

Chapter 2 – The One Sitting on the Rocks

They walked the last stretch of the breakwater in silence.

Not because there was nothing to say. Because there was too much.

The wind came at them sideways, shoving at their shoulders, dragging spray up and over the concrete blocks. The luminous pulses in the waves had shifted—weakening near shore, brightening further out, like the anomaly was drawing breath from deeper water.

The figure on the rocks waited at the farthest point of the breakwater, where the concrete spine ended in a scatter of uneven, spray-slick boulders. The kind of place you only went if you didn't mind losing your footing, or your teeth, or your life.

Mai checked the scanner again, then lowered it, frowning.

"No human baseline," she said quietly. "Electromagnetic, pressure, thermal—none of it maps cleanly. She's not invisible to instruments, but she's... sideways."

"Sideways is one word for her," Ace said.

Mai shot her a look. "You're very sure of the pronoun for someone you haven't seen in twenty years."

Ace's jaw clenched. "I'm sure."

Mai didn't push. Not yet.

Up close, the figure resolved out of silhouette into details that didn't help.

Tall—six foot seven, by Mai's quick visual estimation. Long limbs, long lines, the kind of height that should have looked awkward on wet rock. It didn't. The figure sat with one knee up, elbow resting easily, the other leg dangling down toward the water, heavy boots braced against the stone.

She wore armor, but not the Foundation's clean composite plates or the militaries' layered tactical rigs. This was... organic. Almost grown. Dark metal and something smoother, shell-like, interlocking in subtle curves. The joints flowed instead of angling.

Thin channels ran along the armor's surface, tracing ribs and shoulders and hips. They were dark now, but Ace remembered when they'd glowed.

The hair was long, a deep, saturated blue that wasn't any dye Mai had ever seen. It moved in the wind with an odd weight, strands drifting a fraction too slow, like they were still deciding whether they were in air or water.

And the eyes—

Even before she turned, Mai could see the faint glow. A soft, steady cyan leaking from beneath dark lashes. Not bright enough to illuminate the rocks, but impossible to ignore.

Ace stopped on the last patch of flat concrete.

She didn't step onto the uneven stones yet. That was new. The Ace Mai knew would have hopped the gap without thinking, laughing, daring the wind to shove her.

Now she stood very still.

“Shammy,” she called.

The name blew away in the wind, but it didn’t need volume.

The figure on the rocks stiffened.

Slowly, she turned her head.

The movement wasn’t human. Not wrong, not monstrous—just too smooth, like a slow pan in a perfectly stabilized camera shot. Her gaze slid from the horizon to the two of them without any stutter of focus.

Mai had expected something alien. Some impossible geometry in the face, some distortion.

What she saw instead was almost disarming.

The features were... soft. Not fragile, not delicate—just composed. High cheekbones, strong jaw, full mouth. Too symmetrical in that way that made casting directors nervous. If she’d been human, someone would have put her in movies.

The emissive eyes anchored everything. Not glowing like headlights. More like a bioluminescent deep-sea creature that had learned restraint.

Those eyes rested on Mai for exactly half a second, cataloguing, assessing.

Then they moved to Ace.

They changed. Subtly. The glow warmed, the pupils widening a fraction.

“Ace,” the woman said.

Her voice carried over the wind like it had been placed on top of it, rather than pushed through it. Low, clear, with a resonance that made Mai think of water running through cavities in stone.

Ace’s shoulders dropped in a way Mai had never seen. Not in battle, not in debriefs, not even in quiet nights when the worst of the world was on mute.

Relief. Real, visceral relief.

“Hey, Shammy,” Ace said.

The nickname fell out of her mouth without effort, as if no time had passed at all.

The woman—Shammy, Shamaterazu, whatever her full name was—tilted her head slightly. A piece of her hair brushed against the armor at her cheek and didn’t cling, it beaded, like it had aligned with a different set of physical rules for a moment.

“You did not grow much,” Shammy observed.

Mai almost laughed.

Ace did laugh, a short, startled bark. “Nice to see you too.”

