

## Chapter Twelve - The Briefing Tide

Morning came with sirens.

Not urgent ones. Not the “containment breach, run” kind. These were lower, more bureaucratic—convoy escorts, clearance horns, the sound of a small army arriving with permission slips.

Ace watched from the safehouse window as the Foundation made good on Tokala’s late-night call.

Trucks rolled down the coastal road in a neat line: white, gray, anonymous. Logos that meant nothing to civilians but everything to anyone who’d ever had to fill out Form SITE-19-A (“Request for Borrowed Mobile Task Force Units”). Cranes on their backs, sealed containers strapped down, cable spools glinting in the watery sunlight.

The harbor, for once, looked honestly industrial instead of secretly haunted.

“Containment porn,” Ace muttered.

Mai, standing beside her with a mug that definitely wasn’t her first coffee, arched an eyebrow. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I say that like I’m about to be buried under three hundred pages of ‘as per protocol’,” Ace said.

“Your suffering is a small price to pay for the possibility of not drowning in conceptual sewage,” Mai said, and sipped.

Behind them, Shammy stood a little away from the window, gaze not on the trucks but on the water.

The glow around the breakwater had faded further overnight. It was still wrong if you knew what to look for—still too steady, too deliberate—but it no longer pulsed like an open wound.

“The Wellspring is... wary,” she said softly. “It does not like your machines near its skin.”

Mai glanced at her. “It can learn to cope. We’re not drilling into its heart. Just putting braces on the parts that crack when it sneezes.”

Ace grinned. “You hear that? She’s negging an ocean.”

“I’m simplifying for your benefit,” Mai said.

Tokala appeared in the doorway, looking ruffled and overcaffeinated.

“They’re here,” he said unnecessarily, then hesitated. “Obviously. Uh. We’re expected in the conference room in twenty.”

Ace squinted at him. “We have a conference room?”

Tokala sighed. “Every safehouse has a conference room. You’ve just never stayed long enough to notice.”

“That’s on you for inviting us to all the fun anomalies,” Ace said.

Mai set her mug down. “Any word on who’s leading the containment team?”

Tokala grimaced. "Dr. Halden."

Mai blinked. "Hydro-Thaumic Division Halden?"

"The same," Tokala said. "And Section Chief Ramirez from Cognitive Hazards. They brought a full Anchors & Wellsprings unit. Plus Ethics observer."

Ace whistled. "We rate, apparently."

"We poked a Wellspring-adjacent anchor and made it blink," Mai said. "We were always going to attract attention."

Ace shot Shammy a sideways look. "Think you're ready to be glared at by the world's grumpiest water wizard and a man whose job title probably contains the words 'moral hazard'?"

Shammy considered. "Yes," she said simply. "Are they ready for me?"

Ace snorted. "God, I hope not."

The conference room tried very hard to be normal.

Rectangular table. Stackable chairs. Whiteboard. Mounted projector. One wall of glass looking out onto a perfectly boring stretch of corridor. Someone had even left a bowl of individually wrapped mints on the table, as if to convince fate that this was just another meeting about budget allocation.

It didn't work.

The air hummed faintly with the same eighteen-second rhythm the harbor had been breathing for days. The overhead lights flickered in sympathy, then steadied when Shammy walked in.

Ace dropped into a chair with her usual disregard for posture. Mai sat beside her, laptop already open, cables trailing to the projector. Tokala took a spot further down, clutching his notebook like a shield.

Across from them sat Dr. Halden, hair gray at the temples, lab coat too crisp for this early in the morning. His badge had enough clearance bars to make most people nervous. Next to him, Section Chief Ramirez—dark-skinned, sharp-eyed, suit instead of lab coat, tablet instead of notebook.

At the end of the table sat the Ethics representative: Dr. Singh. No lab coat, no suit. Soft sweater, tired eyes, the kind of presence that suggested they were absolutely used to being ignored until it was too late.

A large monitor on the wall showed the Foundation crest and the words SECURE LINK - LEVEL 4 ESTABLISHED. The camera above it watched silently.

Halden adjusted his glasses and looked directly at Shammy.

"So," he said. "This must be our 'entity designation-pending'."

It wasn't contempt. More... curiosity with a chaser of worry.

Shammy stood a pace behind Ace and Mai, not taking a seat. Chairs were not designed with her in mind.

"Yes," she said. "I am Shammy."

Halden's eyebrow twitched. "That's... not a very Foundation designation."

Ace grinned. "You should see what she calls us."

Mai cut in before Halden could reply.

"The designation is temporary," she said. "Field nickname. Formal classification can wait until after we're done making sure the harbor doesn't implode."

Ramirez tapped their stylus against the tablet. "We'll need at least a provisional object class for the report."

