

Chapter 10 – Surface Tension

By the time they reached the maintenance shaft, the tunnel felt like a bad dream shrugging off sleep.

The glow in the water behind them had settled into a dull, steady shimmer, visible around the bend but no longer clawing at their thoughts. The concrete walls had gone back to being concrete—damp, cracked, unambitious.

Ace hauled herself up the rope first, boots scraping metal rungs that had never expected to meet someone like her. She popped out into the gray daylight with a grunt and rolled clear to make room.

Mai followed, slower, limbs protesting the transition from weightless water to gravity and cold air. The hatch frame bit into her gloves as she climbed. She emerged into the narrow strip of weeds and gravel behind warehouse C-7 and sucked in a lungful of open air that tasted like rust and diesel and, luxuriously, not-wound.

Shammy didn't climb. She stepped.

One moment she was below, a tall shape in a cramped tunnel. The next she was rising out of the hatch like the water itself had decided to return her. Droplets sluiced off her armor, catching the weak light.

Ace flopped onto her back in the grass, rebreather hanging loose around her neck. She stared up at the low, cloud-heavy sky and laughed, short and breathless.

"Okay," she wheezed. "Checked 'primordial anchor dive' off the bucket list. Next up: something with less drowning."

Mai sat cross-legged beside the open hatch, rebreather pushed up onto her head like a mispositioned crown. Her hands shook slightly as she unclipped gear, but her voice, when she spoke, had found its usual dry balance again.

"We'll decontaminate at the safehouse," she said. "For both pathogens and ideas."

Shammy stood half a step away from the hatch, gaze turned toward the harbor.

From this angle, they couldn't see the breakwater, only the tops of cranes and the gray slice of water beyond the warehouses. But Shammy didn't need a direct line of sight. The Wellspring's pressure brushed against her awareness like a distant weather front.

"It is quieter," she said.

Mai lifted her head. "The anchor?"

"The wound," Shammy said. "It sulks."

Ace snorted. "Good. Let it sit in the corner and think about its actions."

Mai stood carefully, knees reminding her she was not, in fact, indestructible. She closed the hatch with a grunt and spun the rusted locking ring back into place.

There was something comforting about the mundane act. As if, by resealing a decades-old municipal access point, she was also slapping a flimsy lid on a very non-mundane hole in reality.

"The local council would be horrified if they knew what they'd built over," she said.

Ace rolled onto her side and pushed herself up, grass sticking to her damp clothes.

"They won't," she said. "They'll just complain about their water bills and wonder why the tide charts are off by half a centimeter."

Mai took one last look at the hatch, then turned to Shammy.

"Can you... stay out of deep resonance for a while?" she asked. "You took the brunt of those pressures. I don't want the Wellspring deciding it can use you as a permanent patch."

Shammy's emissive eyes softened.

"It cannot," she said. "Not anymore. I have... too many edges."

"Good," Mai said, a little too quickly.

Ace caught that and filed it away for later.

They walked back to the safehouse with the unsteady gait of people whose inner equilibrium hadn't caught up to their outer stability. The wind off the water cut through damp clothes and dried hair in an unpleasant, necessary way.

The city went about its business.

Cars passed on the coastal road. Someone shouted orders on the docks. A dog barked behind a chain-link fence. To most of the world, the harbor glow was just "weird water" on social media and a line item in some municipal "environmental anomalies" report.

To Ace, Mai, and Shammy, it was a thing that had tried to remember them wrong.

The safehouse door looked almost domestic when they reached it—just a reinforced gray slab in a forgettable wall.

Mai keyed them in.

The warmth inside hit Ace like a hug and a scolding at the same time. The dry air smelled faintly of burnt coffee and old electronics.

Tokala was halfway to the door when they stepped in, a stack of printouts clutched to his chest like a paper shield.

He froze at the sight of them.

"You're—" he started, then stopped, eyes flicking from Shammy's damp, glowing armor to Ace's cut cheek to the faint circles under Mai's eyes. "You're back."

"Your grasp of the obvious continues to impress," Ace said, but there was less bite in it than usual.