“And you...” Shammy’s gaze slid back to Mai, steady and unblinking. “Are new.”

Mai managed not to adjust her glasses. She had a sudden, irrational feeling that any nervous tic would be permanently recorded in some vast aquatic archive.

“Mai,” she said. “I am—”

“Ace’s river,” Shammy said.

Mai blinked. “Excuse me?”

Shammy considered that, then corrected herself. “Anchor. You burn quietly. Like a pilot flame in a storm.”

Mai decided she was too tired, too cold, and too surrounded by glowing ocean to be offended by metaphors.

“Mai is my partner,” Ace said, emphasis deliberate. “Work partner. Mission partner. All the other kinds, too.”

Shammy’s eyes returned to Ace. “Yes.”

The way she said it—simple, certain—made Mai’s chest tighten. There was no surprise there. No jealousy, no recalculation.

Acceptance. As if this had always been the only logical outcome.

The sea surged against the rocks. A wave exploded in spray below Shammy’s boots, luminous threads tracing its height before breaking into pale foam.

The glow painted moving patterns across Shammy’s armor. For a heartbeat, the channels along the plates filled with light, sketching lines of flow along her ribs and shoulders.

Mai’s scanner whined at her hip.

She tore her eyes away from the elemental and looked at the device. The screen was a mess: overlapping peaks, interference bands, and something that looked suspiciously like an error message trying to be polite.

“Well,” she said. “Whatever the anomaly is, it likes you.”

Shammy looked down at her own armor, then back at Mai. “It recognizes kin and confusion. There is much of both tonight.”

Ace shifted her weight. “So it’s Wellspring-related.”

Shammy’s eyes softened, if emissive eyes could do that. “Yes.”

Mai filed the capital letter in her mind. That was not a common noun.

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” Mai said. “Foundation records contain multiple references to anomalous sources, fonts, reservoirs—‘wellsprings’ of different kinds. Which one is this?”

Shammy looked out at the water again, as if asking its permission.

When she answered, her voice held a different cadence. Older.

“The Wellspring is not a place,” she said. “It is the pattern beneath all waters. The first agreement between flow and gravity. The reason rivers know where to go.”

Mai folded her arms. “That’s... a poetic answer.”

“Accurate,” Shammy said.

Ace smiled faintly. “She’s always talked like that.”

Shammy gave a small nod. “Language deforms truths. Poetry bends more gently.”

Mai opened her mouth to argue, then shut it again. There were too many fights she could pick right now. She chose the one that mattered.

“You’re not human,” she said.

She hadn’t meant it to be that blunt, but subtlety had gone out with the last normal tide.

Shammy looked at her, mildly surprised. “No.”

“Elemental?” Mai prompted. “Hydrokinetic entity? Incarnated morphogenic field? Bound spirit?”

Ace snickered. “You’re just throwing all your best words at her now.”

Shammy turned over the options in her head like shells on a shore.

“Elemental is... close,” she said. “I am water, given a shape I chose. I remember rivers that existed before there were names for them. I remember holding drowned cities in my arms. I remember Ace, when she was small and angry and refused to be carried even when she was bleeding.”

Mai’s attention snapped to Ace.

Ace made a face. “It was one time.”

“Three,” Shammy said calmly.

“Two and a half,” Ace shot back.

Mai stared between them. “You knew each other when Ace was a child.”

It wasn’t a question, but Shammy nodded anyway.

“Yes,” she said. “She was the first human who spoke to me without asking for anything.”

Ace shuffled one boot on the concrete. “You say that like it’s a compliment.”

“It is,” Shammy said simply.

Mai’s brain tried to integrate this new data into existing mental models and failed several checks.

“There are no records of you in Foundation archives,” she said. “No mention of a persistent water-elemental attached to Ace’s file. Nothing in the incidents from her hometown.”

Ace shrugged, studying her nails. "We didn't file the paperwork."

"Ace," Mai said, keeping her voice carefully neutral. "Why exactly did you not mention an immortal semi-divine river friend who remembers you from childhood?"

