

Chapter Nine - When the Anchor Breathes

The fracture didn't heal.

Mai hadn't expected it to. Even in the best-case scenario, there was no "fixing" something this old and overloaded with one improvised hack and a bad attitude.

What it did instead was... change its mind.

The crack along the strut flared, bright as lightning underwater, then dimmed—not to nothing, but to a contained glow. The raw, tearing pressure bleeding from it shunted sideways, rerouted along the anchor's internal lattice.

The load redistributed.

Mai felt it like a migraine easing a notch. The screaming in the stone dropped from a piercing wail to a ragged, furious groan.

Above them, the Wellspring's downward force shifted. It settled against the new arrangement, testing. For a terrible half-second, Mai thought it would reject the adjustment, slam everything back into the old, breaking pattern.

It didn't.

Some ancient, deep logic decided "less bad" was preferable to "catastrophic failure."

The weight ratcheted down one click.

The anchor breathed.

Not air—relief.

The cavity shuddered. The luminescent threads crashed against each other like a startled school of fish.

The wound hated it.

It had been riding the instability, feeding on the imbalance. Now its playground had tilted.

The swirling glow around them tightened, threads snapping into harsh, jagged pulses.

For a moment, Mai's vision blurred.

She got flashes, like static between channels. A coastline she'd never seen. A storm that never happened. A thousand lives the wound wanted to retroactively splice into reality to justify its existence.

No.

She clenched her jaw, doubled down on her refusal.

The rebreather hissed, loud in her ears.

Ace felt the wound's temper tantrum as a fresh, wild grab at her edges. It went hunting for loose

thoughts, for unanchored fears.

It found Violet.

For one terrifying instant, the three-way balance inside Ace tilted.

The wound pushed: *_You are a crack. Let me through._* Violet pushed back: *No. She's mine. The Wellspring pressed: *_You are a stone I lost._**

Ace almost lost track of which "you" was which.

Too many currents. Too many claims.

Mai's hand—real, gloved, cold—closed around her wrist.

The contact cut through everything.

"You are Ace," Mai told her, not in words but in the way her grip anchored. *_You are mine and yours and no one else's._*

Violet laughed, delighted, and—for once—stepped back instead of forward.

Fine. Share.

The shadow around Ace settled. It didn't retreat, it sharpened—more blade than fog.

The wound's reach bounced off it.

Shammy took the brunt of the backlash.

The Wellspring's shifting decision had come through her, and the wound knew it. The water around her thickened, trying to compress her back into conduit, to strip away the bits that had chosen.

Her armor screamed.

Not audibly, but in stress. The etched channels swelled with too much light. Hairline fissures appeared where there had been none.

For a heartbeat, she was back where she'd been the day she pulled a furious child out of a river: caught between duty and defiance.

She chose defiance again.

She pushed the Wellspring's pressure away from her own core and into the anchor instead, a controlled redirect.

Not through me, she told it. Through the thing you built for this. Let it do its work. Let me do mine.

The Wellspring, vast and not truly sentient, nevertheless *_recognized_* the shape of that argument.

It had forged the anchor on the assumption that its servants would hold.

Here was one, still holding. Still arguing, yes—but not rejecting its purpose.

The pressure eased off Shammy fractionally.

Some of the weight she'd been carrying for centuries slipped into the lattice below.

The anchor flared brighter.

Echo fragments shrieked and popped like bubbles as their pressure sources vanished.

The cavity's glow changed hue.

Not dramatically. No cinematic shift from blue to gold. Just a subtle deepening, a less frantic flicker. The Riptide Seven pattern, if Mai could have graphed it in that moment, would have shown a tiny but real damping of its worst oscillations.

They had succeeded.

Not fully. Not permanently.

But enough that the harbor above would not crack open like an eggshell in the next tide.

Mai would have liked to take a second to appreciate that.

The wound did not give her one.

Deprived of its easy leverage, it changed tactics.

The luminescent threads around them coalesced—not into columns, not into vague humanoid shapes, but into masks.

Three of them.

They hung in the water at arm's length, perfectly still, impossibly sharp.

They weren't copies of faces. They were archetypes. The kind of simplified expressions people drew when they didn't have time for detail.

One smiling. One blank. One screaming.

Each oriented toward one of them.

Mai got the blank one.

Of course she did. The wound had learned something from her refusal. It knew she feared being reduced to function—analyst, gate, fixer—with no self left behind that.

Ace got the smiling one.

A wide, too-wide grin, eyes crinkled in a way that didn't reach anything beneath. She could feel the accusation in it: you cope with jokes. You'll laugh your way into the water and call it courage.

