

Chapter 7 – Beneath the Concrete Skin

The tunnel swallowed outside sound in three steps.

Above, there had been the distant hiss of tires on wet roads, the low thrum of harbor machinery, the endless conversation of the sea. Down here, there was only the echo of their own movements and the steady drip of water from places that didn't have obvious sources.

Ace walked point, one hand brushing the tunnel wall, the other near her sword hilts. Her boots found the narrow edge of dry concrete above the stagnant water with an ease that would have bothered Mai if she weren't used to it.

Mai followed half a pace behind, flashlight sweeping ahead in slow arcs. Her scanner hung from her harness, sometimes chirping quietly to itself like an anxious bird.

Shammy took the rear.

It wasn't a tactical decision so much as geometry. The tunnel was circular, just wide enough for the three of them if they were very friendly. Shammy's presence bent the available space in ways that made "rearguard" the only configuration that didn't feel like wading through someone else's aura.

The air grew cooler as they moved away from the shaft. Moisture condensed on the concrete, beading, running in thin, hesitant rivulets toward the waterline.

"Distance from hatch?" Mai asked quietly.

Ace's shadow had uncoiled in a thin line behind her, tracing the curve of the tunnel back into darkness. She checked the little waypoint counter clipped to her belt.

"Sixty meters," she said. "Mildly haunted."

"That's not a unit," Mai said.

"It is in my system," Ace replied.

The scanner clicked a little louder. Mai glanced at its display without slowing.

"Electromagnetic noise increasing," she murmured. "Still within acceptable parameters, but the baseline's drifting."

"Meaning?" Ace asked.

"Meaning the tunnel is starting to remember it's sitting on top of something wrong," Mai said.

Behind them, Shammy's voice came soft but clear. "The stone does not forget. It just... waits for someone to listen."

Ace snorted. "You and your poetic geology."

"It is accurate geology," Shammy said.

They walked another thirty meters in silence.

The tunnel curved gradually, sloping almost imperceptibly downward. The waterline crept higher up the walls. In places, mineral deposits veined the concrete, like the inside of a bone.

Ace's flashlight beam picked out an old stencil on the wall: faded letters, half-obscurd by limescale.

" 'INLET 3B - GRAVITY FEED'," she read. "That's comforting."

"Gravity is at least predictable," Mai said.

"Until it isn't," Ace said.

"Please don't pick a fight with physics right now," Mai said.

A faint, rippling glow appeared on the water ahead.

It wasn't the full cold blue of the open surf—more a suggestion of it, like light reflected on a ceiling from a pool below. The echo of luminescence.

Mai slowed. "We're entering the field."

Ace nodded. "Feels... thicker."

The air had weight now, like a humid summer day with a storm thinking about existing. Each breath tasted faintly metallic, like the inside of an old coin.

"Any immediate cognitive anomalies?" Mai asked, partly out of habit, partly to anchor herself.

"I'm thinking about sandwiches," Ace said. "Is that the wound or just me?"

"Just you," Mai said. "You had half a granola bar for breakfast."

"You had coffee for breakfast," Ace pointed out. "Do not judge."

Behind them, Shammy was silent.

Mai glanced back.

"Shammy?" she prompted.

Shammy's emissive eyes were brighter in the dim tunnel, reflecting the faint glow from the water. The channels in her armor pulsed in slow, steady rhythms.

"It pushes more here," she said. "Small nudges. Requests to move. To shift weight. To give in."

"Does it feel targeted?" Mai asked.

Shammy considered. "It feels... impatient. Like a tide hitting a closed gate. It does not yet see us as separate shapes. Only obstacles."

"That's something, at least," Mai said. "Let's disappoint it further."

They went on.

The tunnel narrowed briefly—the ceiling dropped, forcing Ace to duck and Mai to hunch. Water had overtopped the lower part of the walls here at some point, leaving a faint tideline of fungus and salt.

Ace's boot slipped once on a wet patch. Her hand shot out, catching the wall.

Shadow flared around her glove for a heartbeat, dark and sharp, then settled.

"You okay?" Mai asked instantly.

"Fine," Ace said. "Just the tunnel trying to give me a hug."

"Decline," Mai said.

"Already RSVP'd 'no'," Ace replied.

Shammy's steps remained eerily even behind them, as if the slope and slick had nothing to do with her.

