

Chapter Thirteen – City Currents

The city wasn't impressive by global standards.

It had no skyline to speak of—just a few taller office blocks jostling with church spires and old brick warehouses. The harbor ate most of the horizon. The wind stole the rest. But it was the kind of place where the streets had grooves worn into them by feet and tires and bad decisions.

Exactly the sort of place, Ace thought, where water could get ideas.

They walked.

No escort, no uniforms. Just three people who didn't quite fit in, moving down a coastal road lined with cheap cafés, shuttered souvenir shops, and the occasional defiant ice cream stand that refused to admit summer was over.

Shammy drew looks.

Not because she was obviously anomalous—Foundation courtesy cloaks had their uses. Mai had loaned her one: a long, dark coat that hid most of the armor and made her look like a tall, slightly overdressed tourist with strange posture.

It didn't quite hide the emissive eyes.

They glowed faintly under the shadow of the hood, catching reflections from car windows and neon signs. People who weren't paying attention didn't notice. People who were blinked, decided they were imagining it, and moved on.

"The Foundation is going to send someone a very stern email about you walking around like this," Mai muttered.

Ace grinned. "They can add it to the pile."

Shammy's head turned slowly, taking in everything.

Traffic lights. Puddles. Shop windows. A dog straining at its leash toward a lamppost.

"This is... dense," she said quietly. "Many small currents. Many decisions."

"Welcome to a city," Ace said. "It leaks."

Mai gestured at a storm drain near the curb.

"The Wellspring touches here too," she said. "Through pipes and sewers and run-off channels. All the little flows that keep people from realizing how much water they use."

Shammy stepped closer to the grate.

A trickle of dirty water gurgled below, carrying traces of soap, rain, spilled drinks, old oil.

She crouched, coat pooling around her, and rested two fingers lightly on the metal.

The city's water flickered against her awareness—petty, annoyed, busy. Not old like the Wellspring. Young and harried and full of human noise.

"It is... tangled," she said. "Like hair that has never been brushed."

Ace laughed. "You've seen my mornings."

Mai's mouth twitched. "We're working on infrastructure. Brushing comes later."

A car rolled past, music thumping faintly through its closed windows.

Shammy straightened, listening.

"That is... not water," she said.

"Unfortunately, no," Ace said. "That's pop."

"It's... very sure of itself for something so shallow," Shammy decided.

Mai choked on a laugh. "I'm writing that down for Tokala. He needs an elementally aligned review column."

They reached the first crosswalk.

It was one of those newer designs, with a countdown timer and a small green human figure that lit up to tell pedestrians when it was safe to cross. The traffic light above it cycled through red, yellow, green with patient indifference.

Ace stopped at the curb and stuck an arm out in front of Shammy automatically.

"Rule one of street survival," she said. "Do not challenge the metal herds."

Shammy blinked. "I would not."

"You say that now," Ace said. "But I've seen you look at cargo ships like they're just badly behaved rocks."

Mai hit the crosswalk button.

It beeped cheerfully, then began its slow countdown.

"See the little green person?" she said. "When it lights up, we walk. When it's red, we wait."

Shammy tilted her head. "Why?"

"Because cars," Ace said. "They move faster than you expect and brake worse than you hope."

Shammy considered the passing traffic.

"Water moves faster," she pointed out. "And has no brakes."

"Exactly," Mai said. "Which is why humans invented rules."

The green figure lit up with a soft chime.

The small crowd at the curb surged forward as one. Ace stepped with them, tugging lightly at Shammy's sleeve.

Shammy walked.

She had no trouble tracking the flow of the cars, the rhythm of the lights, the timing of the pedestrians. The whole system made a kind of sense—structured, repetitive, comforting.

Halfway across, she stopped.

Not because of the traffic.

Because of a child.

He was maybe five, clutching a neon balloon in one hand and the hem of his exhausted mother's coat in the other. The balloon bobbed and tugged, a small, determined pocket of helium trying to escape gravity's boredom.

