

Chapter 8 – Descent to the Anchor

They geared up in the tunnel like people putting on the wrong kind of armor.

Rebreathers, harnesses, clipped-in tethers running back to a piton Mai had buried deep into the concrete. Waterproof casings over the scanner and two small, brutally reliable lights. No bulky tanks—there wasn't space, and Shammy had been very clear: they would not be down long.

"If you are," she'd said, "then something went wrong, and the time on the tanks will not matter."

Not reassuring. Honest.

Ace checked her mask seal with practiced fingers, then bumped her shoulder lightly against Mai's.

"Last chance to back out," she said through the muffling rubber and plastic. "I can go down with Shammy, you stay here and shout analytics at the water."

Mai adjusted the strap on her own mask. "Absolutely not."

"Aww," Ace said. "You do care."

"I'm not letting you go into a cognitively active, high-pressure environment without the person whose literal job is saying no to reality," Mai said. "You'd improvise the tunnel into a fractal."

Ace grinned behind the mouthpiece. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Shammy watched them, bare-faced, rebreather dangling from her fingers like a prop. The glow from the flooded conduit ahead reflected in her emissive eyes, painting them with currents.

"You should know," she said, "once we are fully submerged, words will not travel well. Sound bends strangely near the anchor."

Mai nodded. "We expected that. Use touch and visual signals as much as possible. If you need us to stop, squeeze. If something is wrong, pull back. If you go still, we drag you out."

Shammy's mouth curved. "You cannot drag me."

Mai met her gaze. "Watch me."

For a heartbeat, the weight of something unspoken lay between them. Then Shammy inclined her head, accepting the stubbornness for what it was.

"Remember," she said, "the wound wants to understand you first. Its first touch will be... curious. That is the most dangerous part."

Ace rolled her shoulders, as if trying to loosen the memory of the tunnel's earlier probing.

"So we don't let it get past the first date," she said. "Got it."

They stepped to the edge of the glowing water together.

From up close, the luminescence was almost beautiful. It wasn't uniform. Tiny filaments of brighter light traced patterns just below the surface, looping and unlooping like sketches of muscles around an

invisible bone.

The scanner gave a last, plaintive chirp, then its display dimmed to a minimal readout. The anomaly had eaten half its bandwidth.

Mai clipped it firmly to her harness anyway. Sometimes information survived where tools didn't.

"All right," she said. "Sequence: Shammy first, then Ace, then me. We descend along the tunnel slope until we hit structural transition—where concrete ends and anchor cavity begins. We do not go beyond without re-evaluating."

Ace held up a hand. "One adjustment."

Mai narrowed her eyes. "Yes?"

"If something grabs you," Ace said evenly, "rules or not, I cut it."

Mai's chest tightened. "That is already in my assumptions."

"Good," Ace said, and the brief seriousness in her eyes said more than any joke could have.

Shammy stepped forward.

She did not put the rebreather in her mouth. She simply walked into the water.

It took her like a memory—without splash, without resistance. The glow climbed her armor as if delighted, filling the etched channels along her limbs and chest, then sank in, adjusting, tuning.

For a moment she stood there, submerged to the waist, looking back at them.

"You will feel like you are moving slower than you are," she said. "The anchor bends distance around itself. Trust your bodies, not your sense of time."

Mai swallowed.

"On three," she said. "One. Two—"

Ace jumped on two.

Mai swore into her mouthpiece and followed.

The water hit like a second skin.

Cold, but not as cold as she'd expected. Heavy, but in a way that felt... structured, like walking into gel with a mind. The luminescence flowed over her, seeking purchase on her gear, her exposed skin. The rebreather's hiss was loud in her ears.

For a heartbeat, panic clawed up her throat—old, irrational, surfacing from somewhere her training didn't reach.

No air. No up. Wrong.

She crushed it. Focused on the rhythm of her breath, the familiar resistance of the apparatus.

In. Out. In. Out.

