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Chapter 13: Storm Without Regulation

Relief came first. That was the wrong emotion, and Shammy knew it was wrong, and she felt it anyway.

The Dreamer moved.

It wasn't the slow, millimeter-scale shift that Verath's instruments had detected during their previous visit. This was a displacement. A sudden adjustment in position that sent a shockwave through the atmospheric pressure of the entire district. Shammy felt it before the instruments registered it: a pulse of pressure that originated below the warehouse and expanded outward in a sphere of altered atmosphere, rippling through the Harbor district's carefully regulated air like a stone dropped into a frozen pond.

The regulation broke.

For the first time since the triad had arrived in the Harbor district, the atmosphere fluctuated. The flat-line stability that had made Shammy feel redundant shattered into a thousand micro-variations: pressure gradients, temperature shifts, humidity spikes, the chaotic signature of an atmosphere that was no longer being controlled.

Shammy's atmospheric sense, which had been reading blanks since they entered the district, suddenly had data. More data than she could process. The regulation that had made her redundant was gone, and in its absence, she could feel everything.

She should have been afraid. The Dreamer was moving. The seal was under stress. The atmospheric anomaly was expanding. This was the beginning of the catastrophic scenario that Mai's probability models had been predicting.

Instead, Shammy felt relief.

Not relief that the situation was dangerous. Relief that she could feel again. Relief that her primary instrument, the atmospheric sense that defined her as much as her height or her hair or her warmth, was working. The Harbor district's atmosphere was no longer a frozen lake she couldn't read. It was an ocean, and the ocean was in motion, and she could feel every current and every wave and every subtle shift in the weather.

The relief lasted approximately three seconds.

Then the wind came.

The Dreamer's movement had displaced air. The displacement had created a pressure differential. The pressure differential was equalizing, and the equalization was coming through the warehouse as wind. Not a violent wind. Not a destructive wind. An honest wind. The first honest wind the Harbor district had experienced in three centuries.

The cult panicked.

Shammy could feel their emotional states like weather patterns: the sharp spike of alarm from the younger members, the controlled concern from the veterans, Verath's focused calm as she assessed the situation. They'd never experienced atmospheric variance inside the seal zone. They didn't know what it meant. They didn't know whether the seal had failed or the Dreamer had woken or the world was ending or it was just weather.

It was just weather. The first real weather the Harbor district had had in three hundred years. And the cult didn't know how to handle weather, because weather wasn't supposed to exist here, because the Dreamer's regulation had removed weather from the district's atmosphere, and now the regulation was broken and weather was back and it was terrifying because weather was change and change meant the Dreamer was doing something it hadn't done in three centuries.

Shammy's instinct was to regulate. To smooth the turbulence. To dampen the wind. To make the atmosphere stable again because stable was safe and safe was what she did.

But she couldn't.

The Dreamer's regulation had collapsed because the Dreamer was still moving. The entity was shifting in its containment, and the shifting was disrupting the atmospheric control from below. Shammy couldn't balance what was being disrupted by something larger than her. The atmospheric anomaly was too big. The source was too deep. The scale was wrong.

She couldn't balance this.

For the first time since the triad had formed, Shammy stopped regulating.

Not because she chose to. Because she couldn't. The wind came through the warehouse and the atmosphere fluctuated and the pressure shifted and Shammy's field, which had been holding the triad's atmospheric environment stable since they'd arrived, simply let go.

The air pressure in the warehouse dropped. Not dangerously. Noticeably. The kind of pressure change that makes your ears pop and your head feel light. The cult felt it. The triad felt it. Shammy felt it.

And Shammy, for the first time in her humanoid life, experienced the atmosphere without regulating it.

It was terrifying.

It was also beautiful.

The wind moved through the warehouse like someone had opened a door that had been closed for a very long time and had opinions about it. The air pressure fluctuated naturally. The temperature shifted in gradients. The humidity varied from corner to corner. The atmosphere was alive, chaotic, uncontrolled, and it was the first real weather the Harbor district had experienced in three centuries, and Shammy was standing in it, and she wasn't regulating it, and the wind was moving through her hair and her clothes and her atmospheric field, and she could feel it all.

Ace stood in the wind and felt it move through her shadow-pressure. The darkness around her rippled like water disturbed by a current. Not threatening. Not destabilizing. Just present. The wind was present. The atmosphere was present. And Ace was present in it, not regulating, not controlling, just being.

Mai watched the atmospheric data on her scanner with wonder. The flat-line readings had exploded

into a thousand data points. Pressure variance. Temperature fluctuation. Humidity cycles. The data was beautiful.

The data was weather.

“Shammy.” Mai's voice, cutting through the wind. “Are you okay?”

Shammy didn't answer immediately. She was standing in the middle of the warehouse with her arms slightly raised and her face tilted toward the ceiling and her bright blue eyes wide and her storm-gradient hair moving in the wind that had no source and was the first real wind this district had felt in three centuries.

“I'm not regulating,” Shammy said. “I'm just... here. I'm just here, Mai. I'm not holding anything. I'm not balancing anything. I'm not maintaining anything. I'm just standing in the weather and the weather is happening to me and I'm not doing anything about it.”

“That's... unprecedented.”

