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Chapter 9: Eye of the Storm

The safehouse had the kind of quiet that makes you hear your own blood and resent it for being so loud.

It was a converted storage unit in a district that had no name because Night City had run out of names for its marginal spaces and had started numbering them instead. District 17. Two rooms. One window. A door that locked from the inside and had been reinforced by whoever had used the safehouse before them. The air was stale. Shammy could fix stale. She couldn't fix what was underneath it.

The triad had retreated after Verath's message. The message had been brief and concerning: the Dreamer's respiratory cycle had dropped to 7.4 seconds. The cult's monitoring equipment was registering REM activity at a level they'd never seen before. The triad's presence was stimulating the Dreamer. The more time they spent in or near the warehouse, the more active the dreaming became.

So they'd pulled back. Not far. Not out of the Harbor district's atmospheric radius, because the radius was expanding and moving away from it felt like running from weather. But far enough that Verath's instruments showed the REM activity stabilizing at a new, slightly elevated baseline.

The safehouse was quiet. No data screens. No field equipment. No analytical frameworks running in the background. Just three people and stale air and the weight of what they'd learned.

Shammy sat in the corner with her back to the wall. Her height made the safehouse feel smaller than it was. She'd ducked through the doorframe without thinking about it, the automatic compression of someone who'd learned that the world was built for smaller people and had decided to accommodate rather than argue. Her bright blue eyes were focused on the window, which showed a slice of Night City sky that was smog and amber and nothing that looked like weather.

She was regulating. Shammy was always regulating, but right now she was regulating harder than usual, and the safehouse's atmosphere showed it. The air pressure was perfect. The humidity was perfect. The temperature was perfect. Everything was perfect, which meant Shammy was white-knuckling, which meant something was wrong.

Mai noticed. She always noticed when Shammy was working too hard, because Shammy's over-regulation was the atmospheric equivalent of someone smiling so hard their jaw hurt. The perfection was the symptom.

"Shammy," Mai said. "Stop regulating."

Shammy blinked. "What?"

"The air in here is too perfect. You're over-regulating. Stop."

The air pressure in the safehouse shifted. Not collapsed. Just relaxed. The perfect atmosphere became slightly imperfect: a draft from under the door, a temperature gradient between the floor and the ceiling, the faint smell of dust that had been suppressed by Shammy's field.

"I'm sorry," Shammy said. "I didn't realize I was—"

"You were. You are. And that's the problem." Mai sat on the floor across from her. The safehouse didn't have furniture, which meant sitting on the floor was the only option. "You're holding the space for us the way you always hold the space, but right now you're holding it too tight, and that means you're scared."

"I'm not—"

"Shammy." Mai's voice was gentle but precise. "You're the most emotionally open person I know. You can't hide from me. And right now, the fact that you're trying to hide means there's something worth hiding."

Shammy's hands were in her lap. Her storm-gradient hair was still. No wind. No static. The air around her was ordinary, which for Shammy was the equivalent of screaming.

"I'm afraid."

The words were simple. The cost of saying them was not. Shammy didn't admit fear easily. She was the triad's atmospheric regulator, the vertical vector, the one who held the space. Admitting fear was admitting that the space she held was under threat.

"I'm afraid because I can't balance what's happening in the Harbor district. The Dreamer's atmospheric regulation is better than mine. It's more consistent. It's more patient. It's been doing what I do for longer than I've been alive, and it does it without effort, and it doesn't need help, and it doesn't get tired." Shammy's voice was quiet. Not her warm register. Not her focused register. Something in between. "I've never encountered something that makes me redundant. I've never been in a situation where my primary function, the thing I was made to do, is already being done by something else. And I don't know how to be useful when I can't regulate."

Ace, who had been sitting against the opposite wall with her eyes closed, opened them. Her shadow-pressure shifted, a small fluctuation that meant she was choosing to engage.

"You're not redundant," Ace said.

"The atmosphere in the Harbor district is perfectly regulated without me. If I tried to regulate it, I'd be competing with something that's been doing it for three centuries. I can't improve on it. I can't contribute to it. I can't even read it properly because it's too stable to analyze." Shammy's bright blue eyes were wet. Not crying—Shammy didn't cry the way other people cried. The air just got heavier, and warmer, and fuller of something that had no name but felt like honesty.

"Shammy." Ace stood. Crossed the room. Sat next to her, close enough that their shoulders almost touched. Close enough that Shammy could feel Ace's shadow-pressure like a familiar weight. "The Dreamer regulates atmosphere. That's what it does. It breathes, and the breath keeps the air still. But it doesn't regulate the way you do. It doesn't read the room. It doesn't feel the people in it. It doesn't hold the space for anyone except itself."

"That's true," Shammy said. "But—"

"The Dreamer's regulation is selfish. Yours isn't. The Dreamer keeps the air still because that's what it needs to sleep. You keep the air right because that's what we need to breathe. Those are different functions. Different architectures. The Dreamer is a contained environment. You're a caring one."

Shammy looked at Ace. The words were unexpected. Ace didn't usually articulate emotional architecture. The fact that she was doing it now meant she'd been thinking about it—probably since the first time Shammy had said she felt redundant, probably during every hour she'd sat at the window counting frequencies while Shammy counted clouds.

"You're right," Shammy said. "But that doesn't change the fact that when we're inside the warehouse, my atmospheric sense goes blank. The regulation is so total that I have nothing to read. I'm blind in there, Ace. I'm operating without my primary instrument."