The world steadied.

Ace was directly ahead of her, shadow coiling around her like darker water. Even submerged, the twin katanas on her back glowed faintly green, their anomalous edges acknowledging the wound's pressure with a tightening of aura.

Shammy moved before them both, deeper into the glowing conduit.

Underwater, she was... terrifying.

Not in a monstrous way. In a right way. The water around her liked her. It parted for her without turbulence, flowed along her armor like an extension of herself. Where she passed, the luminescent threads reoriented, aligning with the etched channels on her plates, as if syncing to a master rhythm.

Mai forced herself not to stare too long. The tunnel curved downward. Concentrate.

The concrete under her gloves was rough, familiar. That helped.

She kept one hand on the wall, the other near Ace's tether. The rope line ran from Mai's harness to Ace's, from Ace's to Shammy's, and then on to the piton. A physical reminder that they were connected in more ways than one.

The first thirty seconds were simple descent.

Then the wound noticed them.

It didn't feel like a sudden attack. More like a new flavor of pressure added to the existing weight of water. A gentle, insistent awareness pressing at the edges of Mai's mind.

It didn't claw. It... suggested.

Wouldn't it be easier if—

She pushed back, hard.

I am Mai. I choose. I refuse.

A flicker of impatience came through the water.

In front of her, Ace's shadow field bristled. She squeezed Ace's ankle—two short pulses.

Check.

Ace squeezed back: one short, one long.

Okay. Enough.

Shammy's silhouette ahead slowed a fraction. Her hand, which had been brushing the tunnel roof, flattened against it.

Mai felt, distantly, a conversation she couldn't hear.

Wellspring pressing: Explain these shapes. Shammy countering: They are not yours. We are here as guests.

The weight shifted. The pressure eased off Mai for a moment.

It didn't leave. It moved.

It went for Ace.

Ace had never been a fan of blindfolds.

Underwater, surrounded by light that wasn't light, pressure that wasn't purely physical, she felt briefly, wildly claustrophobic. The wound's curiosity slid along her nerves like cold fingertips, looking for purchase.

It found the old river.

For an instant she was small and furious again, cheeks wet with something that wasn't river water, lungs burning, fingers clawing at mud-slick banks.

She saw Shammy as she must have looked from below: a shape in the water, vast and kind and utterly incomprehensible, reaching down.

The wound tried to rewrite the frame.

It showed her the same scene, but this time the hand didn't come. The river kept her. Silence. Weight. Then nothing.

Ace's breath stuttered in the rebreather.

No. No.

A hot spike of anger cut through the cold.

You had your chance, she told the river-that-wasn't. You lost me. I walked away.

Violet surged in her chest, thrilled by the resistance.

The water around her shuddered. For a moment, the glow flickered, dark filaments threading through it like cracks.

Behind her, Mai tightened her grip on Ace's tether, anchoring.

Shammy's hand left the ceiling and closed around the rope line.

Her fingers were cool even through the gloves.

Her presence bled into the water around Ace, a calm countercurrent.

"Stone," she broadcast, not in words but in the way the pressure shifted. "Shadow. Gate. They are not yours."

The wound's curiosity recoiled.

It didn't like being denied.

The weight in the water changed.

The gentle, analytical pressure gave way to something more like... frustration. The luminescent threads around them began to move faster, spiraling in tighter patterns.

"Now it is annoyed," Mai thought, half detached. "Good. Let it be."

The tunnel ceiling changed texture under her hand.

The rough concrete gave way to something older, smoother. Stone, not shaped by human tools. The slope leveled off, then bent subtly outward.

They were at the cavity edge.

Shammy stopped.

She turned in the water, emissive eyes brighter than the glow now.

Her hand moved in a terse signal.

Here.

Mai kicked to a halt beside Ace. The three of them hung there for a moment, suspended in luminous heavy silence.

Even through the haze, Mai could feel it.