"Does this bother you at all?" Ace asked over her shoulder. "The closed space, the concrete, the... everything?"

"It is small," Shammy said. "But not suffocating. Enough water still moves for me to feel its thoughts."

Mai blinked. "Water has thoughts now?"

"Not like yours," Shammy said. "Yours are jagged and loud. Water thinks in weight and patience."

Ace grinned. "That's why you like Mai so much."

Mai almost tripped. "Excuse me?"

Shammy sounded faintly puzzled. "Mai is not water."

"No," Ace said. "She's the shore. You said so."

"Yes," Shammy agreed calmly. "Stubborn stone that refuses to smooth."

"You say that like it's a compliment," Mai muttered.

"It is," Shammy said.

Ace's grin softened. She slowed a fraction, enough that the three of them walked almost in line for a few steps.

"You two realize you're talking about me like I'm not here," Mai said.

"Yes," Ace and Shammy said at the same time.

Mai sighed. "Wonderful."

Something changed in the air ahead.

It wasn't obvious, not like the echo fragment on the beach. It was smaller, more intimate. A pressure behind the eyes. A subtle tug at the muscles of the jaw, the fingers, as if the world were suggesting a different way to hold yourself.

Mai's flashlight beam wavered.

She stopped.

“Ace,” she said.

“Feeling it,” Ace said, voice tight. “Like... walking into someone else’s memory.”

Shammy’s steps faltered for the first time.

“The anchor’s pressure...” she said slowly. “We are close enough for it to try to... correct us.”

Mai swallowed. “Define ‘correct’.”

Shammy’s emissive eyes dimmed a fraction. “Align us with its expectations. Remove angles it does not like. Smooth sharp edges.”

“Translation,” Ace said. “It wants to turn us into something that fits.”

“Roughly,” Shammy said.

Mai felt it now—sly, almost polite. A suggestion at the edge of her thoughts: Wouldn’t it be easier if you were softer. If you flowed instead of resisted. If you stopped cataloguing, stopped defining, stopped saying no.

She said no.

Not just with her mouth—with every mental habit she’d ever honed.

I am Mai. I choose. I refuse.

The pressure recoiled, then came back, probing for cracks.

“Ace,” she said. “Status.”

Ace’s jaw was clenched, a muscle jumping near her temple.

“It’s loud,” Ace managed. “Feels like... every time I let go and fell, all at once. All the almost-deaths I didn’t have time to be scared of.”

“Do you need to fall back?” Mai asked.

“Can’t,” Ace said. “I’m point. That’s my job.”

Shammy’s voice came, softer than the tunnel should have allowed. “You do not have to carry all weight at once.”

Ace huffed a laugh through her nose. “Kinda do, actually.”

The pressure sharpened, like it had noticed resistance and decided to try harder.

Mai tasted riverwater in the back of her throat. For a second, she smelled damp wood, cold mud, the metal tang of blood on scraped knees.

She was standing on a broken bridge, holding a snapped fishing rod. She was seven years old. She was furious at the river for doing what rivers did.

She blinked.

No. That wasn't hers.

She shot a look at Ace.

Ace's eyes were unfocused for a heartbeat, tracking something only she could see. Waterlight reflected in violet.

"Hey," Mai said sharply. "With me."

Ace flinched, then fixed her gaze on Mai's face like it was a lifeline.

"There you are," Ace said, voice rough. "It's trying to run a highlight reel."

"Of what?" Mai asked, even though she suspected.

Ace's mouth twisted. "Wet regrets. Old stones."

Shammy moved.

In the narrow tunnel, it was just a small shift of position, but it changed everything. She stepped close enough that her armored shoulder almost brushed Mai's back and her presence wrapped around Ace like a second wall.

The stale tunnel air grew cooler, fresher. The smell of old concrete receded, replaced by something cleaner: mountain streams, winter rain on empty streets, the first breath after surfacing.

Shammy's voice threaded through the pressure, not loud but... heavier.

"Wellspring," she said, speaking into the tunnel, into the water, into the unseen cavity ahead. "You are pressing on the wrong currents."

The sense of directionless insistence hesitated.

"This one," Shammy went on, her hand lifting to indicate Ace even if the wound couldn't see the gesture. "You do not own her. You let her slip once. The river has no claim on stones that learned to walk."

The pressure shifted. It probed at Shammy instead, like a finger poking at a dam.