"Then you operate with your secondary instruments." Ace's voice was compressed but not flat. It carried something Shammy recognized—the kind of care that Ace couldn't say directly and had to compress into statements of fact. "You read people. You read emotional weather. You feel the room. Those aren't atmospheric functions. They're Shammy functions. The Dreamer can't do them. That's your space. Hold it."

Mai had been listening. The analytical framework was quiet for once, which meant she was processing on a different channel—the one that existed below the data and above the instinct.

"The math scares me," Mai said.

Ace and Shammy turned to look at her. Mai didn't say she was scared. Mai said the math scared her, which was the same thing, delivered in the precise technical language that was her way of being vulnerable.

"The seal's architecture is beautiful. Non-human. The equations work better than they should. The proofs are inevitable. And they're beautiful, and beauty in cosmic horror means something designed the trap, and designed it well, and designed it to be admired, and that's more frightening than anything the seal is containing."

"What do you mean?" Shammy asked.

"Horror is the unknown. A monster is frightening because you can't predict it. But a beautiful equation is known. It's predictable. It's legible. The seal's mathematics are beautiful, which means they were designed by an intelligence that valued beauty, and that intelligence is the same one that designed the containment, and the containment is what's holding the Dreamer." Mai's voice was measured but the measurement was trembling. "The Dreamer designed its own prison. Or helped design it. The entity consented to containment. The prison is beautiful because the prisoner helped build it. And I'm standing in front of a beautiful prison built by a lonely god that agreed to be locked up because it was too big to walk around without breaking things, and I'm supposed to redesign the lock, and the lock was designed by the prisoner, and I don't have the key because the key is the prisoner's own mathematics, and I can't read those mathematics completely, and I'm afraid that when I try, I'll find that the beautiful equations lead somewhere I can't follow."

The safehouse was quiet. Not the regulated quiet of Shammy's field. The real quiet. Three people who trusted each other enough to be afraid out loud.

Ace sat between them. Literally between them: Mai on one side, Shammy on the other. The triad's physical geometry was intentional. Ace in the center, Mai and Shammy flanking, the depth vector between the horizontal and the vertical.

"I'm the proof that seals fail," Ace said. Her voice was flat. Controlled. Maximum compression. "The village seal failed. I was the result. A fragment came out and found me and I've been carrying it ever since. That's what happens when containment breaks: something gets out."

"Yes," Mai said. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"I'm also the proof that something survives when they do." Ace's violet eyes held something that wasn't quite hope but was adjacent to it. "Violet isn't a parasite. It's a resonance. It's part of me. When the village seal failed, the fragment could have destroyed everything. Instead, it found a place to exist that wasn't destruction. It found me. I survived. The triad survived. We're still here."

"That's one data point," Mai said. "One seal failure. One survivor."

"It's the only data point that matters. We can't solve the Dreamer. We can't defeat it or contain it permanently or make it go away. What we can do is face it. Together. The way we face everything." Ace looked at Mai. At Shammy. "I move so I don't have to feel. You understand so you don't have to trust. Shammy regulates so she doesn't have to need. We're all doing the same thing in different directions. But the triad works because we do it together. That's the architecture. That's what holds."

Shammy's hand found Ace's. Not the touch of regulation. The touch of need. Shammy needed to hold something, and Ace let her, and the air pressure in the safehouse shifted to something that was warm and present and not perfect.

"The triad decides together," Shammy said. "Do we help the cult? Do we redesign the seal? Do we walk away and let the degradation run its course?"

"We don't walk away," Mai said. The answer came faster than analysis. "I've run the numbers. Walking away gives us a 97% probability of seal failure within fourteen months, and a 100% probability that whatever comes out will be catastrophic for Night City and possibly the surrounding region. Walking away isn't a neutral option. It's a decision to let the failure happen."

"Then we help," Ace said.

"Redesigning the seal is the only option that addresses the root cause," Mai said. "The current seal is temporary. It was always temporary. Maintaining it is buying time, not solving the problem. A new seal, designed as a permanent solution, maintained by people who understand it, is the only path that doesn't end in failure."

"It's also the most dangerous path," Shammy said. "We'd need to be inside the containment zone during construction. If something goes wrong, we're inside the breach radius with an awakening cosmic entity."

"Yes."

"And you're still willing to do it?"

Mai looked at Shammy. At Ace.

"I don't understand the Dreamer," Mai said. "I don't understand the non-human mathematics. I don't understand what it means for an entity to consent to containment and then wait three centuries for someone to finish the job. But I understand the triad. I understand that the three of us together can hold a line that none of us could hold alone. And I understand that right now, we're the only people in Night City who have the data, the skills, and the architecture to attempt this."

"Then we do it," Ace said.

"We do it," Shammy agreed.

The decision was architecture. Not sentiment. Not heroism. Three vectors choosing to align because alignment was stronger than separation.

The safehouse's atmosphere settled into something that wasn't perfect but was real. Shammy's regulation had eased. Mai's analytical framework had rebooted. Ace's shadow-pressure was calm. They sat in the quiet and breathed, and the breathing was ordinary and human.

"If the Dreamer is dreaming more actively," Ace said into the silence, "what happens when it wakes up?"

Nobody answered.

The Dreamer breathed at 7.4 seconds. The seal held. The triad held.

And somewhere below the Harbor district, something vast and patient and lonely dreamed of being whole, and the dream was getting louder.

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