Ace exhaled. The breath plumed in the cold air.

"Because I didn't think she was coming back," Ace said, for once without deflection. "And because I didn't think it mattered to the stuff we do now. Sometimes a weird childhood is just a weird childhood."

Shammy watched her with a stillness that was not passive. It was like seeing the eye of a storm from a plane window.

"I left," Shammy said. "The Wellspring needed me elsewhere. The last time I saw you, you were standing on a ruined bridge, holding a broken fishing rod, and pretending it didn't hurt."

Ace barked a laugh. "You remember that?"

"I remember everything," Shammy said. "It is what water does."

Mai filed away a hundred questions for another time, then prioritized.

"Why are you here now?" she asked. "And don't say 'because the plot demanded it.' I'll push you in."

Ace snorted.

Shammy's gaze drifted back to the glowing swells.

"Because the pattern is wrong," she said. "The Wellspring is bleeding where it should be sealed. Something woke under the shared sea, and it is pulling on every current it can reach. Including mine. Including Ace's."

Mai's heart stuttered. "Ace's?"

Shammy nodded. "She is not only shadow. She carries... resonance. Like a river stone that has been turned too many times."

"That's not ominous at all," Ace muttered.

Mai tightened her grip around the scanner. "This 'something' that woke. Can you define it?"

Shammy considered. "A wound that learned to speak."

Mai closed her eyes briefly. "Of course."

Ace nudged a small rock off the edge with her toe and watched it tumble down into the glowing water.

"What does it want?" she asked.

Shammy tilted her head. "What does any wound want? To be reopened. To feel what it remembers."

Ace's mouth pressed into a thin line. "That tracks with the pressure patterns."

Mai gave her a sharp glance. "You had the same thought?"

"I had a feeling," Ace said. "You did the math."

The wind shifted direction, suddenly carrying the tang of deeper ocean, colder and cleaner than the harbor's diesel-scented breath.

Shammy's emissive eyes brightened a fraction. "It is listening to us."

Mai looked down at the waves, then out at the open water.

"Good," she said, louder. "Then it can hear this: we're not here to worship it. We're here to stop it."

Ace smiled. "That's my Mai."

Shammy regarded her for a long moment.

"You burn brighter than the surface shows," she said.

Mai resisted the urge to fidget. "That's classified."

"From whom?" Shammy asked, genuinely curious.

Ace made a strangled noise.

Mai decided she needed to move this conversation back onto something resembling a tactical track before she drowned in metaphors and uninvited emotional transparency.

"Shammy," she said. "If the Wellspring is connected to this anomaly, and you're connected to the Wellspring... are you a stabilizing factor, or a risk vector?"

Ace winced. "Mai, maybe don't call my childhood friend a risk vector on our first date back?"

"I didn't say she is one," Mai replied. "I asked which."

Shammy accepted the question as if it were entirely reasonable.

"Both," she said.

Mai sighed. "Of course you are."

"If I go too close to the broken point, it will recognize me as kin and pull harder," Shammy continued. "If I stay away, the wound widens without resistance. There is no safe option. Only less harm."

Mai rubbed the bridge of her nose under her glasses. "I hate problems with no good branches."

"That's why they call us," Ace said lightly.

"No," Mai said. "They call us when they want someone else to pick the least catastrophic branch."

Shammy watched them with that faint, steady warmth in her eyes. She looked like she could stand on those rocks forever and never slip, never tire, never fall in.

Mai wondered, not for the first time, what it felt like to be that certain of your place in a world that refused to sit still.

"So," Ace said, clapping her hands together once, the sound sharp in the wind. "We've established our guest star is an elder water-being with boundary issues, the ocean is bleeding conceptually, and something under the waves wants to turn reality into its personal therapy session."

"That is not—" Mai started.

"Close enough," Ace said.

Shammy considered the summary and nodded. "Not inaccurate."

Mai tilted her head. "How long have you been sitting out here?"

"Three days," Shammy said.