Beyond the curve of the tunnel, the water opened into a larger space. Pressure gradients twisted weirdly. The luminescent threads were denser, more organized.

They had reached the anchor's skin.

"Time check," Mai thought, glancing at the tiny wrist display strapped inside her suit.

They'd been submerged for less than two minutes.

It felt like longer.

Shammy pointed down, then traced a circle with her hand, indicating the cavity.

Her other hand flattened against the stone, fingers splayed. The armor along her palm peeled back slightly, exposing something like bare, luminous flesh to the rock.

She listened.

Mai couldn't hear what she heard. But she felt the echo.

The stone was screaming.

Not in sound. In strain. Micro-fractures, pressure lines, weight distributions. It had been holding too much for too long. The anchor beneath it was pulling in all directions—down, out, up—trying to maintain the Wellspring's balance and failing.

Shammy's emissive eyes narrowed.

She turned back toward them.

Her fingers moved in slow, clear signals they'd agreed upon topside.

Anchor below. Cavity wide. Pressure unstable.

Mai responded, her own hands moving cautiously in the thick water.

Can we access from here?

Shammy's mouth quirked.

We can. Should we? Maybe not.

Ace squeezed the rope between them twice.

We have to.

The wound pressed again, harder this time.

It was done being curious.

The luminescent threads in the water spun into a vortex ahead of them, twisting into a funnel shape that vanished down into the unseen cavity. The tunnel's gentle current became a pull.

They all felt it.

Water tugging at gear, at limbs, at the parts of themselves that thought about giving in.

Mai slammed metaphorical brakes into the stone, shoving her free hand against the wall. Ace dug her fingers into tiny imperfections. Shammy spread her stance, anchoring herself with weight the water couldn't easily move.

For a moment, they hung there, caught between the tunnel's structural curve and the cavity's hungry pull.

The wound's pressure changed shape.

It stopped trying to rewrite them as drowned children or softened stone. It went for roles again.

It tried to make Mai a channel—someone who carried, translated, didn't say no. It tried to turn Ace into a breaker—a force that opened, cracked, let things through. It tried to coax Shammy back into a pure conduit—no choices, no resistance.

Shammy refused first.

Water remembered. She reminded it.

She sent back the memory of pulling a small, furious girl out of a river against the current's will. The feeling of _no_ as a force, not an absence.

She sent the shape of Mai while she was at it—dry, stubborn, inventing new angles where surfaces had been flat.

She sent Ace's refusal, bright and sharp: I am not your debt.

The wound hit that and shuddered.

For a moment, the pull lessened, confused.

Mai seized the gap.

She let go of the wall with one hand and grabbed the rebreather casing, steadying her thoughts like she would steady a shaking instrument.

Then she did something that felt insane even as she did it.

She pushed back.

Not physically. With `_pattern_`.

Every anomalous system had one. The wound was no exception. It had a signature. A rhythm.

Mai had been studying it since they arrived.

Riptide Seven's underlying waveform pulsed in her memory—the way it had responded to sensor pings, to Shammy's presence, to their earlier echo fight.

She took that waveform and, in her mind, inverted it.

Then she `_remembered_` it at the water around them as hard as she could.

Not this, she told it. The opposite. You're not just a hole. You're a hinge.

The effect was immediate and weird.

The luminescent threads around her stuttered, then reoriented. The vortex ahead flickered, its spiral loosening.

The wound had not expected to be challenged with its own math.

Ace felt the change as a sudden slackness in the tug, like a grip releasing her collar.

She whooped into her mouthpiece, the sound lost in bubbles.

Shadow flared around her, dark tendrils wrapping around the glowing threads that brushed too close, damping them.

Between them, they carved out a tiny pocket of relative stability in the anchor's turbulent skin.

Shammy's hand moved again.

Now. Down.

There was no more time for thought.

They let go.

The three of them kicked off the tunnel wall and let the softened pull take them.

The conduit bent, then opened.

The anchor cavity swallowed them.

