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Chapter 9: The Vertical Exits

<!-- Word count: ~4,400 | Target: 4,400 | Anchor: Shammy at the edge of the room—watching doors, counting exits, her atmospheric pressure pulling away from the conversation like a tide receding. ->
<!-- Emotional Surprise: Shammy isn't withdrawing because she's not needed. She's withdrawing because she doesn't believe she has a place in a conversation about blood family. She's enacting the theme question without realizing it. -> <!-- POV: Shammy | Structural Approach: Quiet Character Moment ->

Shammy stood at the edge of the room.

Always the edge. Near the door. Watching. Atmospheric pressure shifted around her, heavier where she was, lighter where she wasn't.

The conversation about blood family was happening in the center. Ace. Mai. Vera. The three of them. Blood questions. Family questions. Questions Shammy couldn't even ask.

At 195 centimeters, she'd learned to make herself small in rooms built for smaller bodies. Doorframes required ducking. Ceilings pressed down. And conversations about blood, about where you came from, had edges she couldn't cross.

Morning. Investigation continued. Three paths. Three questions.

Mai wanted to investigate Vera's origin. The inconsistencies, the gaps, the details that didn't line up.

Ace wanted to investigate the wooden bird. Fragment, transmission, memories from outside.

Vera wanted to investigate the cult. Watchers, residue, the feeling that someone was coming.

Shammy had no preference. She'd been withdrawing again. Atmospheric pressure around her thinner. Pulling away from the conversation like a tide receding.

"I should check the perimeter." Warm. "See if the watchers left anything."

"Later." Mai's framework already running. "We need to discuss the paths. All three of us."

All three of us.

Not Ace, Mai, and Shammy. Ace, Mai, and Vera. The blood-family conversation. The question that didn't include her.

She moved toward the door. Watching exits. Counting them. One. Two. The window was three.

“Shammy.” Mai's voice cut through. “Stay. We need all perspectives.”

All perspectives. But not all blood.

Shammy stayed. But she stood at the edge. Near the door. Pressure around her thinner. Like she wasn't quite in the room.

The discussion continued. Vera's origin. The wooden bird. The cult.

Shammy listened. She felt the atmospheric pressure in the room. Tension. Fear underneath Mai's analysis. Stillness underneath Ace's questions. Controlled delivery underneath Vera's story.

But she didn't speak. The question wasn't hers. The blood question. The family question. She didn't have blood. She'd happened. She was a phenomenon that became a person.

So she stood at the edge. Watching doors. Counting exits.

Mai's framework ran. Probabilities. Inconsistencies. Details that didn't line up.

“If Vera's story has gaps,” pressing, “we need to find them. Where did you wake up? Who found you? What happened in the years between the Blood-Rift and now?”

“I don't remember.” Controlled. “I told you. The gaps are there. I don't know what filled them.”

“But someone knows.” Fingers tapping. “Someone found you. Gave you the name. Built your story.”

“Or someone erased it.” Threshold touch. “Trauma takes memories. The fire took everything.”

“The fire took facts.” Pressing. “But emotional content doesn't survive without factual anchors. Not this cleanly. Not this consistently.”

Ace's shadow-pressure flickered. Fragment quiet. Eyes on Vera.

“The memory wasn't mine.” Flat. “Fragment received. Someone else's death. Someone else's grief.”

“The real Vera's death.” Framework clicked. “If the memories are real, the source is real. The real Vera died. And someone built a construct from her memories.”

“Or the real Vera survived.” Cracking. “And she doesn't remember how.”

“Probabilities are even.” Cold. “Either you're a survivor with trauma gaps. Or a construct with implanted memories.”

Shammy stood at the edge. Watching.

The atmospheric pressure around Vera was wrong. Not lying, Shammy could feel that. But wrong. Like she wasn't entirely present. Like she was adjacent to reality.

Like Shammy.

The realization hit her. Vera's edges. The atmospheric trace. The wrongness.

It wasn't deception. Not a lie. It was the feeling of something that wasn't born. Something made. Something that happened instead of lived.

Shammy knew that feeling. She'd lived it. She was it.

"You're atmospheric-adjacent." Direct.

The room went quiet. Mai's framework stopped. Ace's shadow-pressure stabilized. Vera's threshold touch activated.

"What?" Vera's control cracked.

"The pressure around you." Shammy moved closer. Atmospheric presence followed. "It's wrong at the edges. Like you're not entirely present. Like you're..."

She stopped. The word was hard to say.

"Like you're made. Not born."

Vera's control broke. "I don't... I don't know what you mean."

"I happened." Warm. "I was atmospheric pressure before I was a person. I know what it feels like to not be born. To be made. To be adjacent to reality."

The pressure in the room shifted. Heavier. Shammy's presence filled the space.

"You feel like that." Direct. "Not entirely here. Like you're... constructed."

Mai's framework restarted. Clicked.

"Shammy's atmospheric perception has been reliable." Analytical. "If she says Vera's edges are wrong, there's something there."

"I'm not saying she's a lie." Shammy's presence steadied. "I'm saying she's adjacent. Like me. But different."

"Different how?" Flat.