The child stumbled on a crack in the pavement.

His hand slipped.

The balloon string wriggled free.

He froze, watching it rise.

His mouth opened in a small, helpless sound.

The wind caught the balloon, laughing, and pulled it toward the road.

Shammy moved before the sound fully left the boy's throat.

It was not fast, by her standards. Just a small realignment. One foot finding purchase a fraction of a second earlier than it might have. One arm lifting, fingers closing on the string with effortless precision.

From a human perspective, it was simply... graceful.

She caught the balloon just before it drifted into the path of a truck.

The driver never even saw it.

Shammy turned and knelt so she was eye-level with the child.

He stared at her emissive eyes, mouth open.

She held out the string.

"You dropped this," she said.

He nodded mutely and took it.

His mother—pulled out of her fog of fatigue by the near-miss—caught up, grabbed his shoulder, and blurted a breathless, "Thank you," at Shammy.

Shammy smiled.

"You are welcome," she said.

They crossed the rest of the way.

Ace watched, torn between awe and a nagging feeling of déjà vu.

“You know that looked almost exactly like you grabbing me out of the river, right?” she said when they reached the other side.

Shammy considered. “You were louder,” she said.

Mai hid a smile behind her coffee cup.

“You passed the crosswalk test,” she said. “Congratulations. You are now certified to navigate on-foot human traffic without causing a hydrological incident.”

Shammy’s lips curved. “The rules are... cute.”

“Cute,” Ace repeated. “I love you, city, but you’re being condescended to by an ancient river spirit.”

They walked on.

The café they chose was small and stubbornly local—a chalkboard menu, mismatched chairs, plants in chipped mugs on the windowsills. The kind of place that smelled like butter and strong decisions made at three a.m.

No seafood, as promised.

The waiter did a double-take at Shammy, then decided, like most people, that he did not get paid enough to ask questions and concentrated on the order instead.

Ace pointed at the menu.

“Pancakes,” she told Shammy. “With syrup. And berries.”

Shammy frowned faintly. “Flattened cake?”

“Trust me,” Ace said. “It’s a religious experience.”

Mai ordered something technically classified as breakfast but heavily biased toward eggs and bread.

Shammy studied the glass of water the waiter set in front of her.

The liquid inside was clean, clear, catching the light in small, honest ripples.

She touched the side of the glass.

The water answered, curious, contained and content.

“You drink this?” she asked.

“Yes,” Mai said. “We’re extremely unoriginal.”

“And we have to replace it constantly,” Ace added. “We leak.”

Shammy lifted the glass and sipped.

It was nothing like the Wellspring.

Small. Simple. Tasted of pipes and filters and the trace minerals of the local soil.

"I like it," she said, surprised. "It is... humble."

Mai snorted softly. "That's one word for municipal water."

The pancakes arrived.

Shammy stared.

They were absurd—stacked, buttered, drenched in syrup and berries, steaming gently in the café's warm air.

Ace armed herself with knife and fork like she was about to perform a summoning.

"You cut pieces," she demonstrated, "and then you put them in your mouth. Revelatory."

Shammy copied her carefully.

The first bite stopped her cold.

The sweetness, the warmth, the soft texture soaked through with syrup—it was so far from anything water or stone offered that her brain just... stalled.

"This is ridiculous," she said at last.

"In a good way?" Mai asked, amused.

"Yes," Shammy said. "Humans did this with... flour. And heat. And patience."

"And a complete disregard for glycemic load," Mai said.

Ace grinned, mouth full. "Welcome to civilization. We break the laws of nature to make breakfast more dramatic."

Something in Shammy eased.

She ate slowly, methodically, like someone studying a new current.

Around them, the café exhaled.

A couple argued gently over their phones at a nearby table. An older man read a newspaper, flipping pages with exaggerated rustles. A teenager scrolled through something on her screen, face lit by whatever argument the world was having today.

It was so... ordinary.

Ace felt the edge of it like a bruise.

She'd almost forgotten what normal azimuth looked like, without an echo humming under it.