Mai peeled off her rebreather harness and set it on a metal chair with more care than it deserved.

"Status?" she asked.

Tokala blinked, brain trying to jump tracks from emotional reaction to professional report.

"Right," he said. "Um. Riptide Pattern Seven's amplitude dropped by about twelve percent starting ten minutes ago. Frequency is holding at eighteen seconds, but the high-energy spikes are less severe. The shoreline sensors are reading lower stress on the breakwater foundations. No new echo formations detected topside. The glow is... dimmer?"

The question in his voice was almost hopeful.

"It will stay that way for a while," Shammy said, stepping further into the room. "Not forever. But the anchor has one more breath."

Tokala stared at her like he might cry or laugh or both.

"You... did something," he said. "Down there."

Ace flopped into her usual spot on the file cabinet, more tired than cocky now.

"We annoyed a cosmic plumbing fixture," she said. "It adjusted."

Mai sank into a chair at the central table and pulled the nearest notepad toward her.

"Shammy helped us redirect some of the Wellspring's pressure through the anchor in a more stable pattern," she said, because "annoyed a cosmic plumbing fixture" would not fly in internal documentation. "The wound lost one of its leveraged instabilities. It will have to work harder to undermine the structure now."

Tokala nodded, eyes wide. "So we're... safe?"

Mai paused, pen hovering.

"Safer," she said. "For now. We reduced the immediate risk of catastrophic anchor failure. But the wound is still there. The Wellspring is still pressing. The anchor is still cracked."

Tokala deflated slightly. "Right. Of course."

Ace watched his shoulders sag and felt a pang of something like guilt.

"We bought you time," she said, softer. "That's something. Call your Site Director, tell them they've got a window to send in the big toys."

Mai nodded. "Full hydrological containment team, structural thaumics, cognitive hazard specialists. The works. We can give them our data, our adjustments, and our very strong recommendation not to treat this like a standard coastal anomaly."

Tokala swallowed. "They're going to ask how we managed this with a three-person field team."

Mai's mouth quirked. "Tell them it was a collaborative improvisation between an elementally aligned asset, an overqualified analyst, and a stubborn weapon."

Ace put a hand to her chest. "She does love me."

Tokala looked between the three of them and decided, wisely, not to ask for clarifications.

"I'll start drafting the notification," he said. "And some tea. Or coffee. Or both."

He retreated to the bank of equipment, fingers trembling only slightly as he sat, put on his headset, and began navigating the Foundation's labyrinthine communications protocols.

Mai flipped open the notepad properly and started writing.

Not the official report—that could come later, cleaned and polished and stripped of the bits that would make oversight twitch. This was the raw version. The one where she noted down every subjective impression before fatigue sanded the edges off.

Anchor cavity: depth unknown. Anchor structure: non-euclidean load-distribution lattice, partially fractured. Primary intervention method: pattern inversion at fracture locus, supported by elemental mediation and shadow disruption. Cognitive hazard behavior: adaptive, role-targeting, uses archetypal masks under high pressure...

Her handwriting deteriorated slowly from neat block letters to a more hurried script, but the flow of information stayed coherent.

Ace watched her for a minute, then slid off the cabinet and wandered to the window.

The harbor glow was only barely visible now in the gray daylight—a faint, wrong brightness at the edge of the breakwater.

From up here, it almost looked... peaceful.

She hated that.

Shammy stood near the opposite wall, as if giving Mai's concentration physical space. The channels in her armor were dimmer now; the emissive light in her eyes had settled into its usual, gentle intensity.

Ace drifted toward her, drawn by curiosity and the need for someone who understood the water's moods better than any sensor.

"You okay?" Ace asked quietly.

Shammy considered the question.

"My structure is strained," she said. "Some channels cracked. But I will mend."

Ace squinted at her. Up close, she could see faint, hairline fractures along some of the armor's etched lines, filled with a darker, almost bruised light.

"Does it... hurt?" Ace asked.

"Pain is a useful signal," Shammy said rather than yes. "I am not accustomed to ignoring it."

Ace snorted soft. "That's one thing we've got in common."

Shammy's mouth curved. "You ignore many signals."