"'Ally'," Ace suggested. "Anom-Adorable."

"Absolutely not," Mai said.

Halden cleared his throat. "We can revisit nomenclature later. For now—Dr. Mai, Agent Ace, Field Liaison Tokala, Entity Shammy... walk us through exactly what you did."

Mai plugged in the last cable and brought up the first slide.

It was not pretty.

The initial Riptide Pattern Seven graph filled the screen—a chaotic waveform, high spikes, ugly amplitude. She clicked through to the "after" overlay. The difference was subtle but unmistakable: peaks shaved down, some of the wildest oscillations damped.

"This is the harbor baseline before intervention," she said. "And this is twelve hours after. The anchor cavity pressure we measured directly reports a similar reduction."

Halden leaned forward. "What intervention?"

Mai looked him in the eye.

"Pattern inversion at a critical fracture locus, supported by coordinated conceptual resistance," she said. "We went down the maintenance tunnel, entered the cavity, contacted the anchor skin, and—"

"You dove into a Wellspring-adjacent anchor cavity without a hydrological containment team," Halden interrupted, voice dangerously mild.

"Yes," Mai said.

Ramirez raised an eyebrow. "How did that seem like a good idea?"

"It didn't," Ace said cheerfully. "It seemed like the only idea that didn't end with 'city falls into metaphorical and literal sinkhole'."

"We had incomplete data on the anchor's internal structure and failure modes," Mai said, unflinching. "Waiting for a full team would have meant accepting a nontrivial risk of catastrophic lattice failure during the delay. We had an elementally aligned mediator—Shammy—on site, plus my pattern analysis and Ace's... refusal. It was a calculated risk."

Dr. Singh, who had been quietly watching the exchange, smiled faintly at that description.

“Refusal,” they repeated. “As in... anomalous resistance?”

Ace shrugged. “I’m very good at telling things to get bent.”

“The anchor was already bending,” Mai said. “We just... encouraged it to bend in a direction that didn’t collapse immediately.”

Halden pinched the bridge of his nose. “You touched the lattice directly?”

Shammy stepped forward half a pace.

“I did,” she said. “It trusted me more than your machines.”

Halden looked up at her properly now, really seeing her in ways the others hadn’t yet.

“You are Wellspring-aligned,” he said slowly. “Not just water-proximal. Old.”

“Yes,” Shammy said. “I was part of its first patterns. Before your shores had names.”

Ramirez glanced between them, expression tight. “And you... chose to help us instead of... it.”

“I chose to help her,” Shammy said simply, nodding at Ace. “And Mai. The Wellspring can learn to share.”

Ace tried not to preen.

Halden exhaled, a tiny, reluctant sound.

“All right,” he said. “So you had an ancient hydrological entity on your side. That does explain the graphs.”

Ramirez tapped something on the tablet. “We’ve reviewed Tokala’s sensor logs. The reduction in amplitude is real. And the echo formation rate dropped significantly after your dive.”

“At a cost,” Mai said.

She brought up the next slide: schematic sketches of the anchor lattice and its cracks, overlaid with her best approximation of stress lines before and after intervention.

“The anchor is still fractured,” she said. “We didn’t repair it. We forced a controlled shift from ‘imminent chaotic failure’ to ‘extended degenerative stress’. You’ll need to reinforce the lattice, patch the worst cracks, and design a containment field that can handle both Wellspring pressure and residual wound behavior.”

Halden’s eyes lit up despite himself. “You mapped the stress vectors?”

“Roughly,” Mai said. “Underwater, under cognitive assault, with limited time. Don’t treat this as gospel. Treat it as a guide.”

Ramirez gestured with the stylus. “And the cognitive hazard expressions? The masks Tokala mentioned in his preliminary call?”

Mai flipped to a new slide.

Three simple sketches appeared: blank face, smiling face, screaming face.

“Under peak pressure, the wound generated archetypal role masks,” she said. “Tailored to each of us. Blank for me—reduction to pure function. Smiling for Ace—reduction to performance. Screaming for Shammy—reduction to pure hydrological rage.”

Ramirez’s mouth twitched. “Adaptive memetic packaging. Efficient.”

“We broke them,” Ace said. “Conceptually, not just as visuals. Mai refused blankness, I punched the smile, Shammy... talked the scream down.”

“That is a very unhelpful sentence,” Halden muttered.

“It’s accurate,” Mai said.

Dr. Singh leaned forward slightly.

“Were there any lasting effects?” they asked. “Residual identity distortion? Role fixation? Dissociation?”

“No,” Mai said.

“Yes,” Ace said.

They looked at each other.

Mai sighed. “Minor residuals. Nightmares. Familiar patterns amplified. Nothing outside our existing profiles.”

