

Chapter Eleven – The Night After the Wellspring

The Foundation containment team wasn't due until morning.

That left them with the worst kind of timeslot: the hours after the work was done and before the consequences arrived.

The safehouse, such as it was, handled it badly.

Pipes rattled in the walls, then fell quiet the second Shammy walked past. The emergency exit sign flickered at irregular intervals until Ace threw a screwdriver at it. The vending machine in the corner whirred to life on its own and tried to vend a packet of something that had expired eight years ago.

Mai unplugged it before it could escalate.

"Residual echo interference," she told Tokala as he hovered anxiously. "Or poor maintenance. Hard to tell."

He looked at the unplugged vending machine like it might start glowing.

"Will it... get worse?" he asked.

"Probably not," Mai said. "The big structural pressure's damped. What we're seeing now is mostly static—little bits of the wound's signature caught in your infrastructure."

"I'll add it to the list," he muttered, scribbling on a notepad already covered in her earlier instructions.

"Good," she said. "Make a new section. 'Haunted Appliances'."

Ace snorted from the couch.

There were two couches in the safehouse's common room, both ugly and structurally questionable. Ace had claimed the less terrible one, sprawled across it with a blanket thrown haphazardly over her legs. Her hair was still damp from the shower, curling slightly at the ends.

Shammy sat on the floor nearby, legs crossed, back against the wall, like a statue someone had dropped in the wrong museum.

In the better light, the hairline cracks in her armor were more obvious. They traced along the etched channels like pale scars, filled with a darker blue than her usual glow. Nothing leaked. Nothing dripped. But the damage was there.

Ace kept looking at it and looking away again, like staring too long might make it worse.

Tokala retreated eventually to the operations room, muttering about calibrations and coffee.

The safehouse settled.

Wind rattled the windows. Somewhere in the ventilation system, an echo of the eighteen-second pattern tried to start and then gave up.

Mai dropped into the chair nearest the couch and let herself sag, just a little. Her laptop sat closed on the table; the raw notes were still drying on the desk in the other room.

For the first time since they'd arrived in this nameless little harbor city, there was no immediate next step screaming for attention.

Ace took advantage of the silence first.

She pushed herself upright enough to hook her socked feet under Mai's thigh.

Mai raised an eyebrow. "Personal space?"

"Anchors need ballast," Ace said. "I'm preventing you from floating away into spreadsheets again."

"We don't anchor spreadsheets," Mai said. "We anchor reality."

"Same principle," Ace said.

Shammy watched them with that small, fond stillness she had when the world outside was quiet enough to indulge it.

"You are both very bad at resting," she observed.

"We are resting," Ace said. "This is my resting face."

"It looks like your 'I am thinking of something absurd' face," Shammy said.

"Those overlap," Mai said dryly.

Ace huffed and flopped back again, but left her feet where they were, a warm, solid weight against Mai.

For a while, the only sounds were the wind, distant harbor noises, and the occasional groan from the building's bones as it tried to remember that it wasn't, in fact, a diaphragm for a hydrological wound.

"You should sleep," Mai said eventually, not looking at Ace.

"I napped," Ace said. "In the afternoon. During your epic romance with the report form."

"That was forty minutes," Mai said. "You fell asleep face-down on the keyboard. You typed six lines of 'nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn' into my field notes."

Ace grinned into the couch. "I improved them."

"You corrupted them," Mai said.

"Art is subjective," Ace replied.

Shammy tilted her head. "Humans need more sleep after deep water. Your blood remembers the pressure. It must smooth."

"See?" Mai said. "Elemental authority."

Ace sighed, long and theatrical. "Fine. I'll attempt sleep. But if I dream of screaming plumbing, I'm filing a complaint."

"With whom?" Mai asked.

"With whoever built that anchor," Ace said. "Or with you. You like forms."

Mai rolled her eyes but softened.

She stood, disentangling Ace's ankles from her lap, and stretched until her spine popped.

"The bunks are still set up," she said. "And the Foundation decided to splurge on two whole pillows per bed this time."

"Luxury," Ace said.

Shammy rose more slowly.

"Where do you sleep?" she asked Mai.

"In one of the bunks," Mai said. "Usually."

Ace smirked. "Lies."

Mai arched an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

Ace sat up, eyes gleaming with mischief despite the fatigue.

"Last three missions, you slept in the chair," she said. "One eye open, hand on the gun, brain on fire. I'm upgrading you to horizontal."

Mai snorted. "Last three missions, the anomalies were actively trying to breach containment while we were resting. This one is... less immediate."

"Exactly," Ace said. "Which is why you don't get to watch the walls. You get to shut down for once."

Shammy watched the back-and-forth with quiet interest.

"Do you two always argue about sleeping?" she asked.

"Yes," they said together.

