

## Chapter Three - Water Remembers the Child

The safehouse looked even smaller with Shammy in it.

Mai noticed it first in the corridor: the way the ceiling suddenly felt lower, the fluorescent tubes more fragile, the walls closer together. It wasn't just height. There were tall people. She'd worked with them. They didn't make buildings feel like bad shoes.

Shammy walked between them without brushing the walls, but the air learned a new shape around her. The hum of the old wiring shifted. Somewhere in the plumbing, water adjusted its route.

The coastal operations room, with its tables and monitors and disgruntled file cabinets, felt... startled when they came in.

Tokala nearly dropped his coffee.

He'd been hunched over a stack of printouts when they entered, mug clutched in both hands, dark circles deeper than before. He looked up at the sound of boots and immediately did a double-take.

His gaze went from Ace—familiar, worrying, tolerable—to Mai—professional, terrifying—to Shammy.

His brain silently blue-screened.

"Uh," he said.

Mai decided to be kind. "Dr. Tokala, this is Shammy. She's... a specialist."

"I—she—" Tokala blinked. "We don't have clearance for bringing civilians into—"

"I am not a civilian," Shammy said calmly.

Her voice did something to the room. The monitor nearest her flickered, then settled into a clearer image than before. The overhead light stopped buzzing.

Tokala swallowed. "Okay," he said faintly. "That's... obvious."

He looked at Mai with something like desperation. "Is she in the file and my copy just corrupted, or—?"

"No," Mai said. "There is no file. Yet."

Tokala made a noise that sounded like his worldview trying to escape through his teeth.

Ace clapped him on the shoulder on her way past. "Drink water," she said. "You're getting dehydrated just looking at her."

Mai moved to the central table and cleared a space with a few brisk motions. "All right. We're going to need a new working model. Tokala, pull up the latest hydrology data, overlay with your gravimetrics. Shammy, I need you to tell me what the Wellspring is doing like I'm a particularly dense river rock."

Shammy tilted her head. "You are not dense."

"It's a metaphor."

“Your metaphors are poor.”

“Work with what you have,” Mai said, and resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose.

Ace hopped up to sit on the edge of a filing cabinet, arms braced behind her, boots swinging. She watched the room assemble itself around a new center of gravity.

Mai’s fingers flew over the keyboard. The harbor map spread across the largest wall monitor—coastline, depth contours, sensor buoys, and now, a superimposed pattern of glowing lines representing the luminescent pulses. The breakwater stood out like a jagged finger.

Shammy stepped closer, her emissive eyes reflecting the light of the display. The channels in her armor traced faint echoes of the map’s curves.

“This is wrong,” she said quietly.

Mai glanced up. “In what way?”

Shammy pointed at the pattern of brightest pulses. “The Wellspring feeds from deeper lines. Old rivers, sunken currents. It should not be pooling this close to the surface, so near a narrow man-made stone.”

Tokala recovered enough to hover near the back, clutching his coffee. “You mean... it’s leaking?”

Shammy nodded. “A seal is failing. A balance forgotten. The weight of older agreements is loosening.”

Mai zoomed in on the outer harbor. “Is there a focal point? A... plug?”

Shammy considered the glowing pattern like a bloodhound sniffing a trail.

“There,” she said, touching the screen just outside the tip of the breakwater. Her fingertip left a faint smear of condensation. “And below. The wound is vertical.”

Mai overlaid depth data. The lines danced into a 3D view: a sloping seabed, the foundations of the breakwater, and beneath that, an older structure—a strange, semi-regular void the sonar had half-seen and then chosen to ignore.

Tokala squinted. “That cavity... we thought it was just a natural formation.”

“It isn’t,” Mai murmured. “Something is down there.”

“Anchor,” Shammy said.

Ace tilted her head. “Same kind of thing as at the tunnel?”

“There are many,” Shammy said. “Anchors sunk in stone and sand and bone, tying the Wellspring’s flow to stable paths. Most hold. Some have cracked. This one is... near breaking. That is why the surface glows. It is not trying to lure. It is trying not to drown you.”

Mai looked from the map to Shammy. “Let me guess. The Foundation didn’t build it.”

“No,” Shammy said. “Your kind are very young.”

Tokala made a wounded sound. “We’re not that—”

"We're very young," Mai cut in. "And we keep poking things out of our depth."

Ace smirked. "Speak for yourself."

Mai ignored her. "All right. This gives us a working plan. We access the anchor. We stabilize it." She tapped the void on the holo. "The tricky part is getting there alive."

Tokala licked his lips. "We tried drones," he said. "All of them lost signal twelve meters down. The water becomes... opaque to radio. It's like something is eating the waves."

"Because they are speaking too loudly," Shammy said. "The wound is sensitive to noise."

Mai had a thought she disliked. "What about people?"

Shammy nodded slowly. "People sink more quietly."

"That is not reassuring," Tokala muttered.

Mai rolled her shoulders. "We'll adapt. We always do."

Shammy's gaze moved from the map to Ace, lingering.

Mai watched that look, and something unpleasant and irrational stirred in her.

She stuffed it down and turned the feeling into a question.