“Dreams where the wound tries to reassert its masks,” Ace said. “We tell it to get stuffed. My baseline weirdness remains unchanged.”

Dr. Singh’s gaze flicked from Ace to Mai to Shammy, weighing what they were not saying as much as what they were.

“And you, Shammy?” they asked. “Any... change?”

Shammy considered, emissive eyes unfocused for a moment as she checked inner currents.

“I am... more cracked,” she said. “The Wellspring pushed. I pushed back. Some channels broke. But I am still myself. Perhaps more so.”

Halden made a note, pen scratching fast.

“We’ll want to run a full battery of post-exposure assessments,” Ramirez said. “Just to be sure.”

Mai nodded. “I expected as much. We can do them after this debrief.”

Ace groaned softly. “You’re not poking my brain with more questionnaires, are you? I already ticked the box for ‘hears hostile water, refuses politely’.”

Ramirez’s lips twitched. “We’ll keep it to a minimum. Probably.”

Dr. Singh looked at Mai.

"From an ethical standpoint," they said, "I have to ask: did you have any other viable options? Short of leaving the city to its own fate?"

Mai met their gaze, unflinching.

"If we'd had a hydrological containment team on site when we arrived, we would have used them," she said. "We didn't. The anchor was days away from a possible uncontrolled shift. The Wellspring was pressing. The wound was feeding. Waiting would have been negligence."

"And going in, knowing the cognitive risks?" Singh pressed.

Mai's jaw tightened. "Calculated self-endangerment, yes. But better three informed, anomalously resilient operatives in a controlled dive than an entire city scrambled by uncontrolled echo formations."

Ace shrugged. "We're built for this. Professionally and... weirdly."

"And I am," Shammy added, "stubborn."

Ramirez barked a short laugh. "That seems to be the team's shared anomaly."

Halden sat back, rubbing his temples.

"I can't decide if I want to yell at you or thank you," he said. "You broke half a dozen protocols and probably saved us six months of screaming at models."

Mai folded her hands on the table.

"You can do both," she said. "But if you yell, yell at me. It was my call."

Ace opened her mouth.

Mai shot her a look. "We're not having the 'it was my call' argument in front of management."

Ace shut it again, scowling.

Dr. Singh's smile was small but real. "Noted," they said. "For the record, Ethics is more concerned that you understood the risks and made them anyway than that you violated process. Given your profiles and the outcome, I'm... inclined to accept your judgment."

"That's a first," Ace muttered.

"We do occasionally approve of things," Singh said dryly.

Ramirez flicked to a new page on the tablet.

"There is one more thing," they said. "You mentioned in your notes that the wound behaviour here matches... other incidents."

Mai's spine went very straight.

"Yes," she said. "Riptide Pattern Seven is unique in its exact parameters, but the underlying Wellspring-adjacent harmonics are present in at least three other documented anomalies—Site-█ coastal fridge event, the Black Fjord echo cascade, and that mess under the old oil platform in the

North Sea.”

Halden grimaced. “Don’t remind me.”

“They all show signs of wounded anchors,” Mai said. “Not as far gone as this one. Not yet. But the pattern is there. Fractures, pressure misrouting, emergent echo fields with role-targeting behaviour in cognitively active zones.”

Ramirez exchanged a look with Halden. “You think this is systemic,” they said. “Not just a one-off structural failure.”

“I think someone—or something—has been meddling with Wellspring anchors,” Mai said. “Badly. Sloppily. Possibly accidentally. Possibly on purpose. And that if we treat each incident as isolated, we’ll keep firefighting until we run out of coasts.”

The secure link monitor on the wall chimed.

A new window popped up: text only. O5-3: DR. MAI, ACCEPTED. CONTINUE.

Mai didn’t flinch at the intrusion.

Of course they were watching.

Ramirez whistled softly. “Well. There’s your answer on whether the Council is paying attention.”

Ace unsuccessfully fought a smirk. “Told you we rated.”

Halden sighed. “So you’re proposing... what? A dedicated task force? A Wellspring Project?”

“Yes,” Mai said, and heard how unlike her it sounded to be that decisive.

She didn’t back down.

“We need a unified framework,” she went on. “A cross-site team that tracks anchor health globally, integrates hydrological, thaumic, and cognitive data, and responds before fractures reach this stage. This harbor is a warning. One we were lucky enough to catch with a cooperating elemental mediator present.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly at “cooperating”.

Dr. Singh looked thoughtful.

“And where,” they asked, “do you see yourself in this... Wellspring Project?”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“Not in charge,” she said. “I don’t have the political capital or the patience. But I want a chair at the table. Enough access to see the patterns. Enough authority to say ‘no’ when someone suggests drilling into an anchor to see what happens.”

“And me?” Ace asked, because she knew better than to assume.