The bunk room was down the hall, a narrow space with four metal-frame beds bolted to the walls in two tiers. Someone had taped a cartoon of a drowning bureaucracy onto the foot of one bunk; another had a faded sticker warning about "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY" half peeled off.

Mai flicked the light on.

The overhead flickered once, then settled. The mattresses looked as thin and unforgiving as ever.

Ace eyed them like an enemy and then shrugged.

"Top or bottom?" she asked.

Mai considered the structural integrity of the frames, Ace's propensity for falling out of things, and the wound's residual behavior.

"Bottom," she said.

Ace blinked. "I thought you liked the higher vantage point."

"I like not having to catch you when you roll over and knock yourself unconscious," Mai said.

"I have never fallen out of a bunk," Ace said, offended.

Mai gave her a look.

"...recently," Ace amended.

Shammy lingered in the doorway, watching the small ritual of who-gets-which-bed with faint bemusement.

"Do you need a place?" Mai asked, pausing as she tugged at the bunk's blanket.

Shammy looked confused. "A place?"

"To rest," Mai said. "You... said you mend. Does that require... stillness? Specific conditions?"

Shammy drifted in a step, gaze flicking over the bunks, the cramped room, the ceiling.

"I do not... sleep," she said slowly. "Not like you. I... settle. Listen. Let currents pass through. Roofs are good for that."

Ace grinned. "Shammy likes rooftops. Confirmed."

Shammy nodded. "I can hear the Wellspring better from the open air. And it can hear me."

Mai frowned faintly. "Is that... safe? After today?"

"Yes," Shammy said. "It is... quieter now. Less angry. More... sore."

Ace winced. "Relatable."

Mai chewed on that, then nodded. "All right. But if the wind decides to throw you off, I'm not filling out the paperwork."

Shammy's smile was small and bright. "The wind likes me."

"Of course it does," Mai muttered.

Ace kicked her boots off, missing the corner neatly this time, and flopped onto the bottom bunk.

The springs squealed in protest.

She shifted, propped her head on one of the pillows, and looked up at Mai.

"You joining me or pretending we're 'professionals' and taking the other bed?" she asked, a lazy dare in her voice.

Mai glanced at the empty bunk across the aisle, then at Ace's open hand on the mattress.

Professionalism warred with exhaustion and the prickling memory of the anchor's pressure.

She sighed.

"We're off duty," she said. "Technically."

“Technically,” Ace agreed.

Mai flicked the light off and slid in beside her.

The mattress were narrow, but they’d both slept in worse conditions. Ace made space automatically, curling just enough to give Mai room without letting go. Mai pressed her forehead against Ace’s shoulder, one hand finding its familiar place over her ribs, counting breaths.

In. Out. In. Out.

The safehouse hummed.

Above the bunk room, the roof waited.

Shammy stepped out onto it a few minutes later.

The door gave under her hand with a reluctant creak. The night air hit her like an old song—salt, exhaust, cold metal, distant fish, the faint ozone whisper of the Wellspring’s vast, slow breath.

The harbor’s glow was thin from here, more suggestion than spectacle, a faint wrongness in the waterline.

She walked to the edge, armored feet whispering on the gravel and tar, and sat with her legs dangling over the side.

From here, she could see the breakwater as a black line against the darker sea. The pressure above it had changed. Less frantic now, more contained.

Still not right.

“Sleep,” she murmured to the water.

It rippled once, petulant.

“You are not healed,” she said. “But you are held. That is something.”

The Wellspring’s awareness brushed hers—massive, impersonal, an old weather system that had seen continents rise and fall.

In the echo of their earlier exchange, there was something like acknowledgement.

She let it pass through her without sticking.

Below, in the bunk room, the human anchors finally drifted down.

Ace’s dreams had never been quiet.

Even before Violet, she’d had nightmares like badly cut films—jumping between fights, falls, failures, always at the moment of impact.

With Violet, they’d gained soundtracks. And teeth.

Tonight started with water.

Of course it did.

She was on the riverbank again, small and furious, the world bigger than her ability to punch it back.

The current tugged at her ankles, cold and quick. The bridge loomed, wooden and half-rotted. Shammy's hand reached down, just out of sight, not yet.

The wound tried to splice itself in.

This time, when she fell, the water was luminescent, glowing threads wrapping around her limbs like cold fingers. The current pulled down and sideways and in, like a throat swallowing.

She knew this trick now.

"You're late to the party," she told it, or tried to. Underwater, her voice came out as bubbles and stubborn intent.

The glow around her twisted.

The river became the anchor cavity, the lattice rising above and below her. The masks drifted past, blank and smiling and screaming, faces she recognized now.

The smiling one tried to reassemble.

She grabbed it by the edge and bit it.

Even in a dream, that felt petty and satisfying.

The mask shrieked without sound and broke apart.

