

Chapter 6: The Still Air

Shammy stood inside the warehouse perimeter and felt the wrongness settle into her bones.

The infiltration had been Ace's design. The guard rotation had a twelve-second gap on the west side, between the mobile patrol's departure and the corner guard's visual reset. Ace had timed it during reconnaissance, counted it down, and the triad had moved through the gap like water through a crack. Mai had handled the electronic countermeasures: the warehouse's security system was old, analog, and vulnerable to the specific frequency of Mai's disruptor pistol set to EM-pulse mode. Shammy had regulated the air around them, smoothing their passage so the atmosphere didn't register their movement.

Inside the perimeter, the air was worse than she'd remembered. Not worse in quality. Worse in stillness. The regulation was absolute. No fluctuation. No variance. The air was so stable that Shammy's atmospheric sense had nothing to read, like looking at a photograph of an ocean instead of the ocean itself.

The warehouse was large. Industrial-scale. The ceiling was high enough that Shammy didn't have to duck, which was a rare comfort in Night City architecture. The interior had been converted. What had once been a cargo processing facility was now something else. The floor space had been divided into sections: storage areas for the organic materials, workstations where robed figures performed tasks that looked like ritual and read like maintenance, and a central area where the largest concentration of activity occurred.

"Thirty-one people," Mai murmured. She was counting. Mai always counted. "Organized into three work groups. Group one is handling the organic materials. Group two is performing something that looks like a ceremony but has the rhythm of a checklist. Group three is monitoring equipment I don't recognize."

Ace said nothing. She was reading the space the way she read every space: exits, threats, positions. The warehouse had two main exits, four emergency routes, and a large open area in the center where something was very wrong with the floor. Not structurally wrong. Geometrically wrong. The floor pattern in the center of the warehouse was a seal.

Shammy felt the seal before she saw it. The atmospheric regulation was emanating from below the floor, from whatever space existed beneath the warehouse. The breath was there, the slow eight-second rhythm, steady and patient and ancient. But being inside the building, being directly above the breath, was different from standing outside the perimeter. Inside, she could feel the texture of the regulation. It wasn't just stillness.

It was intent.

Something down there was maintaining this atmosphere deliberately, with the specific attention of a thing that was choosing to keep the air still.

"They're not performing a ritual," Mai said. She was watching the second work group with the

intensity of someone whose analytical framework was being rebuilt in real time. "They're performing maintenance. The hand positions correspond to seal-reinforcement protocols. The vocalizations are stabilization cantos. I've read about these. They're used to maintain containment integrity by providing acoustic reinforcement to the seal's geometric structure."

"They're singing to the seal," Shammy said.

"They're maintaining it. The cantos provide frequency support. The hand positions map to the seal's anchor points. The organic materials are replacement parts for degraded sections." Mai's voice had shifted to her analytical register. "This isn't worship. This is repair work."

The cult noticed them.

It happened the way things happen in rooms where the atmosphere is being actively regulated: the pressure shifted. Shammy felt it before she saw it—a change in the ambient regulation that wasn't her doing. The entity below had noticed them. The breath hadn't changed, but the quality of the regulation had shifted from passive to attentive.

The robed figures turned. Thirty-one people looking at the three strangers who'd walked through their perimeter and into their workspace. The reactions were mixed: alarm from the outer ring, curiosity from the work stations, and from the center of the room, approaching with the calm deliberateness of someone who'd been expecting this, a woman who moved like she'd been poured into her role and left to set.

"Verath," the woman said. She wasn't armed. She didn't need to be. The warehouse itself was her security system. "You're the ones Whisper's been asking about. I was wondering when you'd show up."

"How did you know about Whisper?" Mai stepped forward.

"Whisper asks questions about everything. Questions create ripples. The Dreamer feels ripples." Verath's voice was measured, instructional—the tone of someone who'd been explaining this to people for a very long time. "If you came to break the seal, you'd already be dead. The containment protocols would have activated when you crossed the threshold with hostile intent. If you came to understand, then watch."

She gestured toward the central work group. The robed figures continued their cantos without interruption. Their voices were low, rhythmic, the sound of people performing a task they'd performed so many times it had become automatic. The cantos resonated with the floor, and the floor resonated with whatever was below it, and the resonance was a frequency that Shammy could feel in her atmospheric field like a second heartbeat.

"The Dreamer has been asleep for three centuries," Verath said. "But sleep has stages. We've detected REM activity. It's starting to dream more actively. The cantos help stabilize the REM cycle, the way white noise helps a restless sleeper stay under. That's what we do here. We keep the noise going so the Dreamer doesn't wake up."

"The Dreamer," Mai repeated. "That's what you call the entity."

"That's what it is. We don't worship it. We don't fear it. We maintain the conditions that keep it dormant." Verath's eyes moved between the three of them. "You have a Neverborn fragment. You have a ritual architect. And you have something I can't identify but that's making the air in this

warehouse feel like it wants to pay attention to you.”