"I happened. Became a person." Shammy moved closer. "She was... built. Or something like it. The pressure around her is wrong. Like she was made, but the making was different."

Vera's threshold touch activated. Fingers found the doorframe. Grounding. Grounding.

"I don't know what I am." Cracked. "I don't know if I'm real. I only know what I remember."

"And what you remember might not be yours." Warm. "But that doesn't mean you're not real. It means you're adjacent. Different. Not born. Made."

The conversation continued. But Shammy withdrew again.

She'd said what she needed to say. Pointed out what she felt. The atmospheric trace. The wrongness at the edges.

But the blood question wasn't hers. The family question wasn't hers.

She stood at the edge of the room. Near the door. Watching exits.

Mai noticed.

The analytical framework had been running probabilities. Counting inconsistencies. Tracking gaps.

But the atmospheric pressure around Shammy was thinner. Pulling away. Tide receding.

Mai broke from the analysis. Moved toward Shammy.

Not words. Presence. She stood near. Not asking. Not demanding. Just being there.

Shammy's presence shifted. Pressure changed. Heavier. Grounding.

"You're withdrawing." Quiet. "You've been withdrawing since the letter arrived."

Shammy didn't answer. Pressure thin. Tide pulled back.

"The conversation is about blood." Just Mai. Not analytical. "You don't have blood. So you're standing at the edge."

"I always stand at the edge." Warm. "I watch doors. I count exits."

"You're not watching doors right now. You're pulling away from the conversation. Because you think you don't belong."

Shammy's atmospheric presence shifted. The truth in the words. Vertical truth.

"The question is about blood family." Warm. "Found family. I'm found family. But I'm not blood. I'm not in the conversation."

"You're in the triad." Mai's presence steady. "The triad is the conversation."

"The triad is Ace and Mai. And Shammy." Direct. "But when blood calls, the question isn't about Shammy. The question is about blood. And I don't have blood."

Mai's framework didn't rebuild. Analytical voice didn't click.

The truth was vertical. Shammy was withdrawing because she didn't think she belonged in the blood-family question. Enacting the theme without realizing it.

"The question isn't about blood." Quiet. "It's about who you choose. Blood or found."

"Blood calls." Presence shifted. "But found family answers. I know. But I'm standing at the edge of the conversation. And no one's asking me to come closer."

Mai's hand found Shammy's shoulder. Grounding. Present.

"I'm asking." Steady. "I'm asking you to come closer. The question isn't about blood. It's about who stands together. And you're standing at the edge. Watching doors."

Shammy's atmospheric presence changed. Tide came back. Pressure filled the room.

"I'm always watching doors." Warm. "But I don't have to stand at the edge."

The conversation resumed. Three paths. Three questions.

But this time, Shammy was in the center. Not at the edge.

"Three paths." Mai's analytical voice restarted. "Vera's origin. The wooden bird. The cult."

"Which path do we take?" Flat.

"I say the cult." Controlled. "Someone's watching. Someone sent the letter. Someone knows I'm here. We need to find out who."

"I say the bird." Shadow-pressure flickered. "Fragment received. Memory came from outside. We need to find out what the fragment is receiving."

"I say Vera's origin." Framework clicked. "The gaps. The inconsistencies. We need to find out who you are."

Three paths. Three directions. Three people pulling different ways.

Shammy stood in the center. Not at the edge. Pressure steady.

But she had no preference. No blood question. No origin question. No fragment question.

Only the triad. The family she'd found. The question she couldn't ask.

Ace looked at Shammy. Shadow-pressure stabilized. Stillness deepened.

"Shammy." Flat. "Which path?"

Mai's framework stopped. Vera's threshold touch activated.

Shammy's atmospheric presence shifted. Vertical truth. Core question.

"You're asking me?" Warm. "I don't have a preference. I don't have a question."

"You have an answer." Flat. "You always have an answer. Vertical truth. What does the atmospheric pressure say?"

Shammy felt the room. Tension. Fear. Counting. Stillness. Controlled delivery. Threshold touch.

Three paths. Three people pulling different ways. Three wounds. Three fears.

But only one path led somewhere. Only one path had the atmospheric pressure of movement. Only one path had the weight of something coming.

"The cult." Warm. "Something's coming. I can feel it in the pressure. The residue from the relay point. The watchers. Something's moving."

"You can feel that?" Clicked.

"I can feel the atmospheric pressure." Shammy moved through the room, tall enough that she barely fit, ducking slightly under the ceiling's low points. "The residue was wrong. Not like a person. Like something made. Like something adjacent."

"Like Vera?" Flat.

"Different. But similar." Presence steadied. "The cult uses things that aren't born. Things that are made. If we follow the cult, we find out what's coming. And we find out what Vera is."

"The cult it is." Flat. "Shammy leads. We follow."

"Shammy leads?" Framework clicked.

"She feels the atmospheric pressure." Shadow-pressure flickered. "She senses what's coming. She's the vertical truth."

Shammy's presence filled the room. Tide returned. Not at the edge anymore.

The question wasn't about blood. It was about who stands together.

And Shammy was standing with the triad. Blood or no blood.

The pressure was steady. The storm was coming. And the triad would face it together.

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