Mai watched her out of the corner of her eye.

"You're thinking too hard," she said softly.

Ace shrugged. "The last time we had pancakes after an anomaly, it was because we survived a building trying to eat itself from the inside. I'm noticing a pattern."

"Pancakes as post-traumatic ritual," Mai said. "We could publish."

"Ethics would have Opinions," Ace said.

Shammy chewed another bite, thinking.

"This is good," she said slowly. "Not just the food. The... pause. The small weight. It presses differently."

"Gravity," Mai said. "One of our more reliable field hazards."

Shammy met her gaze.

"I would like," she said, "to do this again. After other wounds."

Ace's throat did that annoying tight thing again.

"We can arrange that," she said, aiming for flippant and landing somewhere near earnest. "Assuming the world doesn't drown itself before we finish the menu."

Mai nudged her foot under the table.

"We're working on that," she said. "Systemically, now."

Shammy nodded, satisfied.

She looked out the café window.

Rain had started, fine and insistent, drawing temporary constellations on the glass.

Each drop raced others down invisible paths, merging and splitting.

"The Wellspring watches," she said quietly. "Not just the harbor. All its faces. It is... intrigued."

Mai's fingers tightened on her coffee mug.

"Does it see us as allies?" she asked. "Or as infection?"

"Both," Shammy said. "You are stones that move. You confuse it. I like that."

Ace raised her glass in an invisible toast to confusing eldritch hydrological systems.

"Here's to being someone else's anomaly," she said.

They spent the afternoon walking.

Not as tourists—Ace had no patience for museums she wasn't being chased through—but as surveyors of a different kind.

Shammy met a fountain in a small square, its water cycling dutifully through a pump and a few bored

pigeons. She nodded at it like a distant cousin.

She listened at a public tap, crouched by a canal, watched condensation gather on the inside of a bus window and smiled when a child traced a shape in it.

“Water is how you touch each other without noticing,” she said at one point, watching a woman wash graffiti off a wall. “You move pieces of yourselves in it. Tears. Sweat. Blood. Soap. Regret. It carries your stories.”

Mai considered that. “I should hire you as a metaphor consultant.”

Ace looped an arm around Mai’s shoulders, half to keep her out of the path of a cyclist, half because she could.

“Careful,” she said. “Give her a few more hours and she’ll unionize our metaphors.”

By evening, the wind had gotten teeth.

They stood on the promenade, watching the waves crash against the breakwater. The glow was almost gone now, visible only as a faint wrongness in the way foam broke along the stones.

Shammy’s coat snapped around her legs.

“The anchor holds,” she said. “For now.”

Mai shoved her hands deeper into her pockets.

“We’ll get you reinforcement,” she said. “Halden looked almost excited about having a puzzle he can’t solve with just more salt circles.”

Ace squinted at the horizon.

“Do you feel it?” she asked Shammy. “The other ones?”

“Yes,” Shammy said. “Faintly. Like distant storms. Anchors under other coasts, other cities. Some are... quiet. Some whine. One... howls.”

Mai’s stomach dropped a centimeter.

“Where?” she asked.

“Far,” Shammy said. “Different continent. Very old stone. Deep water.”

Ace made a face. “Of course. Can’t be somewhere convenient like a swimming pool.”

Mai’s brain was already sketching maps, overlaying known anomalies, cross-referencing.

“We’ll find it,” she said. “With the Project. With you. We have a starting pattern now.”

Shammy turned away from the sea and looked at them.

“You will need many hands,” she said. “Many ‘no’s. This is bigger than one harbor.”

Mai nodded.

“That’s the job,” she said. “Scaling refusal.”

Ace bumped her shoulder, eyes bright despite the wind and the long day.

“Besides,” Ace said. “We’ve already annoyed one ancient hydrological system. Might as well make it a hobby.”

Shammy smiled, small and real.

The rain intensified.

They turned back toward the safehouse, the city lights flickering on one by one behind them, reflections stretching across wet streets like new, fragile currents.

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