"You said you remember Ace from before," she said. "From... when she was small."

Ace made a face. "We don't have to—"

"We do," Mai said. "Because whatever this is under the water recognizes her too. I want to understand why."

Shammy's emissive eyes softened. "It is not because she is shadow."

Mai folded her arms. "Then because of what?"

Shammy considered for a moment, then stepped away from the table. The monitors dimmed fractionally in her wake.

She chose a spot near the far wall, where she could see both Ace and the map at once. When she spoke, the hum of the safehouse seemed to lean in.

"There was a river," she said. "Not like your big, straight ones with concrete shoulders. A smaller one. Curved. It liked to wander. It flowed through a place with too many stones and not enough patience. People built houses close to its sides and wondered why they flooded."

Tokala blinked. "Is this—"

"A story," Shammy said. "And an answer."

Mai bit back a comment. Let her tell it her way, she thought. That's how we'll get the useful pieces.

"I slept in that river a long time," Shammy went on. "Longer than the houses, shorter than the stones. I watched children grow and leave and forget the way the water sounded at night."

She glanced at Ace. "Most of them forgot."

Ace looked away, suddenly deeply interested in a crack in the linoleum.

"Then there was a girl," Shammy said. "Small, loud, much shadow for her size. She threw stones like she wanted to hurt the world."

Mai pictured a miniature Ace, furious at gravity, and felt an unwelcome tenderness in her chest.

"One day," Shammy continued, "she slipped on the wet bank. The river took her. Not maliciously. It was just what it did. It moved forward, and she was in its path."

She paused. The room was very quiet.

"I felt her hit the water," Shammy said. "Like a dropped ember." Her fingers twitched slightly. "She did not float. She sank. Heavy with anger and stubbornness."

Mai's throat tightened. "Ace can swim."

"She can now," Shammy said.

Ace's knuckles were white on the edge of the cabinet. She didn't say anything, so Mai did it for her.

"What happened?" Mai asked.

Shammy's gaze drifted to the safehouse window, where the faint glow of the sea blinked like a far-off heartbeat.

"I hesitated," she said. "I was not... supposed to interfere. The Wellspring's agreements are old. We hold, we carry, we accept. We do not choose."

Her voice went quieter.

"But she was small. And angry. And the river wanted her to stay. So it pulled faster."

"She stopped struggling," Shammy said. "Not because she accepted. Because she was tired. There is a difference."

Mai glanced at Ace. She still wasn't looking up.

"I touched her," Shammy said simply. "I took her out of the pattern and held her between one breath and the next. The river went on without her. The water complained. The Wellspring watched."

"You broke a rule," Mai said softly.

"Yes," Shammy said. "For the first time."

She looked back at Ace, and there was a depth in that look that made the room feel suddenly inadequate.

"I put her on the bank," Shammy said. "She coughed. She cried. She threw up everything the river had taken. Then she kicked the water."

Tokala made a tiny, shocked noise. "She—what—"

"Of course she did," Mai and Shammy said together.

Ace groaned. "I was eight."

"Seven," Shammy corrected. "You became eight three days later. You told everyone you had 'beaten' the river."

Ace finally looked up, meeting Mai's eyes with a kind of helpless defiance.

"I don't... remember it like that," she muttered.

"You don't remember most of it at all," Mai said gently.

Shammy nodded. "The Wellspring did not like my choice. It does not like free stones in the current. So it took some of her memory as payment. It blurred the edges. Left only a fear and a stubbornness."

She lifted her chin a fraction. "But I remember. It is what water does."

The weight of that settled over the room.

Mai understood, suddenly, why the waves had felt like they were knocking for Ace.

"From its perspective," she said slowly, "the Wellspring sees a tiny human child it once lost track of. A loose piece in its accounting. And now that piece is standing on top of one of its anchors."

Shammy inclined her head. "Yes."

Mai stared at the harbor map. "So it's not just that Ace is shadow. She's also... an unclosed tab."

Ace made a face. "Wow. I feel very special."

Mai stepped closer to her, bumping her shoulder lightly against Ace's leg where she sat on the cabinet.

"You are," she said simply.

Ace's expression softened despite herself.

Tokala, who looked like he might actually fall over from metaphysical stress, cleared his throat.

"Why didn't the Wellspring just... take her back?" he asked. "If it was that upset."

"Because I did not let it," Shammy said. "And because she changed shape while it watched. It does not understand your small lives. They move too quickly. By the time it decided, she was already a different pattern. It lost the thread."

Mai tapped her fingers against her upper arm. "And now, with the anchor failing, the thread is visible again."

"Yes," Shammy said. "And everything the Wellspring pushed away—its rejected pressures, its trimmed currents, its unused paths—are gathering near this wound, trying to rejoin."

Mai looked at the messy graphs on the table. "Pressure ghosts. Echo fragments. Conceptual sewage."

"That is a crude term," Shammy said. "But accurate."

Ace slid off the cabinet and landed lightly, the motion snapping the room out of its trance.

“Okay,” she said, clapping her hands once. “Enough about my near-drowning traumatic backstory. Two questions.”

Mai arched a brow. “Only two?”

