

## Chapter Fourteen – Wellspring Project

The first email arrived three days later.

Mai opened it at her desk in a different Site, in a different country, with a different sky pressing against the office windows. The harbor felt far away and uncomfortably close at the same time.

Subject line: W-PROJECT: INITIAL FRAMEWORK – INPUT REQUEST

The list of recipients was short.

Dr. Halden. Section Chief Ramirez. Dr. Singh. A handful of names from Thaumic Hydrology, Structural Containment, and Cognitive Hazards.

And her.

Ace, looking over her shoulder, whistled. “Small party.”

“High explosives,” Mai said. “You don’t invite the whole building to handle them.”

She clicked.

The memo was dense in the way Foundation documents tended to be: numbered sections, subsections, references to other references.

But under the jargon, it was simple. Objective: Establish a unified global program for monitoring, modeling, and maintaining Wellspring-Adjunct Anchor integrity. Scope: All known and suspected hydrological anchors with adjacent anomaly signatures, including but not limited to coastal Riptide patterns, inland echo basins, and deep-sea anchor nodes. Rationale: Field Incident W-07 (Harbor Site ■) demonstrated both the systemic vulnerability of aging anchor structures and the potential for integrated hydrological/thaumic/cognitive intervention. Failure to address these vulnerabilities at scale risks multi-site cascading failures with unacceptable civilian impact.

Halden had done his homework.

There were diagrams—Mai’s cavity sketches, cleaned up and annotated. There were sensor graphs from the harbor, overlaid with similar patterns from the Black Fjord and the oil platform mess. There was a table of “Unresolved Hydrological Anomalies with Potential Anchor Involvement,” which was longer than she liked.

At the end, a section labeled: Proposed Core Team – Field & Analysis

Her name sat there, tidy and inarguable.

Dr. Mai – Systems Analyst / Pattern Integration Agent Ace – Field Intervention / Anomalous Resistance Entity “Shammy” – Elemental Mediator (Provisional)

Ace pointed. “Look, ma. We’re a bullet point.”

Mai’s mouth quirked. “We’ve been worse things.”

Her terminal pinged again.

A short, separate message. FROM: O5-3 SUBJECT: W-PROJECT – EXPECTATIONS DR. MAI, YOU WANTED

A SEAT AT THE TABLE. THIS IS IT. WE WILL NOT MICROMANAGE YOUR METHODS, BUT WE WILL EXPECT RESULTS. KEEP THE ANCHORS HOLDING. – O5-3

Ace leaned in, reading.

“Wow,” she said. “That’s downright affectionate, for an O5.”

“It’s a threat,” Mai said.

“It’s both,” Ace said. “Multitasking.”

Mai closed the messages, leaned back in her chair, and rubbed her eyes.

She could feel the shape of it already.

A network of sensors, scattered along coasts and rivers and lakebeds. New rituals designed to patch cracks without upsetting ancient balances. Task forces whose job description would include “talk to the ocean nicely, then tell it no.”

The responsibility felt... right.

Too big, certainly. Dangerous, definitely. But aligned.

“You don’t have to say yes,” Ace said quietly, reading the tension in her shoulders.

Mai opened her eyes.

“Yes, I do,” she said. “We both know that.”

Ace tilted her head. “Why?”

Mai gestured vaguely at the invisible map in her head.

“Because someone is meddling with anchors without understanding them,” she said. “Because the Wellspring is wounded. Because we have the pattern, the ally, and the scars to prove we survived round one. If we walk away, someone else will step in with less context and more hubris.”

Ace considered that.

“Fair,” she said. “Also, if someone else tries to ‘fix’ anchors by throwing bigger containment fields at them, I’ll have to stab them out of principle.”

“That too,” Mai said.

She turned her chair to face Ace fully.

“This is going to be... long,” she said. “Years, not months. Travel. Deep dives. Arguments with entities older than our species. The Project will pull us into things that make Riptide Seven look like a training exercise.”

Ace’s grin was slow and sharp.

“Good,” she said. “I was getting bored of medium-sized disasters.”

Mai huffed a laugh despite herself.

"You're impossible," she said.

"Consistently," Ace replied.

The office door beeped.

Shammy stepped through, ducking slightly to clear the frame.

She'd traded the courtesy cloak for something slightly more... integrated. Site staff had found her clothes that read as "eccentric visitor" instead of "walking containment breach"—loose trousers, a long sweater, boots that didn't squeak on linoleum.

Her emissive eyes were as bright as ever.

"The pipes here are loud," she said by way of greeting. "They complain about being old."

Mai sighed. "Welcome to Site ███."

Shammy walked closer, gaze flicking between them and the dark screen.

"The Wellspring is restless," she said. "Not just there."

Mai nodded. "We saw the list. There's a fjord that whines, an oil platform that hums, and something very deep that howls."

"Yes," Shammy said. "And others. Smaller. Like the harbor, but... earlier."

Ace hopped up to sit on the edge of Mai's desk, kicking her heels lightly.

"So," she said. "Ready to go global?"

Shammy considered.

"I have wanted," she said slowly, "to see where all the water goes. Properly. Not just as currents. As... stories."

Mai's chest did that dangerous warming thing again.

"You realize," she said, "this means a lot of crosswalks."

"I like crosswalks," Shammy said. "They are small, polite agreements with gravity."

Ace laughed. "We're definitely writing that one down too."

Mai turned back to her terminal.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard for a moment, then began to type.

TO: W-PROJECT CORE SUBJECT: Re: INITIAL FRAMEWORK - Input Accepting role as Systems Analyst / Pattern Integration. Expect: frequent refusal to adopt models that ignore anchor agency or Wellspring behavioral feedback. Recommend: early integration of elemental mediator perspectives (see Shammy) into all structural proposals. Warning: If you attempt to "solve" anchors via brute-force containment alone, you will create more wounds. I will fight you. - Dr. Mai

She cc'd Ace and Shammy, because it felt wrong not to.

Ace read over her shoulder, grinning.

“That last line is going to give Ramirez heartburn,” she said.

“Good,” Mai said.

She hit send.

The email flew away into the Foundation’s tangled digital arteries.

Somewhere in a secure server farm, a new project folder spun into existence. W-PROJECT. Inside it, subfolders blossomed: ANCHORS, WELLSRING, CASEFILES, FIELDREPORTS.

In time, there would be too many documents to read in a lifetime.

For now, there was only one harbor, one lattice, one crack that had been convinced, briefly, to hold.

Shammy stepped closer to the window.

Outside, rain traced ghost rivers down the glass.

“The Wellspring notices,” she said quietly. “It does not understand yet. But it feels you choosing. It has never had that before.”

Mai joined her, hands in her pockets.

“It’ll have to get used to it,” she said. “We’re not going away.”

Ace leaned against the wall, arms folded, shadow behaving for once.

“We’re annoying like that,” she said.

Shammy’s emissive eyes reflected the gray light, the faint, distant lash of a world’s water doing what it had always done: moving, eroding, holding, breaking.

“You are,” she agreed. “Very annoying. Very loud. Very... bright.”

Outside, in places none of them had seen yet, other anchors creaked.

A fjord sighed. An oil platform’s supports shivered. In a trench so deep that human light had never touched its floor, something in the lattice shifted, testing.

Far above, on a mundane coast that had almost cracked, waves rolled lazily against a breakwater that had no idea it had been saved.

The world turned.

The Wellspring watched.

And three very particular currents—stone, shadow, and water—began, quietly, methodically, to plan how they were going to argue with an ocean.

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