"Hey," Ace said. "I ignore the ones that want me dead."

"Many of those," Shammy agreed.

Ace leaned against the wall beside her, sliding down until she was sitting on the floor, legs stretched.

For a moment, they watched the harbor in silence.

"You pulled a pretty stupid move back there," Ace said eventually.

"In the cavity," Shammy clarified.

"Yeah," Ace said. "Opening yourself fully to the Wellspring like that. Letting it use you as a conduit again."

Shammy tilted her head. "I did not let it. I shaped how it moved through me. There is a difference."

"Semantics," Ace said.

Shammy looked at her, amused. "From you, that is funny."

Ace rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. You could've... broken. Let it fold you back into 'just water'."

Shammy's emissive gaze turned inward for a moment, remembering the sensation of nearly being pressed flat into function.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I could have."

She looked back at Ace, eyes bright.

"But you were there," she added. "And Mai. And the anchor. I was not choosing alone."

Ace's throat did that annoying tight thing again.

"We're good at bad decisions," she said. "Just didn't want you making them solo."

Shammy smiled—not the small, polite curve she gave Tokala, but a wider, softer thing that showed a flash of teeth.

"You pulled your own foolishness," she said. "Letting the wound touch Violet."

Ace flinched. "You felt that."

"Yes," Shammy said. "Shadow ripples. Many teeth."

"She bit it," Ace said.

"I know," Shammy said. "She liked it."

Ace groaned. "I am never going to hear the end of this, am I."

"Probably not," Shammy said.

They sat in companionable silence for a moment longer, the weight of what they'd done settling around them like the aftermath of a storm.

Ace broke it first.

“So...” she said. “Question that’s been bothering me since we saw you on that rock.”

Shammy’s head tilted. “Yes?”

“You haven’t aged,” Ace said, straightforward as always. “At all. The river, that day—that was twenty years ago. More. You look exactly the same. Do you just... not?”

Shammy looked mildly puzzled. “I am not sure what you mean.”

“Humans”—Ace pointed at herself, then at Mai at the table—“get older. We change. Wrinkles, gray hair, bad joints, emotional baggage. You don’t.”

Shammy glanced between them, eyes lingering on Mai’s concentration, the faint strain lines around her mouth, then back to Ace’s face, still young, still edged.

“I do not age like you,” Shammy said. “Water returns. It cycles. It becomes rain, river, sea, sky, and then again. Pieces of me have been many places. But this shape”—she touched her own chestplate lightly—“is... anchored to when I chose.”

Ace frowned. “When you... chose what?”

“To be this,” Shammy said simply. “To have hands. A face. To pull one small child out of a river and then stay close, in case she fell again. The Wellspring thought it was a temporary deviation. A test. It was wrong.”

Ace stared at her.

“So you just... locked yourself like this,” Ace said. “Because of me.”

Shammy considered. “Because of what you were,” she said. “Small and loud and impossible. You made the river interesting. You made the shore... complicated. I wanted to see what you would do next.”

Ace opened her mouth. Closed it. The usual sarcasm failed to arrive on time.

“That’s...” she groped for words, found one that felt too big, used it anyway. “A lot.”

Shammy’s smile warmed. “You are worth a lot.”

Ace made a strangled noise and dropped her head back against the wall hard enough to hurt.

“You can’t just say things like that,” she muttered.

“Why not?” Shammy asked, genuinely baffled.

“Because my emotional regulation is held together with duct tape and shadow,” Ace said. “And Mai is in the room.”

“I heard that,” Mai said without looking up from her notes.

Ace pointed at her. “Case in point.”

Shammy’s eyes softened as she watched the two of them bounce off each other.

"You are both very loud currents," she said. "It is... good. The world needs noise."

Mai finally set her pen down and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Please do not encourage her," she said, but there was no real frustration in it.

Tokala cleared his throat from the desk.

"I've got preliminary confirmation from Site-██████," he said. "They're dispatching a containment and research team within twelve hours. Which, given the bureaucracy involved, is... frankly a miracle."

"They probably saw your Riptide graphs and panicked," Mai said.