Shammy got the screaming one.

Mouth open, no sound, eyes two dark holes.

It wasn't hers. That was what made it effective. It was the scream of a river forced through a narrow channel, of tides fenced by concrete—every time water had been made to hold still against its will.

The masks didn't move physically, but they pressed.

Mai felt the blankness reach for her, offering an erasure. No fear, no choice, no contradiction. Just function. Just flow charts and pattern inversions until she wore down to a smooth stone.

Ace felt the smile trying to glue itself to her face, suggesting she didn't really mean her "no"s, that it was all performance, that if she stopped making jokes there would be nothing underneath.

Shammy felt the scream trying to overwrite her quiet, to tell her she was the Wellspring's captive rage, nothing more.

It might have worked, if they'd been alone.

They weren't.

Mai let herself feel the suggestion fully—for exactly one heartbeat.

She examined it the way she would examine an anomaly: angle, vector, desired outcome.

Then she did something very unscientific.

She got angry.

Not at the wound. At the utility of the trick.

"You really think I haven't seen this before?" she thought, directing the contempt into the water. "Bureaucracies do it better than you. You're just damp and louder."

She reached out and grabbed the blank mask.

Her fingers passed through it—no resistance—but the act mattered.

"I am not your instrument," she told it. "I am the reason things like you get closed."

The mask crackled.

Fine lines spiderwebbed across its smooth surface, filled with light. For a second, Mai saw herself reflected in it—tired, eyes ringed with shadows, mouth set in a line that wasn't nothing.

Then the reflection fractured.

The blank expression split into a thousand smaller, more complex ones and dissolved into the water.

Ace watched that and snorted, bubbles erupting from her rebreather.

"Show-off," she thought at Mai.

Then she turned to her own mask.

The smiling face leered, unbothered by the shift in currents. Its edges were wrong—too sharp, corners of the mouth cutting up into where cheeks should have been.

It told her she was a performance, that her defiance was a bit, that if she stopped performing she'd sink.

She'd had years of training for that one.

She'd spent most of her life weaponizing her own fear of sincerity, hiding behind quips and recklessness. Being with Mai had forced her to notice that.

She thought of the nights when no one saw her shake, when Mai had been asleep and she'd watched the ceiling, waiting for shadows that didn't come.

She'd faced the idea of being nothing.

And found that, stubbornly, she was still someone.

"Not buying it," she told the smiling mask.

She curled her fist and punched it.

Her glove met no resistance, of course. But the shadow around her knuckles did.

The mask shattered.

Not theatrically. No shards. It simply came apart, the edges losing cohesion, the expression blurring into something nonsensical before dissolving.

The scream mask turned to Shammy.

For the first time since they'd entered the water, real fear flickered through her.

The expression it offered her wasn't human. The proportions were off. The mouth was too wide, the eyes too far apart—a distorted reflection of what the Wellspring thought she was.

The scream in it was the sound of levees breaking, of dams failing, of entire coastlines clawed away. It was every moment water had been forced into shapes that weren't its own, then punished for trying to return.

It whispered: This is all you are. A long, slow catastrophe.

Shammy had never liked screaming.

Too much wasted breath.

She looked at the mask.

She thought of Ace on the river bank, coughing out water and insults, kicking the surface as if she could bruise it.

She thought of Mai, telling the Wellspring "no" with math and sheer will.

She thought of the radiator in the safehouse, rattling for months until she walked past and it settled.

She remembered all the times she had held back floods because someone on the shore had whispered "please" instead of "help."

She was not the scream.

She was the pause after.

She lifted a hand and did something very simple.

She smoothed the mask's cheek with her thumb.

"It hurts," she told it silently. "I know. That does not mean you have to swallow everything."

The mask's expression faltered.

The mouth closed a fraction. The eyes narrowed, not in rage, but in something like confusion.

Then it broke.

The scream didn't echo. It seeped out into the water, thinner now, less directed. The mask dissolved.

For the first time since they'd dropped into the cavity, the luminescent threads around them loosened.

The wound wasn't gone. It would never be, not entirely. But it had lost its grip on its newest toys.

In the sudden relative quiet, the anchor's presence dominated.

Mai's head pounded, but her thoughts felt cleaner.

"We've done as much as we can here," she thought, her fingers making the signal: Up. Now.

Ace squeezed back: Agreed. Before it comes up with a new game.

Shammy didn't argue.

She took one last long look at the anchor's lattice, memorizing the pattern of its cracks, the shape of its stubborn endurance.

"Hold," she told it, not as a command, but as an encouragement. "We will send others. More precise hands. You are not forgotten."