The wound tried another angle: showed her Shammy cracking, sinking; Mai at the bottom of the cavity, eyes gone blank, sketching containment runes on stone until her fingers bled.

Ace's chest clenched.

It hit her in the same place reality did—the part that believed, absolutely, that everything was her fault, that if she had just jumped faster, shouted louder, been sharper—

The thought shaped itself, heavy and familiar:

If I hadn't fallen, Shammy wouldn't have locked herself into this shape. If I hadn't existed, she wouldn't have angered the Wellspring. If I hadn't—

"No," Mai's voice said, clear as a bell behind her.

Ace turned.

Mai was standing on the riverbank, perfectly dry, arms folded, hair moving in a wind that didn't exist.

"That's not how causality works," Mai said. "And even if it did, it's still not your job to retroactively fix every current."

"You're in my dream," Ace said, because that seemed important.

"Yes," Mai said. "Apparently your subconscious filed me under 'infrastructure.' I'm offended."

The water surged, trying to drag Ace down, away from the sarcastic anchor her brain had conjured.

Ace grabbed onto Mai's offered hand anyway.

It felt real.

"You can't be here," the wound protested, in the way the current fought. _You're the planner. You should be in someone else's head, diagramming._

"Get out of my file system," Mai snapped.

She stepped one foot into the water, and where it touched her, it stuttered.

Ace laughed, startled and wet. "You're very aggressive for a hallucination."

Mai squeezed her hand. "I am your hallucination. Of course I'm aggressive."

They pulled.

The river fought.

For a heartbeat, everything tangled—the wound's role games, Violet's claws, Ace's fear.

Then another current joined.

Shammy stepped into the water.

Except it wasn't Shammy-as-Ace-knew-her. It was Shammy-as-the-Wellspring-knew-her: a towering silhouette of moving water, edges contained in armor only because she'd chosen to wear it.

She put both hands on Ace's shoulders.

"You are not drowning again," she said, with a force that shook the dream.

The river remembered.

It remembered letting this stone slip once. It remembered the moment it lost its claim.

It could not rewrite that without tearing up more of its own history than it could afford.

The current weakened.

Ace broke the surface, coughing, laughing, furious.

When she blinked, the cavity was gone. The bridge was gone. The masks were gone.

She was lying in the bunk, one arm flung over her face, breathing hard.

The safehouse hummed around her.

Mai snored quietly into her shoulder, absolutely and obliviously asleep.

Ace lay there for a minute, staring at the underside of the bunk above them, heart pounding.

Her shadow, coiled under the bed like a lazy cat, gave a disgruntled flick. It hadn't enjoyed being dragged through conceptual hydrology in its sleep either.

"Sorry," she whispered.

The shadow huffed. It forgave her because it had no choice.

She turned her head, watching Mai's face.

In sleep, the hard lines of concentration smoothed. She looked younger, and somehow more dangerous, without the distance of analysis. Like someone who might, in fact, punch reality if given a good enough reason.

"Hey," Ace whispered.

Mai didn't move.

"Your infrastructure visited my nightmare," Ace said quietly. "She was very rude to a river."

Mai made a small, questioning sound and burrowed closer.

Ace smiled, despite the hammering in her chest.

"Thanks," she said.

Above them, the pipes gurgled once and shut up.

Mai's dream, when it came, was quieter.

It didn't start with falling or drowning. It started with paper.

She was alone in an endless archive, shelves stretching up into darkness, each labeled with precise, infuriatingly vague codes.

Hydro-ANOM-W-07. Echo-COG-MASK-3. Field-INT-SHAMMY-INIT.

Boxes. Files. Graphs.

She walked the aisles, fingers trailing along spines that felt like stone and ice and old rain.

"Of course," she muttered. "My subconscious is a filing system."

"It is a little on the nose," someone said.

She looked up.

O5-3 stood at the end of the aisle, wearing their usual bland suit and gloves, their face fuzzed in that annoying censoring way her dream had apparently imported.

"Absolutely not," Mai said. "Get out. This is a no-O5 zone."

"It's not me," the figure said. Their voice shifted, glitched, then settled into something familiar.

When the blur cleared, it was Shammy.

Not exactly as she was in the waking world. Here, she wore no armor. Her skin shimmered like water, hair floating in a current that didn't exist, emissive eyes bright enough to cast their own shadows.

"This is your idea of authority," Shammy said, gently amused. "So your mind used that shape."

Mai looked down at herself, half expecting to find a lab coat or a clipboard.

She was in jeans and a T-shirt that read "NO, YOU CAN'T JUST 'ANOMALY' IT" in big block letters.

Good. At least her subconscious had some taste.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, more curious than alarmed.

Shammy walked closer, bare feet silent on the not-quite-floor.

"Your thoughts are loud," she said. "They were echoing into the water. I followed the trail."

