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## Chapter 3 — The Pressure

Shammy tilted her head back and let the air wash over her.

The pressure was wrong. Not the weight Ace felt in her chest. Something else. The atmosphere here was held. Contained. Like a storm that wanted to break but couldn't find the crack in the glass.

She stood at the edge of the central plaza, the fountain behind her, the too-perfect city spreading outward in all directions. The sun was high, the sky was blue.

And the air was dead.

Not still. Dead.

Shammy spread her fingers, felt for the edges of whatever was pressing down on this place. Her hair lifted slightly. A static charge that shouldn't exist on a clear day.

Electricity. Held electricity. Potential without release.

She closed her eyes and read.

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The atmosphere told stories.

Shammy had learned to listen years ago, back when she'd first understood that she wasn't like other people. The air spoke to her. Not in words, but in pressure, in charge, in the way electricity built before a storm. She could feel weather coming before the clouds gathered. Could taste lightning on her tongue before it struck.

Here, the air was wrong.

She walked the perimeter of the plaza, one hand raised, reading. The pressure changed as she moved. Thicker near the fountain, thinner near the edges. Like ripples in the atmosphere. Like the tide of something that had washed over this city and left a residue behind.

At the northern edge of the plaza, she found a spot where the pressure spiked.

Her hand came up. Her fingers spread. The hair on her arms rose.

Here.

Something had happened here. The air remembered it, even if the people didn't. A violent release of energy. Heat and force and something that had burned so hot it had scorched the atmosphere itself.

And then, nothing. As if the burning had been erased, but the air still held the shape of the flame.

Shammy pressed her palm flat against the space in front of her. Not a wall. Not a barrier. An absence. A place where the air had been edited.

She opened her eyes.

The spot looked like any other in the plaza. Cobblestones, a bench, a tree in perfect bloom. But she could feel what wasn't there. The absence of something that should have been.

The air held its breath.

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She found Mai at the cafe, notebook open, pen moving.

Her partner looked up as Shammy approached. The cafe's tables were occupied by smiling people drinking coffee, eating pie, living their regular lives. The waitress refilled cups with mechanical precision.

"Thirty-nine clocks." Mai said before Shammy could speak. "All showing different times. All frozen. It's not just that they're wrong, they're stopped at the moment the optimization reached them."

Shammy sat down across from her. The chair was too comfortable. The table too smooth. Everything here was designed to not be noticed.

"The air pressure." Shammy said. "I found something. Spots where the atmosphere holds the shape of something that was erased."

Mai's pen paused. "Where?"

"The plaza. Near the fountain. And at the northern edge, something happened there. Something violent. Heat, force, energy. The air remembers it even if the ground doesn't."

Mai flipped to a fresh page. "Can you map it?"

Shammy closed her eyes. Reached out with her perception, feeling for the edges of the disturbance. The pressure spikes weren't random. They formed a shape, a pattern. Like a fingerprint pressed into the atmosphere.

She opened her eyes and reached for Mai's pen.

Her partner handed it over without asking.

Shammy drew quickly. Circles and lines, points of pressure, zones of absence. The shape that emerged wasn't a circle.

It was a spiral. Winding outward from the fountain, touching the spots where the air was thickest, ending at the northern edge where she'd felt the burning.

"This is where it happened." Shammy pointed at the center of the spiral. "And this is where it spread."

Mai studied the drawing. Her analytical mind was working. Shammy could see it in the way her eyes moved, calculating distances, connecting points.

"This matches my clock map." Mai said slowly. "The time discrepancies form concentric circles. Your pressure points form a spiral. Different shapes, but the same center."

"The fountain."

"The fountain."

Shammy looked out the cafe window. In the distance, she could see the plaza, the perfect fountain, the people moving through their regular lives.

"Ace went down into the stone." She said. "You mapped the spread. And I read the atmosphere."

"And?"

Shammy pressed her hand flat against the table. The static charge in her fingers sparked.

"And something's been waiting here. A long time. Something that wants to break free."

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She left Mai at the cafe and walked the city.

The streets of Verdant Springs curved gently, leading always back to the center. Shammy followed them without thinking, letting her perception guide her. The air pressure shifted as she moved. Thick in some places, thin in others, always wrong.

