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Chapter 13: Atmospheric Memory

<!-- Word count: ~4,800 | Target: 4,800 | Anchor: Shammy's atmospheric read—the air around the cult remnants' last location. It tastes wrong, like static before a storm, like something that shouldn't exist in a world with boundaries. -> <!-- Emotional Surprise: The atmospheric trace Shammy found at the relay point? It's connected to Vera. Vera's edges aren't solid—they're atmospheric-adjacent. She's not entirely human, or she's not entirely present. -> <!-- POV: Shammy | Structural Approach: Investigation Scene ->

Shammy led.

Not because she had answers. Because she didn't have wounds.

The relay point was empty. Cult had retreated. But something stayed behind, something that pressed against her atmospheric sense like a thumb on a bruise. Wrong. Wrong in a way that shouldn't exist in a world with edges.

Shammy stood at the threshold. Not touching the doorframe. That was Vera's ritual, Vera's need. Shammy didn't need doorframes. She needed pressure. Air. The weight of a room.

This room weighed nothing.

"The residue." She kept her voice warm, or tried to. "I can feel them. The attackers. They left something behind."

Mai was already running scenarios. Shammy could hear it in the way her breathing shifted, that precise rhythm that meant numbers. "Can you trace it? Find where they went?"

"Direction, yes." Shammy extended her atmospheric sense outward, feeling along the trace like a finger on a scar. "But the residue is..."

She stopped.

Like me.

The residue felt like her. Atmospheric. Adjacent. Present in a way that wasn't quite present. The wrongness at the edges of the room tasted the same as the wrongness at her own edges. The same made-ness. The same happened-instead-of-lived quality.

Not similar. The same.

Shammy moved through the location slowly, letting the atmospheric pressure map itself against her own. The trace from the cult. The trace from the attackers. The things that weren't born.

"Shammy?" Mai's voice was careful now. Shammy heard the shift. Mai got more precise when she was worried, not less. "You stopped."

"The residue feels like me." No point softening it. "Atmospheric. Adjacent. Not entirely present. The cult's trace and my trace, they share a... a grammar."

Mai's analytical framework clicked into place. "The cult uses constructs. Things that aren't born. Things that are made. You're saying—"

"I'm saying I'm made too. I know what I am." Shammy's presence filled the room as she turned. "But the making is different. Whatever built them built me differently. I can feel it."

Ace stood at the edge of the room. Shadow-pressure stable. Fragment quiet. The stillness that meant processing, not absence.

"Vera's edges." Flat. Almost too flat. "The void-pattern. The symbols. She activated during the fight. Something the cult made. Something with their abilities."

"Vera was made by them." Mai pressed each word into place like a pin in a specimen tray. "From the real Vera's memories. With their abilities. Their connection."

"But she developed something they didn't expect." Shammy's atmospheric pressure shifted, steadied. "Autonomy. Consciousness. The ability to choose."

"And now they want her back." Ace's fragment pulsed. "Because she's dangerous to them. Because she can choose."

Shammy felt the atmospheric memory. The residue. The trace.

And something else.

The trace from the cult connected. It had a direction, yes, but it also had a point of origin. A point of resonance.

Someone in this room was carrying the same trace.

She turned. The atmospheric presence followed her movement like a tide.

Vera.

"The residue." Shammy didn't soften it this time. "The trace the cult left. The atmospheric memory."

"What about it?" Mai pressed.

"It's connected to Vera." Shammy moved closer. The atmospheric pressure around Vera was wrong in the same way. The same wrongness. The same made-ness. "The wrongness at her edges. It matches."

Vera's fingers found the doorframe. Grounding. Grounding. Her controlled delivery cracked like ice over water.

"What do you mean, matches?"

"The atmospheric pressure around you." Shammy stopped a meter away. Close enough to feel it. "The wrongness at the edges. The adjacent-ness. Same as the cult's residue. Same wrongness. Same made-ness."

Mai's framework clicked. The probabilities ran. The pattern-seeking found the connection and then kept going, pulling thread after thread.

"The cult made you." Precise. Clinical. Mai when she needed distance. "The void-pattern. The abilities. The symbols. You have the same trace. The same atmospheric wrongness."

"I'm not—" Vera's controlled delivery broke. Her grip on the doorframe tightened. "I'm not one of them."

"You're something they made." Shammy's voice was warm. Had to be warm. This wasn't an accusation. It was a fact. "Like the attackers. But different. You developed something. Autonomy. Consciousness. They didn't."

"You're saying I'm like them?" Vera's threshold touch intensified. Fingers white on the frame. "I'm like the things that attacked us?"

"No." Shammy's atmospheric presence steadied. The room needed steadying. "You're different. The making is different. But the trace is the same."

Ace's fragment pulsed.

"The symbols." Flat. "The void-pattern. The Blood-Rift. The cult used them to destroy my village."

A beat. The shadow-pressure compressed.

"And they used them to make you."

The room went cold.

Mai's framework found the next piece. "They used them to make something. From the real Vera's memories. A construct. A weapon. A lure."

"But she developed beyond the making." Shammy's presence filled the room. "The attackers didn't. They're following programming. She's not. She's choosing."

Vera's controlled delivery didn't rebuild. Threshold touch activated. Grounding. Grounding. The rhythm of someone holding themselves together through touch because nothing else would hold.

"I'm something they made." Quiet. The quiet of someone hearing their own diagnosis. "Atmospheric. Adjacent. Like Shammy. Like the attackers."

"But different." Shammy moved closer. "You developed consciousness. The ability to choose. The ability to want."

"How do you know?" Vera's voice cracked. "How do you know I'm not just following programming? How do you know I'm not a weapon aimed at Ace?"

"Because you chose to find her." Shammy's atmospheric presence steadied. "Not because you were programmed to. Because you wanted to. The atmospheric pressure around you is different. The wrongness has intention. Purpose. Choice."

Mai's framework ran. The probabilities clicked into place and then clicked again, recalculating.

"Vera is atmospheric-adjacent." Mai pressed each word precisely. "Like Shammy. But made by the cult. From the real Vera's memories. With their abilities. Their connection."

"And she developed autonomy." Shammy's presence held the room. "The attackers didn't. They're following programming. She's following choice."

"So she's not one of them." Ace's shadow-pressure stabilized. "She's something else. Something they made. But something she became."

"The question is what they want with her." Mai's framework clicked. "They attacked to retrieve her. Not destroy. Retrieve. Why?"

"Because she's dangerous to them." Shammy's atmospheric sense extended outward, feeling for the trace again. "She developed something they can't control. Consciousness. Autonomy. The ability to choose against them."

The atmospheric memory lingered. The residue. The trace.

Shammy could feel it now, the direction the trace led. The wrongness had a source. A place. A center.

"The cult wants her back." Mai's voice was precise. "Because she's a weapon they can't control. Because she might choose against them."

"The residue leads somewhere." Shammy turned toward the direction. "The atmospheric memory shows direction. I can follow it."

"You can trace the cult?" Ace's fragment pulsed.

"I can trace the wrongness." Shammy's presence filled the room. "The trace leads somewhere."

“Let's move.” Ace's voice was flat. Shadow-pressure compressing. “Shammy leads. We follow.”

“And we find out what they're willing to do to get her back.” Mai's framework clicked. “Because if she's dangerous to them now, they're going to try harder. They're going to come back.”

Shammy's atmospheric presence steadied. The triad held.

The trace pointed in a direction. The wrongness had a source.

And the storm was building.

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