

Chapter 9: The Storm Inside

The thing about being a storm-elemental is that you never stop being weather.

Shammy had learned this early, earlier than she could remember, because the memory of becoming was not a memory but a process, a continuous unfolding, a choosing that had happened once and kept happening every day since. She had chosen to take this form. She had chosen to be Shammy, 195 centimeters of storm-elemental who ducked through doorframes and apologized to furniture and collected smooth stones from beaches because they felt right in her hand.

She had chosen to be this. And every day, she chose again. And every day, the storm inside her asked: *Are you sure? Are you sure this is the shape you want? Are you sure this is the person you want to be? Are you sure you wouldn't rather be the wind again, uncontained, unbounded, unlimited by doorframes and furniture and the need to make the air comfortable for the people you love?*

And every day, Shammy said: *Yes. I'm sure. This is the shape I want. These are the people I want. This is where I want to be.*

But the storm didn't stop asking. And sometimes, like now, sitting on the beach with the source humming beneath her and the stones warm in her pocket and the truth finally spoken and still not enough, the storm asked louder.

Are you sure? Are you sure? Are you sure?

Shammy had walked the beach alone this morning. Not alone, exactly. The source was always there, humming beneath the sand, a presence that was less like a voice and more like a low note sustained for geological time. But alone from Ace and Mai, who were still in the suite, Ace doing her morning perimeter check of the room (closet, bathroom, balcony, under the bed, behind the curtains) and Mai updating what Shammy had started calling The Grand Spreadsheet of Everything Anomalous.

The beach was different in the early morning. The light was thin and silver, not the warm gold of afternoon or the deep orange of sunset, but something in between, something that hadn't decided what color it wanted to be yet. The sand was cool under Shammy's bare feet. Each step left a print that the tide erased within minutes, which was a small metaphor that Shammy chose not to think about.

The ocean was calmer today. The tide had stopped arguing with itself, the confused push-pull that Shammy had been inadvertently causing. She'd been more careful this morning. She'd woken up and made herself not adjust anything. Not the humidity, not the temperature, not the wind. She'd let the morning be what the morning wanted to be, and the ocean had responded by being ocean-shaped, regular, predictable, the way oceans were supposed to be when a storm-elemental wasn't confusing them.

But the air was heavy. Not with humidity. With something else. With the weight of a conversation that hadn't happened yet. The source was closer today. Shammy could feel it under every step, pressing up through the sand, through the rock, through the years. It was patient, the way it always was. But it

was also... eager. That was new. The source had been patient for so long that eagerness felt like a change in the weather, a shift in the long pattern, the first breeze before a storm that had been building for centuries.

Shammy walked to the waterline. The water touched her feet and held on for a moment too long, as it always did, as water couldn't help doing around her. She let it. She was tired of telling the ocean to let go. The ocean could hold on if it wanted. Everything could hold on if it wanted. Including her. Including the storm inside her. Including the thing under the hotel that had been holding on for so long.

She stood there, at the edge of the water, one hundred and ninety-five centimeters of storm-elemental, and she let the morning hold her the way she'd been holding the morning.

She found the last smooth stone on the walk back from the beach.

It was sitting on the path, not buried, not half-hidden, not something you had to dig for. Sitting. On the path. Like it had been placed there. Like it had been waiting.

Shammy picked it up. It was warm. Warmer than the sun could account for. Warmer than the ambient temperature of a stone that had been sitting on a sandy path in the morning light. Warm the way her skin was warm when she was modulating the air around her, which was always, which was the point, which was the thing she was trying not to do but couldn't stop doing.

The stone had the same concentric circles. The same pattern. Fibonacci-adjacent, Mai would say, if Mai were here, which she wasn't, which was good, because this was something Shammy needed to do alone, even though alone was the last thing she wanted to be, even though alone was the thing the source under the hotel had been for so long that it had started reaching out through napkins and elevators and windows, because alone was a kind of weather that no one should have to live in.

She turned the stone over. The pattern was more pronounced on this one, the circles spiraling inward, the way the buffet had spiraled, the way the ocean had glowed, the way everything in this resort had been reaching toward the center, toward the source, toward the thing that had been alone for so long.

