracked her knuckles. “Worst case, I cut through the pavement.”

Tokala winced. “Please don’t. The local council already hates our ‘unexplained structural incidents.’”

“They can file a complaint with the ocean,” Ace said.

Mai rolled up the map with crisp efficiency. “We’ll need equipment. Ropes, anchors, portable lights, rebreathers.”

Tokala nodded. “We have basic underwater gear in the safehouse storage. Not enough for a full dive team, but enough for three with safety redundancy.”

“Perfect,” Mai said. “We won’t be going deep free-floating. The tunnel should keep us constrained.”

Shammy’s emissive eyes dimmed slightly. “Constrained is not always safer.”

“No,” Mai agreed. “But it lets us control line-of-contact. One direction, one path. Fewer angles for the wound to surprise us.”

She looked at Shammy. “Can you... fit?”

Shammy considered this in a very literal way—glancing at the ceiling, the door, the span of her own shoulders.

“I can make myself narrower,” she said. “If the stone allows it.”

Ace blinked. “I’ve never seen you... shape-shift.”

“I do not shift,” Shammy said calmly. “I... flow. Your eyes are bad at seeing it.”

Ace opened her mouth to make a joke about her eyes being perfect. It died somewhere between her ribs.

“Right,” she said instead. “Flow. Got it.”

Tokala cleared his throat timidly. “What about... cognitive protection? If these echo things are trying to rewrite people’s anchors, shouldn’t you have, I don’t know, amnestics on standby? Scrub damage if it happens?”

Mai shook her head. “Amnestics are for cleaning up after events. They don’t protect against ongoing re-anchoring. In fact, they might make it easier for the wound to rewrite reality if we strip out our own memories first.”

Tokala paled. “So your plan is to go in... mentally naked.”

Ace waggled her eyebrows. “She means we’re going in stubborn.”

“Precisely,” Mai said.

She pulled open a drawer and took out a small box of foil-wrapped tablets.

"But," she added, "we're not suicidal. These are Class-W focus stabilizers. They don't block anomalies, but they help maintain a consistent self-concept under mild to moderate cognitive assault. Take one now, one before we descend."

Tokala watched as Ace tossed one into her mouth without reading the label. "You trust those?"

"No," Ace said. "I trust Mai."

Mai swallowed hers, then held the box out.

Shammy looked at the tablets with polite bafflement. "Those are... rocks?"

"Chemicals," Mai said. "Substances that alter brain states."

"I do not have a brain the way you do," Shammy said.

"Right," Mai said. "You'll have to rely on your personality instead."

Shammy nodded once. "It is resilient."

Ace laughed.

Tokala hesitated, then took one of the tablets too.

Mai raised an eyebrow. "You're staying topside."

"Yes," he said. "But if this pattern is already messing with the shoreline, I'd rather be slightly more sure of who I am."

Mai inclined her head. "Fair."

She checked her watch. The tide charts she'd memorized earlier whispered in her mind.

"We've got a short window before the next major energy build-up," she said. "If we're going to reach that tunnel, it has to be now."

Ace was already halfway to the door. "Race you."

Mai didn't dignify that with a response, but she did move faster.

Shammy followed at their heels, the safehouse lighting flickering once as she passed.

Tokala stayed behind, fingers hovering over the keyboard, watching the Riptide waveform pulse on the screen.

"Try not to die," he murmured to the empty room.

The waveform hiccuped in reply.

The warehouses loomed over the northern edge of the harbor like tired giants. Their corrugated metal walls were streaked with rust and salt, their doors tagged with graffiti in a half-dozen languages.

Warehouse C-7 was particularly unloved. One of its upper windows was boarded over. A sign on the

side read “NO UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS – HAZARDOUS MATERIALS” in fading letters.

“Translation,” Ace said. “Dump everything here we don’t want inspectors to see.”

Mai skirted the building’s side, scanning the ground with a practiced eye. “There should be a maintenance hatch somewhere along this wall...”

Shammy walked a few steps behind, gaze lowered—not in deference, but in focus. The asphalt under her boots had a thin sheen of damp that hadn’t come from rain.