The anchor, being a construct and not truly alive, didn't understand.

But the Wellspring, massive and pattern-based, registered the nuance.

The pressure from above settled into the new configuration with a weary kind of acceptance.

For now.

They kicked upward.

The ascent felt longer than the descent.

Part of that was the bend in the tunnel. Part of it was the human brain's tendency to stretch time when under stress. Part of it was the wound, sulking, making the water cling.

Mai kept count.

Not of seconds—they'd long since stopped matching subjective experience—but of breaths.

In. Out. In. Out.

She felt the moment they crossed back through the cavity's edge. The pressure on her mind dropped from a clawing insistence to a general ache. The glow dimmed slightly.

The concrete under her glove returned, rough and familiar.

Shammy led them back to the tunnel slope, her presence a moving calm.

Ace's shadow, which had been all blade and defense, pulled tight around her again, no longer flaring outward.

They reached the narrow transition where the concrete resumed fully and the luminescent water settled to the lower half of the tube.

Mai forced herself not to rush. Panic on ascent was how people drowned with functional equipment.

When her wrist display finally told her they'd reached their planned limit, she tapped Ace's ankle twice.

Surface.

They kicked up the last few meters of the flooded slope, emerging into comparatively dull, normal tunnel water. The glow receded behind them like a memory.

It was almost a shock when Ace's head broke the surface and her rebreather hiss turned into real, open noise.

She spat out the mouthpiece, sucking in damp tunnel air.

"Ha—"

The word broke into coughing.

Mai surfaced next to her, gasping, pushing the mask up onto her forehead. Her lungs burned. Her head throbbed in a way that felt half physical, half metaphysical.

Shammy emerged last.

She didn't gasp. She simply was there, water streaming off her armor, emissive eyes dimmer now, but still steady.

For a moment, the three of them clung to the curve of the tunnel, breathing and listening.

The water below them sloshed once, then settled.

No new glow. No reaching tendrils. Just cold, tired tunnel.

Ace laughed eventually, hoarse and helpless.

"Well," she said. "I didn't drown in my own backstory. New personal best."

Mai let her head fall back against the wall, eyes closed.

"We partially stabilized a primordial hydrological anchor with improvised pattern inversion and stubbornness," she said. "I am filing that under 'acceptable use of an evening.'"

Shammy looked between them, something soft and old in her face.

“You refused well,” she said.

Ace snorted. “We’re very good at saying no.”

Mai cracked one eye open. “That is literally my job description.”

The tunnel felt different now.

Not safe. But less like a throat about to swallow them.

The weight in the air had shifted from immediate threat to lingering hangover.

Mai checked the scanner. The device whined, then spat out a garbled but readable set of new baseline readings.

Riptide Pattern Seven’s amplitude had dropped.

Not to zero. Not even by half.

But enough that the immediate catastrophic failure models she’d sketched in her head now fell into the “low probability” column.

“We bought time,” she said softly. “Days, maybe weeks. Enough for the Foundation to get a real containment team in place.”

Ace bumped her shoulder against Mai’s. “We’ll still be their favorite disaster-magnets.”

“Undoubtedly,” Mai said.

Shammy’s gaze drifted back down the slope, toward the faint, distant glow.

“It will not like being held,” she murmured. “The wound will keep pushing. The Wellspring will keep pressing. The anchor will keep screaming.”

Mai nodded. “But now it is screaming slower.”

Shammy considered that. “Sometimes slower is mercy.”

Ace let herself relax, just a little.

Her muscles still trembled with adrenaline and leftover pressure, but the worst of the wound’s grip had slid off.

She turned her head toward Shammy.

“Hey,” she said quietly.

Shammy looked at her.

“Thanks,” Ace said. “For... all of that.”

Shammy’s lips curved in a small, genuine smile.

"You kicked a piece of conceptual sewage in the face," she said. "I only redirected some weight."

Mai laughed once, exhausted.

"I'm putting that in the report," she said. "'Mission Summary: kicked conceptual sewage in the face.'"

Ace grinned. "O5 will love it."

"They'll redact it," Mai said. "But I'll know it was there."

They rested for another minute, letting hearts and thoughts settle.

Then Mai pushed herself upright.

"Come on," she said. "Before the tunnel decides to have opinions again."

Ace groaned, but obeyed.

They began the crawl back through the collapse, the scrape of their gear on stone oddly comforting. The world above felt impossibly far away and tantalizingly close all at once.

Behind them, deep in the glowing cavity, the anchor held a little steadier.

The wound, rudely interrupted, circled its new constraint like a shark, testing for weaknesses.

It would be back.

But so would they.

For now, that was enough.

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