“For now,” Ace said. She pointed at Shammy. “One: is the Wellspring actively pissed at me, or just confused?”

Shammy thought about it. “Confused. Curious. It has no concept of ‘pissed.’ It does not hate. It only corrects.”

“Good,” Ace said. “I’m already on too many cosmic shitlists.”

Mai considered pointing out that “correction” could be worse than anger, then decided to keep that one to herself for later.

“Second question,” Ace said. “Can you help us fix the anchor without the Wellspring using you as a handle to grab onto us?”

Shammy’s eyes dimmed a fraction, the emissive glow narrowing.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “If we move carefully. If you do the touching, and I do the guiding.”

Mai nodded. “Then that’s our path.”

Tokala let out a long, shaky breath. “There is so much of this I don’t understand.”

Mai glanced at him. “Then congratulations. You’re caught up with the rest of us.”

Ace smirked. “You get used to it. Or you don’t, and then you become a Site Director.”

Shammy stepped back toward the harbor map. The monitor flickered, then steadied as she looked at it.

“The wound is deeper than your machines can see,” she said. “You will need to go below its edge, where the old stone remembers how it was placed. There will be currents that do not care about your lungs.”

Tokala paled. “Are you saying—”

“Underwater,” Mai translated. “We’ll have to go down. Not just to the anchor, but beneath it.”

Ace rolled her shoulders. “Been worse places.”

“You’re impossible underwater,” Mai said. “You sink like a knife.”

“That’s not an insult,” Ace said.

Shammy watched this exchange with quiet amusement.

“I can hold a space,” she said. “For a time. A bubble in the pressure. But I cannot hold it alone. Mind-fire must stabilize the edges. Shadow must stop the wound from reaching through.”

Mai blinked. "You already figured out our roles."

"You are simple currents," Shammy said, not unkindly. "Distinct. Loud. The Wellspring notices you too."

Mai opened her mouth to argue. Stopped.

"Fair," she said.

Ace grinned. "We're basic archetypes. Deal with it."

Tokala made a small, strangled sound and sank into a chair. "I am not paid enough for this."

Mai put a hand briefly on his shoulder. "File your complaint with Ethics. If the world still exists next month."

He laughed once, hollow.

Mai turned back to Shammy.

"One more thing," she said.

Shammy's attention settled on her.

"You said you broke a rule once to pull Ace out of the river," Mai said. "You chose. That mattered. To the Wellspring. To her."

She took a breath.

"If we go down there," she continued, "you may need to break more. Anchor rules. Balance rules. Whatever ancient cosmic accounting system keeps the ocean from eating the sky."

Shammy's gaze did not waver. "Yes."

"Are you willing to do that?" Mai asked. "Again. For us. For this."

The room held still.

Shammy did not answer immediately. She looked at Ace, then at Mai, then at the harbor on the screen.

When she finally spoke, her voice carried the weight of deep trenches and slow tectonic patience.

"I am not here as the Wellspring's hand," she said. "I am here because Ace called, even if she did not know she did. I am here because I chose once, and I will choose again."

She stepped closer to them, the air shifting with her.

"You are my river," she said to Ace. Her emissive eyes warmed. "You cut new paths whether the stone likes it or not."

Ace looked like someone had punched her in the solar plexus with affection.

"And you," Shammy said, turning to Mai, "are the shore that refuses to erode. The place where waves break and find shape."

Mai's carefully maintained emotional firewall suffered a direct hit.

She cleared her throat. "I'm... analysis and containment," she said weakly.

"You are choice," Shammy said. "You say no when others say yes out of fear. That matters."

Then she stepped back, giving them space again.

"So," she said. "Yes. I will break rules for you. Carefully. As one should break old stones."

Ace made a face like she was going to make a joke about Mai being a rock. Mai shot her a look that said don't.

"So noted," Mai said instead.

She looked at the harbor map, at the void beneath the breakwater.

"All right," she said briskly, because it was that or emotionally melt on the spot. "We have our pieces. We have a wound, an anchor, an overworked junior researcher, one shadow weapon, one metaphysical engineer, and one walking hydrological heresy."

Shammy blinked. "Is that me?"

"Yes," Mai said.

"I am honored," Shammy said.

Ace laughed.

Mai let herself mirror the smile for a heartbeat.

Then she tapped the void on the map, the place where the Wellspring bled through.

"Next step," she said. "We figure out how to get down there without dying."

Ace cracked her knuckles, eager.

"Field trip," she said. "Underwater edition."

Shammy looked at the glowing sea through the window.

"The tide is turning," she said quietly. "We should move before it remembers why it started."

Mai straightened.

"Then let's not keep the wound waiting," she said. "If it wants to see what we are, we'll introduce ourselves properly."

Ace's grin sharpened into something dangerous and bright.

"Hi," she said, flexing her fingers like she was already holding a sword. "I'm Ace. This is Mai. That's Shammy. We fix things you really wish we didn't have to touch."

Shammy's emissive eyes gleamed.

“And we remember,” she added.

The harbor pulsed, a faint shiver through the building’s bones.

As if something far below had just realized the three of them were standing on its doorstep and was, for the first time, truly paying attention.

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