She passed the gate where they'd entered. The guard, Marcus, still stood at his post, still smiling. His hands were smooth. His eyes were warm. He nodded as she passed.

Shammy didn't nod back.

She walked past storefronts and houses, past people who smiled and people who walked and people who lived their regular lives. The city was beautiful, in its way. Clean. Orderly. Perfect.

But the air was screaming.

Not out loud. Shammy was the only one who could hear it. The suppressed pressure, the held breath, the storm that wanted to break. It built as she walked, a crescendo in the atmosphere that no one else seemed to feel.

By the time she reached the northern edge of the city, her hair was standing on end.

The pressure here was immense. Not the weight Ace felt. This was different. This was the pressure of a storm front, of electricity building in the clouds, of lightning seconds before it struck.

Shammy raised both hands. Her fingers spread wide. The charge in her body rose to meet the charge in the air.

Something had happened here.

Something violent.

And the atmosphere had been edited so thoroughly that only the shape of the absence remained.

She found the tower by accident.

Or not by accident. The air had guided her, the pressure pushing her toward the tallest building in Verdant Springs. A clocktower, its face showing a time that didn't match any of the others. 7:15, frozen like all the rest.

The door was unlocked.

Shammy climbed. The stairs spiraled upward, the walls close, the air growing thicker with each step. By the time she reached the top, the pressure was almost unbearable.

She pushed open the trapdoor and emerged onto the platform.

The view was wrong.

Verdant Springs spread out below her. Neat rows of buildings, curving streets, the perfect plaza at the center. But from this height, Shammy could see what she'd missed from the ground.

The city wasn't random. Its streets spiraled outward from the center, forming a shape she recognized.

A vortex.

The same spiral she'd drawn in Mai's notebook. Winding outward from the fountain, touching points of pressure, ending at the edges where the optimization had stopped.

This city hadn't been built. It had been grown. Or planted. Or seeded.

Shammy stood at the edge of the platform, the wind catching her hair. From here, she could see the whole pattern. The spiral city, the frozen clocks, the absence in the air.

And she understood something that Mai's maps and Ace's traces couldn't show.

The optimization wasn't just erasing events. It was erasing the evidence of its own existence. Making everything perfect so that no one would notice what was missing.

But it couldn't erase the atmosphere.

It couldn't edit the air.

The storm was still there. Held. Waiting. Wanting to break.

Shammy raised her hand to the sky. The charge in her fingers matched the charge in the clouds. For a moment, one perfect moment, she felt the storm beneath the surface.

It wanted out.

And she was the only one who could feel it.

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She found Ace at the inn.

Her warrior-sister sat on the bed in her room, counting heartbeats. The room was too soft, too perfect, too wrong. But Ace sat there anyway, her hand pressed flat against her thigh.

"The fountain." Ace said without looking up. "I went down. There was violence. Battle. And something erased it."

Shammy sat beside her. The bed dipped under her weight.

"The atmosphere." She said. "It holds the shape of what happened. Even if the stone doesn't. Even if the people don't."

"Can you read it?"

Shammy closed her eyes. Reached for the memory of the spiral, the pressure points, the burning at the northern edge.

"Fire." She said. "Heat. Energy. Something released here, and then something contained it. The storm wanted to break, and something held it down."

Ace's hand found hers. Brief contact. Grounding.

"The clocks." Ace said. "Mai says they're frozen. Each one stopped at the moment the optimization reached it."

"The air pressure forms the same shape. A spiral. Winding outward from the center."

They sat in silence. The too-soft bed, the too-perfect room, the too-wrong city outside the window.

"We need to go to the center." Ace said.

"I know."

"The fountain. The origin. That's where we'll find what happened."

Shammy nodded. The storm in her chest agreed. It wanted out. It wanted to break.

It wanted to know what had been buried here.

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Night fell over Verdant Springs.

Shammy stood at the window of her room, watching the city below. The moon was too bright. The stars too clear. The air too still.

The storm was out there, held beneath the surface. Waiting for someone to break the glass.

Shammy raised her hand to the window. The static charge in her fingers sparked against the glass.

Tomorrow, they would go to the center.

Tomorrow, they would find what had been erased.

And Shammy would finally feel the storm that this city had been holding for a hundred and seventy-

nine years.

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*end of chapter three*

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