"That seems like a boundary violation," Mai said automatically.

"Yes," Shammy said. "I will apologize later if you want."

Mai frowned. "Why are we in a file room?"

"You like boxes," Shammy said. "You put things in them. Label them. It is how you say 'no' to chaos."

Mai looked at the endless shelves.

"Feels more like how I say 'I'll deal with this later'," she muttered.

Shammy's emissive gaze softened.

"You are... unsettled," she said.

Mai snorted. "We dove into a conceptual wound under a city and convinced an ancient hydrological lattice to accept a different load-bearing pattern. Yes, I am unsettled."

"That is not what unsettles you," Shammy said.

Mai opened her mouth to argue—and stopped.

In the silence, the archive whispered.

Folders rustled. Some of the shelf labels flickered, changing. The codes shifted from clinical abbreviations to words.

FEAR-OF-BREAKING-PEOPLE. FEAR-OF-BECOMING-THE-ANCHOR. FEAR-OF-LOSING-NO.

She scowled at them.

"That's unsubtle," she told her own dream. "Try harder."

Shammy stepped closer, close enough that Mai could see the way her not-quite-skin rippled with currents.

"You think," Shammy said carefully, "that because you know how to move pressure, it will always find you. That you will become like the anchor. Built to break first."

Mai swallowed.

“That’s... efficient,” she said. “Better me than—”

“No,” Shammy said, so firmly that the shelves rattled.

Papers shivered in their boxes. Somewhere, a label snapped back from FEAR-OF-BECOMING-THE-ANCHOR to HYDRO-ANALYSIS-001.

Mai glared. “You don’t get to say no to my self-sacrifice reflex. That’s my job.”

Shammy smiled, just a little. “I learned it from you.”

The anger flickered, replaced by something Mai disliked even more: vulnerability.

“I’m good at this,” she said, quieter now. “At seeing where things will crack. At stepping in the way. At... patching. The Foundation uses that. Everyone uses that. And I—”

She broke off.

“And you think that if you ever stop,” Shammy said, “everything will fall in.”

Mai’s throat felt tight. “Sometimes.”

Shammy reached for one of the boxes.

Mai’s hand shot out on reflex. “Don’t—”

Too late.

Shammy pulled it off the shelf and opened it.

Inside was a graph.

Riptide Pattern Seven, amplitude vs time. Someone had scrawled notes in the margins—her own cramped handwriting, furious and precise.

But where the data line should have curved, it simply ended. The rest of the graph was blank.

Shammy held it out.

“You are allowed to not plot the whole curve,” she said. “You held one piece. You do not have to hold all of it.”

“That’s not how containment works,” Mai said.

“That is exactly how containment works,” Shammy said. “Many hands. Many gates. Not one anchor.”

The shelves murmured.

Some of the labels shifted again. FEAR-OF-BREAKING-PEOPLE softened into CONCERN-FOR-IMPACT. FEAR-OF-LOSING-NO became PRACTICE-OF-BOUNDARIES.

Mai looked at the changes, suspicious.

“Is this you,” she asked, “or my subconscious trying to give itself therapy?”

“Both,” Shammy said. “I am only good at water. Your mind does its own work.”

Mai huffed a laugh despite herself.

“Terrifying,” she said. “My mind doing things without me.”

She took the graph from Shammy, folded it twice, and slid it back into the box.

Then she closed the lid and put the box back on the shelf—deliberately, on a lower, less immediately accessible level.

“It can stay there for now,” she said.

Shammy nodded, satisfied.

“You are tired,” she said. “You should rest. For real.”

Mai raised an eyebrow. “What do you think this is?”

“Half rest,” Shammy said. “Half audit.”

Mai couldn’t argue with that.

She looked around at the endless archive.

“We’re going to need more shelves,” she said.

“You will have more ocean,” Shammy replied.

Mai gave her a flat look. “That metaphor makes no sense.”

Shammy smiled, bright as riverlight.

“You will think of a better one,” she said. “In the morning.”

The archive dimmed.

Shelves receded into fog.

The labels blurred back into codes.

Mai’s awareness folded in on itself, finally allowed to sink instead of hold.

When she woke, hours later, her head still ached—but the weight in her chest had shifted slightly from crushing load to heavy, manageable fact.

Ace was a warm shape pressed against her, breathing slow and steady.

Mai lay there for a moment, listening.

The safehouse hummed. Somewhere, a pipe gurgled and then quieted on its own.

Above, on the roof, Shammy sat and listened to the Wellspring breathe, and for the first time since she’d chosen this shape, she did not feel entirely alone between water and stone.

Morning would bring Site Directors and debriefs and containment teams.

Tonight, just for a few hours, the harbor slept.

And the wound, annoyed and newly constrained, dreamed of different shapes it might try next time.

Someone would be there to tell it no.

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