I'm like you, Shammy thought. And the thought came not in words, because words were the language of the shape she'd chosen, and the storm inside her didn't speak in words. The thought came in pressure, in temperature, in the way the air shifted when something old and patient acknowledged something else that was also old, also patient, also choosing to stay in a shape that didn't always fit.

You've been alone, the stone seemed to say. Not in words. In warmth. In pattern. In the patient hum that Shammy had been feeling since they arrived, the one she'd been holding the space around, the one she'd been modulating, the one she'd been trying not to feel because feeling it would mean acknowledging it and acknowledging it would mean doing something about it and doing something about it would mean not having a vacation.

You've been alone, the warmth said. *I've been alone too. I've been holding the space too. I've been keeping things balanced and stable and small because I didn't want to scare anyone, because I didn't know if anyone could hear me, because I've been alone for so long that I forgot what it sounded like when someone said hello.*

And Shammy, standing on the path with the warm stone in her hand, felt the storm inside her rise.

Not the modulating kind. Not the holding-the-space kind. The other kind. The kind she kept pressed down, the kind she never let out, the kind that wanted to be weather again, that wanted to be wind and pressure and the full weight of a storm system that had been contained in a humanoid shape for so long that the shape was starting to feel like a cage.

She let the stone hum against her palm. She let the warmth of the source reach up through the ground, through the foundation, through the years of nothing happening, through the napkins and the elevators and the windows, and she let herself feel it, really feel it, not modulate it, not hold it, not adjust temperature or shift the pressure or keep it at a manageable level.

She felt the loneliness of it.

The loneliness of being an anomaly that stabilized. Of choosing a shape and staying in it. Of holding the space for so long that you forgot what it was like to be in the space. Of reaching out through every small thing, through breakfast buffets and opinionated elevators and windows that showed the truth, and hoping, hoping, hoping that someone would hear you and say hello.

She felt it because it was her own loneliness reflected back. The loneliness of being the one who modulates, the one who adjusts, the one who keeps the air comfortable and the pressure stable and the humidity perfect, and never asks anyone to adjust air for her, because she's the one who adjusts, that's who she is, that's what she does, and if she stopped doing it, who would she be? What would she be? A storm without a container, a weather system without a forecast, a thing that chose a shape and then forgot why it chose it?

The storm inside her rose.

Shammy stood on the path and the air around her shifted.

Not the small adjustments she'd been making all vacation, not the 0.7 degrees, not the 3% humidity, not the wind from the northwest. This was different. This was the air responding to the storm inside her, as it always did when she stopped holding it back, as it always wanted to respond, as it had been wanting to respond since they arrived, since before they arrived, since the moment she chose to take this shape and started learning to keep the storm contained.

The wind picked up. Not from the northwest. From everywhere. From Shammy. The air around her became the air inside her, and the air inside her became the air around her, and for a moment, a moment, she wasn't holding anything.

She let go.

Not all the way. Not completely. She was still Shammy, still in the shape she'd chosen, still standing on the path with her hair whipping around her and her eyes bright and charged and her hands, one hand holding the warm stone, the other hand open, reaching, not for anything, just reaching, because the storm inside her was reaching too, because the source under the hotel was reaching, because they were the same kind of thing, anomalies that stabilized, anomalies that chose to stay, anomalies that had been alone and were alone no longer.

The wind swirled. The temperature dropped and rose. The pressure shifted in ways that made the nearby palm trees bend and then straighten and then bend again. Shammy's hair, which had been doing its usual trick of drifting in nonexistent wind, was now moving in actual wind, her wind, the storm wind, the weather she'd been holding inside since she'd chosen this shape and decided to be

Shammy instead of weather.

The air tasted like ozone and salt and something older than either, something that had no name because it was the taste of the atmosphere before the atmosphere had a name, the taste of pressure and presence and the particular electricity that ran through a storm that was deciding whether to break. Shammy's skin prickled with it. Every hair on her arms stood up, not from cold, from charge, from the static potential of a weather system that had been contained too long.

The clouds above her, thin morning clouds, silver and innocuous, began to move. Not with the wind. Toward her. Gathering, slowly, lazily, the way clouds gather when they've found something worth gathering around. They weren't storm clouds yet. They were interested clouds. Curious clouds. Clouds that had noticed Shammy and wanted to be part of whatever was happening.