Mai finally looked at her.

"You," she said, "are the one I send when an anchor needs someone to tell it to get bent."

Ace grinned.

Halden's pen scratched over paper, faster now.

"We can propose a dedicated program," he said, thinking aloud. "Fold in existing coastal anomalies, reclassify them under a shared Wellspring-Adjunct umbrella. Use this incident as proof-of-concept."

Ramirez nodded slowly. "Anchors & Wellsprings Tasking. A&W. The acronym will drive someone in Accounting insane."

Dr. Singh smiled. "A worthy cause."

The secure link chimed again. O5-3: PROVISIONAL APPROVAL. DRAFT PROPOSAL FOR W-PROJECT. FIELD TEAM ACE/MAI/SHAMMY FLAGGED FOR FURTHER ASSIGNMENTS.

Below that, another line. ADDENDUM: ENTITY "SHAMMY" - TEMPORARY ALLIED STATUS. NO CONTAINMENT ACTION. OBSERVE.

Halden looked up at Shammy.

"For now," he said carefully, "you'll have an Allied Entity classification. No containment. No forced testing. But... we will ask questions. Is that acceptable?"

Shammy considered the weight of "for now," the old reflexes of being turned into a conduit against her will.

She thought of Ace on the riverbank, Mai in the archive, Tokala clutching his coffee like a lifeline.

"Yes," she said slowly. "As long as I am allowed to say no. And to leave, if I must."

Dr. Singh's gaze sharpened. "That will be in writing," they said. "Allied Entity status with consent clause. I'll see to it."

Shammy inclined her head in thanks.

Ace relaxed a fraction she hadn't realized she'd tensed.

"Well," she said. "That's one way to end up on a watchlist."

"You were already on several," Ramirez said.

Mai closed her laptop with a soft click.

"Debrief complete?" she asked.

"For now," Halden said. "We'll have follow-up interviews, but the immediate picture is clear. You held the line. Stupidly, bravely, effectively."

Ramirez's mouth quirked. "High marks in improvisational containment."

Dr. Singh stood, smoothing their sweater.

"And from Ethics' perspective," they said, "your choices were... within the perimeter of sanity."

Narrowly. Please don't make a habit of diving into unmodeled anchor cavities without backup."

Ace raised a hand. "No promises."

Mai grabbed her wrist and lowered it. "We'll try," she said.

They filed out of the conference room one by one.

Halden and Ramirez peeled off toward the harbor, already arguing about flux compensators and ritual arrays. Dr. Singh headed for a quiet corner and a stack of forms that would quietly redefine the ethical handling of elementally aligned allies.

Tokala lingered long enough to give Ace and Mai a quick, fierce hug—awkward, rushed, but genuine—before hurrying after his new influx of colleagues, notebook at the ready.

That left the three of them alone in the corridor.

Ace blew out a breath.

"Well," she said. "We're officially on the hook for a global hydrological conspiracy. Fancy."

Mai rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I miss the days when SCP-008 was just 'not exactly a zombie prion'."

"You are not built for small problems," Shammy said.

Ace smirked. "Neither are you."

Shammy's emissive eyes turned toward the distant line of the sea.

"The Wellspring is... listening," she said quietly. "You have its attention now. It is curious."

Mai groaned. "Of course it is. The last thing we needed was an ocean watching us."

Ace bumped her shoulder.

"Look at it this way," she said. "We were going to get in trouble with something primordial eventually. At least this one likes Shammy."

"And you," Shammy said.

Ace blinked. "Me?"

"You fell into it wrong and shouted at it," Shammy said. "It finds you... interesting."

Mai sighed. "Fantastic. We're magnets for eldritch bodies of water now. As if one reality-eating Force weren't enough."

Ace slung an arm around her shoulders, somewhere between a hug and a headlock.

"Come on, Doctor No," she said. "We've got, what, twelve hours before someone drops the first Wellspring Project meeting invite on your inbox. Let's use at least one of them to eat something that isn't emergency rations."

Mai tried to resist and failed.

“Fine,” she said. “But I’m picking the restaurant. No seafood.”

Shammy smiled, small and bright.

“I would like to see the city,” she said. “Without wounds.”

Ace grinned. “That’s next on the list.”

She glanced back down the corridor, where the conference room door still stood half-open, the monitor inside blinking with a faint “LINK SECURE” message.

“We’ll save the world’s anchors tomorrow,” she said. “Tonight, we teach an immortal river demon how to navigate a crosswalk.”

Mai snorted. “This can only go well.”

“Better than the last tunnel,” Ace said.

And together, shadow, stone, and water turned their backs on the conference room and walked toward the exit, the taste of the sea still in their lungs and the weight of a new project—not yet named, not yet formalized—settling over them like the first, inevitable wave.

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