“Here,” she said quietly.

Mai turned.

At the base of the wall, half-buried under gravel and weeds, was a rusted metal rectangle. Someone had sprayed over it at some point, but the paint had peeled, revealing the embossed symbol beneath: a minimalistic wave icon and a string of municipal numbers.

“Stormwater access,” Mai said. “They didn’t pave over it after all.”

Ace beamed. “Sometimes humans are lazy in useful ways.”

She crouched and pried at the hatch handle. It didn’t move.

Mai produced a small canister from her pocket, flipped the top, and sprayed a clear solution around the edges of the hatch. The chemical hissed faintly as it ate through layers of oxidation and grime.

“Give it a minute,” she said. “Then try again.”

Ace tapped her fingers against her thigh, impatient. Shammy watched the hatch with the faint curiosity of a river examining a new rock.

After thirty seconds, Mai nodded. “Go.”

Ace grabbed the handle and pulled.

This time, the hatch protested but shifted. Rust flaked. The hinges screamed. Ace gritted her teeth and yanked harder.

With a reluctant metallic groan, the hatch lifted.

Cold, damp air breathed out of the opening, smelling of stale water, wet concrete, and something else. An old, trapped current.

Mai shone a flashlight down.

A vertical shaft dropped three meters to a circular tunnel. The tunnel itself was half-filled with dark water, a creeping line of damp halfway up the curved concrete walls.

“Charming,” Ace said. “Ten out of ten, would spelunk again.”

Mai clipped a rope to a secure point on the hatch frame and fed it down. “You first,” she said.

Ace blinked. “Usually you argue when I volunteer to jump into holes.”

"Today I want you in front where I can see you fall," Mai said.

Ace grinned. "Romantic."

She swung herself over the edge and slid down the rope, boots thumping onto the narrow curve of dry concrete at the top of the waterline. The tunnel was just wide enough for her to stand with shoulders almost touching either side.

She looked up. "It's cozy."

Mai came down next, more controlled, her movements precise. She landed beside Ace, boots a little too close to the water for comfort.

She looked back up at Shammy.

Shammy stared down the shaft, emissive eyes brightening. The air seemed to thicken as her presence crowded into the narrow space.

"Will you fit?" Mai asked.

"Yes," Shammy said.

She didn't climb in the way they had. She stepped.

For a moment, it looked like she simply walked forward over the hatch edge and down, unsupported, as if the air had decided to let her treat it like a shallow slope. The waterline in the tunnel twitched once, then settled.

She landed with a soft, solid thud on the concrete lip opposite them.

Ace blinked. "Show-off."

Shammy looked mildly puzzled. "I simply followed the easiest path."

The tunnel stretched away from them in both directions: one leading inland, the other toward the harbor and, eventually, beneath the breakwater.

The water filling its lower half was very still. Too still. No lapping, no trickling. It just sat there, dark and patient.

Mai's flashlight beam ran along the curve of the conduit.

"Downstream," she said, pointing toward the harbor. "Toward the anchor."

Ace's shadow stirred around her ankles, hungry.

Shammy looked at the water. The faintest hint of luminescence pulsed somewhere deep below its surface, distant but present.

"The stone remembers being bored," she murmured. "Machines chewed through it. Men cursed. They did not know what vein they were cutting."

Mai took a breath, tasting concrete and something metallic under the usual damp.

“All right,” she said. “We follow the tunnel. We watch for structural instability. We do not touch the water unless we have to.”

“And if the water touches us?” Ace asked.

Mai glanced at Shammy.

Shammy’s emissive gaze was steady.

“Then I will do my best,” she said. “To keep you from remembering things that are not yours.”

Ace’s grin flashed, quick and fierce. “Can’t ask for more than that.”

They started walking.

Three figures in a narrow, forgotten artery under a tired harbor.

Shadow on one side, logic on the other, and the sea itself walking between them in borrowed armor.

Ahead of them, the tunnel curved gently toward the dark, listening heart of the wound.

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