And she let it exist. She let it be. She let the storm come out, not to destroy, not to dominate, to be, to exist in the air around her the way it existed inside her, to breathe, to feel what it felt like to not hold the space for one moment.

It felt like falling.

It felt like flying.

It felt like being held.

It felt like all three things at once, which was impossible, which was the point, which was what storms felt like from the inside, the place Shammy had been keeping locked down for so long that she'd forgotten the door was even there.

The ground under her feet hummed. The source was resonating. The warm stone in her hand was no longer warm, it was hot, not burning but radiating, the way a heart radiates when it's finally been heard. The concentric circles on the stone's surface were glowing, faint, a pale gold light that matched the juice carafes and the napkin cranes and every other small, precise, beautiful thing the source had made when it was trying to say hello.

And the source said, in the language of pressure and warmth and the patient hum of something that had been waiting: *I hear you. I see you. I have been waiting for someone like you. Someone who knows what it feels like to hold the weather inside and never let it out. Someone who knows what it costs. Someone who chose the shape and keeps choosing it, every day, and wonders if the choosing is worth it.*

And Shammy, standing in her own wind, in her own storm, in the weather she'd been containing, thought: *Yes. It's worth it. It's worth it because of them. Because of Ace, who reaches for her katanas and pulls back. Because of Mai, who analyzes the wind speed while standing in it. It's worth it because I chose this shape and these people chose me in it, and I would choose it again, I would choose it every day, even when the storm asks if I'm sure.*

But I need to let it out sometimes. I need to not hold the space. I need to be weather. Just for a moment. Just to remember what it feels like.

"Ace." Mai's voice, from the beach, sharp and precise, the way it got when she was analyzing a threat, the way it got when she was scared but not showing it. "Something's happening to Shammy."

Ace was on her feet before Mai finished the sentence. Her shadow snapped vertical. Her hand went to her katanas, she reached, she always reached, and she pulled back, and she reached again, and she pulled back, because she was trying to do both things at once, she was trying to be ready and she was trying to be present, and those two things were in conflict and she could feel them fighting inside her, the part that wanted to move and the part that wanted to stay, the part that wanted to protect and the part that wanted to trust.

Shammy was standing on the path, and the air around her was a cyclone.

Not a dangerous one. Not a destructive one. The wind was moving, the pressure was shifting, the temperature was fluctuating, but it was contained, not in the way Shammy usually contained it, by holding it inside, by modulating it, by keeping it small and manageable. This was contained the way a wave is contained by the ocean. This was contained by being what it was.

"It's not an attack," Mai said, and she was already analyzing, she couldn't help it, she was analyzing the wind speed and the pressure differential and the temperature fluctuations, and she was doing it even though she'd promised not to, because that was who she was, that was what she did, and she couldn't stop any more than Ace could stop reaching for her katanas. "It's not, she's not attacking. This is Shammy. This is what she looks like when she stops holding it in."

Ace's hand was on her katana hilt. She could feel it. The emerald glow was faint but present, the hum of readiness.

"Is she hurt," Ace said, and it came out flat, factual, the voice she used for threat assessment, and both of them knew it was the wrong question, they both knew it immediately, and Ace said "I mean, is she, " and didn't finish it, because the right question didn't come with a tactical category.

"She's letting go," Mai said.

Ace understood. Because she was trying to let go too, in her way, in the small way that involved reaching for her katanas and pulling back, reaching and pulling back, over and over, learning what it felt like to not draw.

"Should we go to her?" Mai asked.

"I don't know."

"When do we ever say 'I don't know'?"

"When it's Shammy. When it's, when it's something we can't fight or analyze. When it's, "

"Someone being who they are," Mai finished.

The wind was changing. Not dying down. Shifting. The cyclone around Shammy was becoming something else, not a storm, not a calm, but something in between, something that was both at once, something that was the storm and the holding and the letting go and the being held, all at the same time.

And Shammy, Shammy was crying.

Not the way humans cry. Not tears. Rain. The air around her was becoming precipitation, light and fine, a gentle mist that fell on the path and the sand and the two people standing on the beach watching her, and it was warm, and it felt like Shammy, and it felt like the thing she'd been holding in,

the thing she'd been modulating, the thing she'd been keeping small and manageable because that was what she did, that was who she was, she was the one who held the space, she was the one who adjusted the temperature, she was the one who kept things comfortable, and she was tired, she was so tired, she was tired of holding and she was tired of modulating and she was tired of being the one who kept the space and never got to be in it.