"And this one," she said, and there was something almost fond in her voice as she indicated Mai. "She is not yours either. She is not a path. She is a gate. You do not like gates. You cannot use her."

Mai almost laughed, except it came out more like a choked breath.

"You're negotiating with an abstract wound," she said.

"Yes," Shammy said. "It understands negotiation. It has been trading away pieces of itself for stability since your moon was closer."

The weight in the air changed again. It didn't withdraw, but it... adjusted. The tug at Mai's selfhood lessened. The suggestions grew blunter, easier to ignore.

The scanner at her hip, which had been emitting a constant, shrill tone, dropped to a series of intermittent beeps.

“Cognitive interference partially mitigated,” Mai said, because the act of naming it helped. “Thank you.”

Shammy inclined her head. “You said we must work from the stone side. Stones do not move without argument.”

Ace blew out a shaky breath. “I owe you a drink. Or an ocean. Whichever is easier to pour.”

Shammy’s lips curved. “You cannot afford an ocean.”

Ace grinned, some of her usual spark returning. “Watch me.”

They moved on.

The glow from the water grew a little stronger, painting the underside of the tunnel in faint, shifting blues. The air felt less suffocating now—not comfortable, but tolerable, like the pressure at the bottom of a deep swimming pool instead of an open trench.

Mai’s flashlight picked out a change ahead.

The tunnel wall on the right bulged inward slightly, the smooth concrete giving way to something rougher. The curve of the floor was broken by a scatter of debris: chunks of broken concrete, rebar, stones that weren’t from any poured structure.

“Collapse,” she said. “We’re close.”

Ace hopped up onto a chunk of fallen conduit, testing its stability. “Can we get through?”

Mai moved her light over the blockage.

The main tunnel continued past the collapse, but the lower half was completely filled with rubble. Only the upper arc remained open—a narrow space above the waterline, jagged and uneven, not wide enough for Shammy to pass upright.

Beyond the tangle of stone and rebar, the faint glow of the wound pulsed, brighter now. The water filling the lower half of the tunnel ahead was luminescent enough to cast moving patterns on the ceiling.

“We can crawl,” Ace said. “You two wait here, I’ll scout.”

“No,” Mai said instantly.

Ace blinked. “No?”

“We don’t split in a cognitively active zone,” Mai said. “We go together or not at all.”

Shammy studied the collapsed section, head tilted.

“The stone here is... tired,” she said. “It fell because the pressure from below pushed its support away. If we move carelessly, more will fall.”

"And if we don't move at all, the anchor keeps building pressure until it cracks on its own," Mai said. "We don't have the luxury of caution."

Ace looked back at Shammy. "Can you make yourself... smaller?"

Shammy considered.

"I can shift some weight to the water," she said. "Let it carry what stone cannot. But I cannot make the tunnel wider without upsetting the balance."

Mai ran quick math in her head—angles, clearances, worst-case scenarios.

"You'll have to go first," she said to Shammy. "If anything collapses, I want the strongest structure under it."

Shammy gave a small nod, accepting the logic without ego. "Very well."

She stepped closer to the rubble.

The water around their boots responded instantly, rising a centimeter, then settling. The glow in it brightened, as if excited.

"Carefully," Mai said through gritted teeth. "We're guests. Do not redecorate."

Shammy knelt.

It was a strange sight—something about seeing her voluntarily fold that long, composed frame into the cramped, jagged space. The armor flowed with her, plates sliding, reconfiguring subtly so edges didn't catch on stone.

She put one hand into the narrow gap above the collapsed section and then—
—shifted.

Mai's eyes couldn't quite track it. One second, Shammy was there, filling the tunnel. The next, she was... less. Not smaller, exactly. Just occupying space differently. The air where she'd been felt relieved, like a room after someone large stepped out of the doorway.

Her legs slid into the gap, followed by her torso. The concrete groaned, but didn't crack.

She disappeared through the collapse like water through a tight channel.

"Okay," Ace breathed. "That was mildly horrifying."

"Agreed," Mai said faintly.

Shammy's voice floated back, oddly clear despite the rubble. "There is room beyond. The tunnel opens again. The glow is stronger. I can feel the anchor's edge."

"Any immediate dangers?" Mai asked.

"Many," Shammy said. "But none that are moving yet."