“I know. It's also the most honest I've felt since we arrived.” Shammy's voice was not her focused register. It was her warm register, amplified, expanded, the voice she used when she was feeling so much that the feelings were becoming atmosphere. “I've been regulating this entire district since we got here. Smoothing the edges. Dampening the fluctuations. Making the air comfortable for you and Ace because that's what I do. And I couldn't feel the regulation because I was part of it. But now the regulation is gone and I can feel everything and it's terrifying and beautiful and I don't want to start regulating again because this is who I am without the regulation and I've never been without it before.”

The cult was still panicking. Verath was trying to calm them. The cantos had stopped because the cantos depended on atmospheric stability, and the atmospheric stability was gone, and the cantos couldn't function in weather.

Shammy felt the fear. The emotional weather of the room was a storm front of anxiety and confusion. Her instinct was to smooth it, to regulate it, to make the emotional atmosphere calm again. She reached for her regulation, the thing she did without thinking, the atmospheric control that had been her primary function since the triad formed.

Her hand stopped. She was shaking. The regulation wouldn't engage. Not because she couldn't. Because she was afraid to. If she started regulating again, she'd go back to being the thing she'd always been: the one who holds the space, the one who balances, the one who makes everything comfortable for everyone else and never lets herself be uncomfortable.

“Shammy.” Mai's voice again. Closer. Mai was crossing the warehouse toward her, moving through the wind, her silver hair catching the light. “You're shaking.”

“I know.”

“Your regulation is offline. I can feel it. The whole room can feel it.”

“I know. I can't... I don't want to...”

Mai reached for Shammy's hand. The gesture was small. The significance was not. Shammy flinched. She was the one who held. She was the one who reached. She was the one who put her hand on other people's shoulders and made the air comfortable. She was not the one who was held. She was not the

one who was reached for.

“Shammy,” Mai said. “Take my hand.”

Shammy looked at Mai's outstretched hand. The hand was steady. Mai was steady. The analytical framework that had been cracking under the strain of non-human mathematics was holding, because Mai was choosing to hold it, and the choice was the same choice Ace had made when she refused the Dreamer's offer: the choice to be who you were instead of who someone else wanted you to be.

Shammy took Mai's hand.

The contact was simple. Two hands touching. The atmospheric effect was not simple. Shammy's regulation, which had been offline, came back in a new configuration. Not the white-knuckled, over-perfect regulation of someone holding too tight. A different regulation. A shared regulation. The atmospheric field around Shammy and Mai was no longer controlled by Shammy alone. It was held by both of them.

Ace moved to stand next to them. Her shadow-pressure settled around the triad like a blanket. Not heavy. Not dark. Present. The depth vector anchoring the horizontal and the vertical. Three people, three vectors, one field.

The wind was dying down. The Dreamer's movement had stopped. The atmospheric disruption was settling. The regulation from below was re-establishing itself, the Dreamer's breath resuming its patient eight-second rhythm, the flat-line stability creeping back across the district like water filling a vessel.

But something had changed. Shammy's regulation was different. Not the same over-controlled perfection. Something looser. More honest. The air around the triad was comfortable but not perfect. Stable but not rigid. It felt like weather instead of engineering.

“I've been regulating the pressure since we got here,” Shammy said. “I didn't realize how much I was holding until I stopped.” She looked at the ceiling, at the warehouse roof, at the Harbor district beyond. “The Dreamer's atmospheric signature. I can read it now, in the spaces between the regulation. The Dreamer isn't maintaining this atmosphere as containment. It's maintaining it as an invitation.”

“An invitation?” Mai asked.

“The stability. The comfort. The perfect air quality. The Dreamer isn't keeping the atmosphere still to contain itself. It's keeping the atmosphere still because it wants something to come close. It's been waiting for three centuries for someone to enter its space and feel the regulation and not run away.” Shammy's bright blue eyes were full of something that was almost understanding. “The Dreamer is lonely. The atmosphere is its way of reaching out. The stillness is hospitality. The invitation is: come close. Stay. Be comfortable. I won't hurt you. I just want someone to be here.”

The wind had stopped. The atmosphere was settling. The Dreamer's regulation was returning, and with it, the flat-line stability that made Shammy feel redundant. But Shammy didn't feel redundant anymore. She felt necessary. Not because she could regulate the atmosphere better than the Dreamer. Because she could be in the atmosphere without regulating it, and that was something the Dreamer couldn't do.

The Dreamer couldn't stop maintaining its own containment. The Dreamer couldn't choose to let go.

The Dreamer was trapped in its own regulation, the way Shammy had been trapped in hers. And Shammy, for one moment, had let go, and the letting go had been beautiful, and the beauty was a kind of freedom that the Dreamer would never have.

“Thank you,” Shammy said to Mai. “For reaching.”

“Thank you for taking,” Mai said.

The triad stood in the settling atmosphere of the Harbor district. The wind was gone. The weather was subsiding. The Dreamer's regulation was returning. But Shammy's field was different now, and the difference was visible in the air: a regulation that left room for variance, a stability that permitted weather, a holding that was strong enough to keep you safe and loose enough to let you breathe.

The cult had stopped panicking. Verath was assessing the atmospheric data. The cantos were resuming, slowly, carefully, the voices of the maintenance crew finding their rhythm again in the unfamiliar atmosphere of a district that had, for one extraordinary moment, had weather.

Shammy's hand was still in Mai's. Ace's shadow-pressure was still around them. The triad held. Not perfectly. Not rigidly.

Honestly.

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:19**