"Shammy!" Ace called, and she was walking toward her, then running. The wind caught her hair and she pushed it back without stopping. The resort's decorative flag over the pool gate had gone horizontal. She noted this and did not evaluate it and kept running. She didn't draw her katanas, she didn't reach for them, she reached for Shammy, which was different, which was new, which was the thing she was learning to do instead of the thing she'd always done.

"Ace, wait, " Mai started, and then stopped, because Ace was already there, already reaching, already putting her arms around Shammy's waist, as high as she could reach on someone who was 195 centimeters of storm and sorrow, and holding on.

The wind buffeted her. The rain misted her face. The pressure shifted around her in ways that made her shadow flatten and then release, flatten and then release, like a heartbeat, like the thing inside her that was always pressing down and now was pressing against something else, someone else, Shammy, who was the storm and the holding and the letting go.

"I'm here," Ace said. And it came out raw, stripped of the flatness, stripped of the hard edge, raw truth. "I'm here and I'm not drawing my katanas and I'm not scanning for exits and I'm here, Shammy, I'm here."

The words landed in the storm like stones in water. Real. Heavy. Sinking through the wind and the rain-mist and the pressure differential to the place where Shammy was, under all the weather, in the quiet center that storms always have, the eye, the still point, the place where you could stand and hear your own heartbeat if you were quiet enough.

Shammy heard her. The way the ocean hears the moon, not with ears, with pull. The words pulled at her, a gravity that was different from the gravity of holding the space, a gravity that said *you don't have to hold this alone, you were never supposed to hold this alone, you chose a shape but you also chose us, and we are here, in the wind, in the rain, in the storm, we are here.*

Mai was there too, her arms around Shammy from the other side, her face in the rain-mist, her silver hair plastered to her cheek, and she was analyzing, she was analyzing, she couldn't stop, she was cataloging the wind speed and the pressure differential and the emotional significance of a storm-elemental finally letting the storm out, but she was also here, she was also holding on, she was also saying, in her own way, with her own language, *I'm here, I'm analyzing this because it's how I love you, I'm categorizing this because it's how I make sense of things, and I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere.*

The three of them fit together in the storm the way they fit together everywhere else, awkward and perfect and impossible to explain to anyone who wasn't them. Ace's compact weight against Shammy's waist. Mai's arms around Shammy's side, her chin pressed against Shammy's ribcage because that was as high as Mai could reach when Shammy was standing at full height, which was always, because Shammy was always at full height, she was the height she was, one hundred and ninety-five centimeters of storm-elemental who had never been small and had never known what it felt like to be held by someone taller, and had learned instead that being held wasn't about size, it was about presence, and right now, Ace and Mai were present, and that was enough, that was more than enough, that was everything.

The storm rose. The rain fell. The three of them stood in the middle of it, Ace, compact and fierce, holding on with everything she had; Mai, analytical and precise, holding on with everything she was; and Shammy, tall and storm-slung, letting the storm exist for the first time since she'd chosen this shape, letting it be weather, letting it be wind, letting it be the thing she'd been containing for so long that she'd forgotten what it felt like when it was free.

And the source under the hotel hummed.

It hummed through the stone in Shammy's hand. It hummed through the foundation. It hummed through the sand and the air and the water, and it said, not in words, because words were the language of the shape Shammy had chosen, and the source had never chosen a shape, had never needed to, had been alone and stable and patient for so long that words weren't necessary, it said:

You are not alone. You are not the only one who holds the space. You are not the only one who chose to stay. I hear you. I see you. I have been reaching for you since you arrived, and now you are reaching back, and we are not alone, we are not alone, we are not alone.

The storm settled. Not all at once. In stages. The way storms settle, the wind dropping, then rising, then dropping again, then finally easing into something that was almost calm, almost peace, almost the quiet after the thing has passed.