Ace snorted. "I love her optimism."

Mai checked her harness, clipped the rope to a secure point on a piece of rebar, and dropped into a crouch.

“Your turn,” she said to Ace. “I’ll be behind you.”

Ace grinned. “You just want to stare at me crawling through a tunnel.”

Mai flushed. “I want to be between you and whatever comes at us from behind.”

“That’s somehow worse,” Ace said, but there was warmth in it.

She slung her swords across her back, tightened the straps, and dropped to her hands and knees.

The space above the collapsed section was just wide enough for her shoulders if she turned slightly sideways. The concrete was cold under her palms, damp seeping into the fabric of her gloves.

As she crawled, the glow from the water below painted her face in flickering blue shadows. Her breath sounded too loud in the confined space. The tunnel smelled like old storms and fresh regret.

Mai followed.

The stone scraped her armor, caught her gear. Her glasses fogged briefly with her own breath. For a moment, her rational mind whispered about rockfalls and entombment and all the ways this could end badly.

She kept going.

Each movement was deliberate. Hand, knee. Hand, knee. She focused on the pattern of it more than the space.

Behind her, the water whispered against the rubble, testing.

A faint vibration ran through the stone under her palms—not enough to be movement. Just a reminder that everything here was under tension.

“Why do we always end up crawling through things?” Ace muttered ahead. “Tunnels, vents, decaying ductwork...”

“Because anomalies rarely place themselves in well-lit, easily accessible locations with good ventilation,” Mai said.

“They should,” Ace said. “I’d respect them more.”

The rubble thinned.

Ace wriggled forward one last time, then emerged with a relieved grunt.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m through. You’re going to hate this.”

Mai didn’t have enough breath to respond.

She pushed herself out of the last narrow gap and dropped onto more stable concrete.

The space beyond the collapse opened up like the inside of a lung.

The tunnel widened—not by much, but enough that standing felt like a miracle. The ceiling rose. The water in the lower half of the conduit was no longer still; it moved in a slow, circular motion, like the surface of a stirred glass.

And it glowed.

Not in faint hints, not in ghostly outlines. The water ahead was lit from within, a deep, steady blue-white that cast shifting patterns across the curved ceiling.

The light didn't hurt to look at. It just felt... wrong. A brightness that belonged in open space, trapped in a confined tube.

Shammy stood a few meters ahead, where the tunnel bent downward in a steeper slope.

She looked different in this light.

The channels in her armor were all lit now, filled with the same glow as the water below but tuned, somehow. Her emissive eyes shone with a clarity that made her seem less like something wearing a humanoid shape and more like what she truly was:

Water, given a face.

Mai pushed herself upright, brushed rubble dust from her knees, and tried not to let her awe show as fear.

"This," she said quietly, "must be near the upper edge of the anchor cavity."

"Yes," Shammy said. "The weight here is... heavy. Old. The Wellspring presses down. The wound pushes up. The anchor is caught between."

Ace stepped to the very edge of the slope and peered down.

The water filled the conduit ahead entirely. No air gap. The tunnel simply became a glowing, liquid artery leading deeper.

"Great," Ace said. "So from here, we swim."

Mai's stomach did that unhelpful lurch again.

She stepped beside Ace and looked down.

The glow was hypnotic. Little swirls and eddies traced themselves along the surface, then sank. If she stared long enough, she could almost see shapes in it—structures, networks, lines of force.

Her mind tried to fall in.

She pulled back.

"Rebreathers," she said, because focusing on logistics was better than conceding the weight pressing on her nerves. "We do this once, on a single breath cycle. No second chances. If the wound interferes with the gear..."

Shammy shook her head. "It will not break your machines. It wants to know you. It will be... gentle at first."

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” Mai said.

Ace rolled her shoulders, as if warming up for a fight instead of a dive. “We go down, we touch the anchor, we tell it to behave, we come back. Easy.”

Mai looked at her. “Do you actually believe that?”

Ace met her gaze, smile tilted but real. “No. But I want you to hear me say it.”

Shammy watched them both, something unreadable in her luminous eyes.

“The water will try to remember you,” she said. “You must remember yourselves louder.”

Mai nodded once.

“All right,” she said. “We’ve reached the threshold.”

She took a breath that tasted of concrete, cold, and light.

“Next stop,” she murmured, mostly to herself. “The anchor.”

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