Shammy felt the truth of that. The atmospheric regulation had shifted when they entered. Not hostile. Not welcoming. Attentive. The Dreamer was aware of them. Its breath hadn't changed, but its attention had.

“Ace,” Shammy said quietly. “Violet. The Dreamer's responding to Violet.”

Ace's shadow-pressure had intensified. The air around her was denser, darker, heavier than the ambient regulation. The Violet fragment was resonating with whatever was below the floor. Not threatening.

Recognizing.

“I feel it,” Ace said. Her voice was compressed. Flat. The voice she used when something was happening inside her that she couldn't control. “It knows Violet. It's reaching toward Violet.”

“It's reaching toward all of you,” Verath said. “The Dreamer has been alone for a very long time. It's not malevolent. It's lonely. When something enters its sensory range that it recognizes as... similar... it pays attention.”

“Similar to what?” Mai asked.

“Similar to itself. Contained. Resonant. The fragment your companion carries is not unlike the Dreamer, in structure. Different scale. Different origin. But the same frequency, if you like. The Dreamer can feel it the way you can feel a voice in a crowded room that's speaking your language.”

The warehouse hummed. The cantos continued. The breath below the floor maintained its eight-second rhythm, steady and patient and ancient. But underneath the rhythm, Shammy felt something else. A quickening. Not in the breath, but in the spaces between breaths. The REM activity Verath had described. The Dreamer was dreaming, and in its dreams, it was reaching toward the thing that had walked into its space and carried a fragment of something it recognized.

“We need to see the seal,” Mai said. “We have a schematic that will let us read it without compromising its integrity. If the Dreamer's REM activity is increasing, the containment may need reinforcement beyond what your cantos can provide.”

Verath studied her for a long moment. The silence was the silence of someone making a calculation—weighing risk against necessity, deciding whether to trust a stranger with something that had been her responsibility for a very long time.

“The seal chamber is below this floor,” Verath said. “I'll take you there. But you need to understand something: the seal is not a prison in the way you think of prisons. The Dreamer consented to containment. The seal was designed to hold it while the permanent structure was built. The permanent structure was never built. What you'll see down there is a temporary solution that's been holding for three centuries, and the only thing keeping it holding is my people and their cantos and the Dreamer's own willingness to stay asleep.”

“Consent-based containment,” Mai said. The concept was landing. “The entity agreed to this.”

“The entity requested this. It was the entity's idea. It was too large to exist in the world without causing damage—not because it was malicious but because it was too big to care about small things. A footstep that crushes an anthill. The anthill isn't the target. The anthill is beneath notice. The entity

chose containment because it didn't want to crush anthills."

The word sat in the air. Shammy felt the emotional weight of it. The cult members she could read now—their emotional states clearer than their faces: devotion that wasn't worship, dedication that wasn't faith, the commitment of people who'd been given a job that mattered and had made it their entire lives.

"Ace," Shammy said. "Violet's getting louder."

Ace's shadow-pressure was pulsing. The darkness around her thickened and thinned in a rhythm that matched the Dreamer's breath. The fragment was responding to proximity, to recognition, to the feeling of being near something that spoke the same language.

Ace closed her eyes. The pulse steadied. When she opened them, her violet eyes were bright and focused.

"Controlled," she said. "Moving on."

Verath led them toward a door in the warehouse floor that Shammy hadn't noticed—which was impossible, because Shammy noticed everything about the atmosphere of every room she entered. She hadn't felt this door because the door's atmosphere was the same as the rest of the warehouse's atmosphere. The Dreamer's regulation extended below the floor as well as above it.

The breath was louder as they descended. Eight seconds. Inhale. Exhale. The rhythm filled the stairwell like a heartbeat. Shammy's atmospheric sense was being overwhelmed by the regulation. Every reading she took came back the same: stable, stable, stable. It was like trying to read the surface of a frozen lake. The information was there, beneath the ice, but she couldn't reach it.

"The Dreamer is dreaming more actively because you're here," Verath said as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "Your resonance signatures are stimulating it. The fragment, especially. It's been a very long time since anything like itself has been this close."

"Is that dangerous?" Mai asked.

"Not to you. Not directly. But the more the Dreamer dreams, the more the seal degrades. REM activity puts pressure on the containment structure. Think of it as a sleeping person who's starting to toss and turn. The blanket stays on, but it starts to slip."

The seal chamber opened below them. The floor was carved with a pattern that hurt to look at. Lines that should have intersected didn't. Angles that should have added up fell short. The mathematics of the seal were visible in its geometry, and the geometry was wrong in the way that a reflection in a funhouse mirror is wrong—you could name what was off, but the naming didn't make it better.

Ace stood at the edge of the seal. Her shadow-pressure pressed against it. The seal pressed back. Violet hummed at 50Hz. The Dreamer breathed at eight-second intervals. The two frequencies found each other in the dark.

The Dreamer was asleep.

But it was dreaming.

And in its dreams, it knew they were there.

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