"I may have used the words 'imminent anchor failure' and 'non-linear escalation of conceptual echoes'," Tokala admitted.

Mai nodded approvingly. "Good. Fear is a valid motivator."

Ace laced her fingers behind her head, eyes closed.

"So what now?" she asked. "We stick around, hold their hands? Or do we leave them a strongly worded memo and sneak out before someone starts asking why the anchor changed its mind when we showed up."

"Both," Mai said. "We'll give them our data, our subjective observations, and Shammy's input, then let the specialists do what they do. But we're not vanishing. The O5s will want a briefing. And I'd rather control the narrative than let someone who's never seen the Wellspring try to interpret it."

Ace grimaced. "Paperwork. Actual worst part of the job."

"That and getting nearly rewritten by angry water," Mai said.

"Eh," Ace said. "At least the water was honest."

Tokala snorted softly.

There was a brief, comfortable lull.

Then a sound intruded.

A faint gurgle, from the corner of the room.

Ace's eyes snapped open.

Mai's head whipped around.

They all looked at the sink.

The tap was closed. The basin was dry.

The pipe under the counter, however, was... humming.

A thin line of luminescent moisture traced itself along the metal, glowing softly in the dim room.

Tokala made a small, strangled noise. "Oh no," he whispered. "I just fixed the plumbing reports."

Shammy walked over to the sink.

The water inside the metal pulsed, trying to rise, then hesitating as her presence crowded the space.

She laid her fingers lightly on the pipe.

“Shh,” she said.

The hum quieted.

The glow dimmed, then went out, like a sulking child going back to bed.

Shammy withdrew her hand.

“It will twitch,” she said. “Here and there. The wound remembers that you touched it. It will leave fingerprints in your systems.”

Mai exhaled slowly. “We’ll add local plumbing to the regular monitoring list.”

Ace snorted. “I can see the maintenance logs now. ‘Anomalous faucet episode, neutralized by telling it to shh.’ ”

Shammy looked over her shoulder at Ace. “Words matter,” she said. “Especially the small ones.”

Mai made a mental note in capital letters: _RESIDUAL ECHO RISK - INFRASTRUCTURE._

Then, finally, she closed the notebook and stood.

“Shower,” she said. “Then food. Then a three-hour nap. After that, we brief properly.”

Ace pushed herself upright with a groan. “You had me at shower. The anchor’s metaphysical hangover is one thing, but I smell like bad decisions and sewer.”

“You always smell like bad decisions,” Mai said.

“Again with the rude accuracy,” Ace muttered.

Shammy watched them head for the corridor, then glanced back at Tokala.

He was still at the desk, looking at the live feed from the coastal sensors. The Riptide waveform on the screen pulsed, steadier than before.

“Thank you,” he said to her quietly. “For... whatever you are.”

Shammy thought about it for a moment.

“You are welcome,” she said. “For whatever you think I am.”

She followed Ace and Mai toward the showers.

In the corridor, the radiators hummed, then settled.

The building, slowly, began to believe that it would stay standing.

Later, much later, when they were dry and fed and marginally less exhausted, a new line would

appear in the Foundation's internal database.

Incident: Wellspring-Adjunct Anchor W-07 / Harbor Site ■ Status: Stabilized (Provisional) Key Contributors: Field Agent Ace, Dr. Mai, Entity Designation-Pending ("Shammy") Summary: Riptide Pattern Seven amplitude reduced via localized intervention at anchor fracture locus. Secondary cognitive hazard expressions (role-targeting masks) encountered and neutralized through resistance and counter-pattern assertion. Anchor lattice remains compromised but functional. Wellspring pressure partially redirected. Wound behavior altered; remains active.

Under "Recommendations," Mai would write: Do not approach Wellspring-adjacent anchors without elementally aligned mediation and at least one stubborn bastard whose primary anomaly is refusal.

The line would be redacted in most circulated versions.

But the people who needed to read it would.

And somewhere under a coastal city that didn't know how close it had come to drowning in new stories, an ancient lattice of impossible angles would hold on a little longer.

Because three very loud currents had gone down to tell it:

You are not breaking today.

—

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Last update: **27/03/2026 18:08**