It was like dropping into the inside of a slow, luminous heart.

The space expanded around them, larger than the tunnel had any right to lead into. The ceiling disappeared into a haze of light. The walls were uneven stone, worn by eons of currents, riddled with cracks through which the glow pulsed like blood.

And at the center, below them, was the anchor.

Mai's first impression was too many angles.

It wasn't an object in any normal sense. It was... a shape forced into a world that didn't have the right dimensions for it. Segments of pale, not-stone struts intersecting at impossible joins, each one inscribed with patterns that made her eyes want to slide off them.

It extended down into darkness and up into the haze, a vertical lattice that pinned the cavity in place.

Where the Wellspring's pressure pressed down, the anchor flared, redirecting. Where the wound pushed up, it tried to blunt, to distribute. It was a brilliant, desperate, failing machine.

Cracks ran through it.

Hairline fractures, some glowing, some dark. On one side, a whole segment had sheared loose, hanging skewed.

From those cracks, the conceptual sewage Shammy had mentioned seeped—pressure ghosts, rejected paths, unclaimed weight. It all swirled in the cavity, feeding the echo fields.

Mai felt the pressure of its purpose, and for a second her heart broke for it.

Someone had put this thing here to help. To hold impossible forces.

It was losing.

Ace's reaction was shorter, sharper.

That's the thing trying to kill us. Fix it, break it, I don't care, just stop it screaming.

The wound reacted to their presence at this depth.

The luminescent threads in the cavity surged, converging on them in a swirling halo.

This time the pressure didn't probe. It pushed.

For a heartbeat, everything blurred.

The water tried to become memory again, all at once.

Mai flashing through lives that weren't hers—lighthouse keeper, drowned sailor, flood victim, riverbed. Ace drowning and drowning and drowning in a hundred different ways, some hers, some not. Shammy eroding into pure conduit, choice stripped away.

Then:

Stone. Shadow. Water.

They held.

Here, at the anchor's naked skin, there was no room left for half-measures.

Mai's mind sharpened to a point.

She saw the failing struts, the overloaded nodes, the stress lines.

She saw where a single adjustment could redistribute load, where one crack might be forced open safely, where another must be kept sealed at all costs.

She saw a path.

Ace felt the cavity like a mouth trying to breathe through water and stone at once. Her shadow reacted instinctively, finding the gaps where the echo fragments were thickest, hungry to choke them.

Shammy felt the Wellspring above, wounded and straining. She felt the wound below, greedy and unfinished. She felt the anchor caught between, bleeding both ways.

They had seconds before the pressure made their brains leak out their ears.

Shammy's hand closed around the tether.

There, she signalled, extending her other hand toward a particular segment of the anchor where three struts met, one cracked, two intact and screaming.

Mai's thoughts, already balanced on the edge of too many inputs, narrowed to that point.

She remembered the inverted waveform, the hinge trick.

She layered it on the strut's fracture, imagining not just stopping the crack, but re-routing its pressure around a new path.

Her fingers moved, almost of their own accord, reaching out to the water touching that section of the anchor.

The wound pushed back, furious now.

It didn't want this. It wanted the anchor to break. It wanted release.

Ace shoved.

Shadow poured out of her like ink, wrapping around the wildest of the luminous threads, choking them off, buying Mai one more heartbeat of clarity.

Shammy did her part.

She opened herself fully to the Wellspring for a second—a dangerous, terrifying act. Letting its weight crash through her, letting it see something that had once defied it.

She showed it the choice again.

This one you let slip. This gate you cannot bend. This stone you cannot erode.

You can, however, set down some of the weight.

The Wellspring hesitated.

For the first time since the wound opened, the pressure from above shifted not out of reflex but decision.

A fraction of the load lifted off the failing strut.

Mai hit the fracture with her inverted pattern and her refusal all at once.

In that luminous, heavy, impossible moment, something changed.

Not enough.

But something.

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