Shammy stood in the middle of it. Her hair was wild. Her eyes were bright with rain-mist and something else, not tears, not exactly, but the storm-elemental equivalent, the weather pattern that meant *I felt that, I felt all of it, I let it out and it was terrifying and it was freeing and I don't know how to feel about that yet.*

"You held me," Shammy said. Her voice was different — not the weather-voice and not the holding-voice. Something underneath both of those. "You held me through it. Neither of you tried to fix it. Neither of you tried to, to modulate it or analyze it or, "

"I analyzed it," Mai said. And then, before Shammy could respond: "I was cataloging the wind speed and the emotional significance. And then I thought I should stop. And then I analyzed the thought about stopping. And then I realized I wasn't going to stop. But I was here. I was here the whole time I was doing all of that."

Shammy looked at her. Then laughed, slightly wet, slightly weather-logged.

"I reached for my katanas twice," Ace said. "I reached and I pulled back. I was here. I was present. I was also counting exits, but I was here."

Shammy laughed. It came out wet, weather-logged, the kind of laugh that follows a storm, the kind that means *I survived, I'm still here, the weather passed and I'm still standing and I'm still in the shape I chose and I'm still me.*

The laugh was also rain. The laugh was also wind. The laugh was a microburst of joy that ruffled Mai's hair and made Ace's shadow flutter and dried a circle of path around their feet, which was Shammy's equivalent of a sigh of relief, the weather exhaling, the pressure equalizing, the space finally, finally not needing to be held.

"You were here," she said. "You were both here. You didn't try to fix it. You, you were here."

"We were here," Mai said. "That's the new thing. We're doing the old things, I'm analyzing, she's scanning, you're, you were letting go, which is the opposite of what you usually do, but you were

letting go and we were here. That's the new thing. Being here while doing the old things."

"Being here while being who we are," Ace said. Not a correction. An addition. The thing she did, adding the precise word that made the sentence true. "Not in spite of it. Alongside it."

"Being here," Shammy repeated. "Being in the space. Not holding it. Not modulating it. Being in it."

The rain-mist settled on their skin. The wind eased. The smooth stone in Shammy's hand hummed, warm and patient, and Shammy held it the way she'd hold anything she loved, carefully, with attention, with the particular respect of someone who knew what it felt like to be held.

"I need to go down there," Shammy said. "I need to go to the source. I need to, I need to say hello. I've been feeling it for days and I've been holding the space between us and it and I need to stop holding and start acknowledging. I need to go down there and meet it."

"We'll go with you," Ace said immediately, and her hand was still on Shammy's waist, and her shadow was still pressed against Shammy's foot, and she was still here, she was still present, she was still not reaching for her katanas, or she was reaching and pulling back, reaching and pulling back, over and over, and that was the new thing, that was the thing she was learning to do.

"You don't have to," Shammy said. "It's not your thing to, "

"It's our thing," Mai said. "We're a triad. We do things together. That's, that's what triads do. That's what we do."

"You have your own things to deal with," Shammy said. "Ace, you can't even, you're reaching for your katanas right now."

"I'm reaching and pulling back. That's the new thing."

"And Mai, you're, you're still analyzing. You still have three spreadsheets."

"I deleted the anomalous analysis one. The other two are for meal planning and wave intervals. They're practically recreational."

"Those are not recreational spreadsheets."

"They are to me."

Shammy laughed again. Wet, warm, weather-pattern laughter. The air around her shifted, not dramatically, not like the storm, a small adjustment, the kind she'd been making all vacation, the kind she couldn't stop making, the kind that was who she was.

"I'm still doing it," she said. "I adjusted the humidity. By like 2%. I can't stop."

"I know," Ace said. "I'm still counting exits. I know."

"And I'm still analyzing," Mai said. "I know."

"And we're all still here," Shammy said. "We're all still doing the things we can't stop doing, and we're still here, and that's, that's the point, isn't it? That's the thing we're learning?"

"That's the thing we're learning," Ace agreed.

The source hummed beneath them. Patient. Waiting. No longer alone.

Tomorrow, they would go down. Tomorrow, they would say hello. Tomorrow, they would face the thing that had been reaching out through napkins and elevators and windows, the thing that had been alone for so long, the thing that was like Shammy, that had chosen to stay, that had been holding the space with no one to hold it for.

But today, they stood in the rain-mist on the path, and they held each other, and they did the things they couldn't stop doing, and they were present, and they were here, and that was enough.

For now, that was enough.

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