Ace blinked. "You've been here since before the Foundation ping?"

"Yes," Shammy said. "I arrived when the first rips opened. I waited for the currents to bring you."

Mai ran the timeline in her head. First official Foundation readings. Escalation pattern. The O5 note.

"Did you contact us?" she asked. "Directly or indirectly?"

Shammy shook her head. "I am not good with your wires and whispers. I only pushed against the patterns until someone noticed."

Ace snapped her fingers. "The 'non-random' flag in the sensor logs. You were knocking."

"Yes," Shammy said.

Mai stared out at the water. "So the glowing pattern isn't just the wound howling. It's you, layered on top. A beacon."

Shammy inclined her head. "I called for help. It is not something I do often."

Ace's voice gentled. "You did the right thing."

Shammy looked at her. For the first time, something like uncertainty crossed her face.

"I was not sure you would come," she said.

Ace exhaled, a small cloud in the wind. "You called. I came. That's how this works."

Mai glanced between them. There were years in that exchange she hadn't been there for. Wounds and bridges and fishing rods. Rivers that didn't exist on any map.

It made something in her chest ache.

She cleared her throat. "All right. Here's what's going to happen."

Both Ace and Shammy looked at her, which was mildly terrifying in different ways.

"We go back to the safehouse," Mai continued. "I correlate your description of the Wellspring with the sensor logs. We figure out where the strongest pressure nodes are." She pointed in the vague direction of the harbor's underside. "Then we find a way down that doesn't involve you, Shammy, walking straight into the mouth of the thing it's trying to become."

“And if there isn’t one?” Ace asked.

Mai’s jaw set. “Then we build one.”

Shammy watched her, expression unreadable but not cold.

“You think like fire,” she said.

Mai sighed. “If you call me ‘mind-flame’ or something like that, I swear I will—”

“Mind-fire,” Shammy corrected gently.

Ace laughed, loud and delighted. “Oh, that’s never going away.”

Mai closed her eyes for a second. “Wonderful.”

The wind gusted again, harder now, making the breakwater vibrate under their boots. The glowing lines in the waves pulsed in response, just a hair out of sync with their previous rhythm.

“Time’s short,” Mai said. “We should get moving.”

She turned back toward the safehouse, expecting Ace to fall into step beside her.

When the footsteps didn’t come, she looked back.

Ace was still at the edge of the concrete, looking up at Shammy.

“You coming?” Ace asked.

Shammy regarded the water.

“The sea is... loud here,” she said. “But I will walk with you for a while.”

She rose from her seat in one smooth motion.

Mai had expected the rocks to protest that. They didn’t. Shammy moved with a balance that made the treacherous footing irrelevant. She stepped from boulder to boulder, water sluicing off her boots in thin sheets.

When she reached the last stone before the flat of the breakwater, she paused.

There was a gap there—half a meter of empty air, too wide to step casually, too narrow to be dangerous if you were paying attention.

Ace hopped it without thinking, then turned and held out a hand.

Shammy looked at the offered hand. Her emissive eyes glowed a shade warmer.

She didn’t need it. Not physically. She took it anyway.

Her grip was cool and very sure.

The moment her armored fingers closed around Ace’s, something shifted in the air. The luminous patterns in the sea stuttered, faltered, then realigned, their rhythm changing by a fraction of a heartbeat.

Mai's scanner shrieked briefly and died.

She stared at the blank screen.

"Well," she said. "That's... new."

Ace just smiled, her fingers tightening around Shammy's for a second longer than necessary.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go poke a wounded ocean together."

Shammy stepped up onto the breakwater beside them, her presence an extra weight in the narrow space.

For the first time since they'd arrived, Mai noticed something subtle.

The wind wasn't quite as sharp. The cold not quite as biting. The sea not quite as loud.

As they walked back toward the safehouse—shadow, mind-fire, and water-born—Mai had the distinct, unnerving feeling that the world itself was paying attention.

And, somewhere beneath the surface of the glowing waves, something smiled back.

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Last update: **27/03/2026 17:45**

