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Chapter 9 — The Storm

The attack came at midnight.

Shammy felt it first. A shift in the atmosphere. A building pressure that wasn't hers. She was out of bed before the first sound, her hand raised, electricity crackling between her fingers.

“Up. Now.”

Ace moved without question. Mai grabbed her notebook.

The window exploded inward.

Not glass. Something else. Shadows that moved like smoke, forms that shifted like heat haze. They poured through the broken frame, filling the room with darkness.

Shammy released.

Lightning erupted from her palms. Blue-white, concentrated, controlled. It struck the nearest shadow, and the thing screamed. Not a human sound. Not an animal sound. Something between.

“Containment,” Mai shouted. “These are containment constructs. Part of the optimization.”

Ace dropped. Rolled. Came up behind one of the shadows. Her hand pressed flat against its back.

The shadow froze. Compressed. Collapsed into nothing.

“They're vulnerable to depth,” Ace said. “I can go down into them.”

“Then go.” Shammy struck another shadow, electricity arcing. “I'll hold the rest.”

Mai was already calculating. Her pen moved across her notebook, tracking patterns, finding weaknesses.

“The window. They're coming from outside. If we can—”

A shadow struck her. Mai went down. Her notebook skidded across the floor.

Shammy turned.

Her storm peaked.

Electricity poured out of her. Not controlled now, not precise. Raw power. Raw fury.

The shadows recoiled.

But more kept coming.

They fought their way into the hallway.

Shammy's electricity lit the darkness. Ace's hands found shadows and crushed them. Mai ran calculations, calling out positions, predicting movements.

"They're constructs of the optimization," Mai said. "Programmed to contain us. To prevent us from reaching the seal."

"Then someone's afraid we'll break it," Ace said.

Shammy struck another shadow. The building around them groaned, the strain of her power against the structure.

"Shammy, contain it," Mai said. "You're damaging the building."

"I can't—"

She felt it. The storm inside her, building past control. The electricity wasn't just defending anymore. It was expanding. Seeking.

"Shammy." Ace's hand found her arm. "Ground. Find your ground."

Shammy closed her eyes. The storm raged. But beneath it, Ace's presence. Steady. Compressed. Real.

She breathed.

The electricity stabilized. Controlled. Focused.

But the shadows kept coming.

They made it to the lobby.

The inn was in chaos. Guests, real ones, not constructs, were screaming. Running. The shadows ignored them. Focused only on the Triad.

"The Architect," Mai said. "She sent these."

"Then we send them back," Ace said.

Shammy raised both hands. The storm peaked. Lightning gathered above her, around her, inside her.

Then she released.

The lobby flooded with light. Blue-white electricity arced from shadow to shadow, destroying them in cascading bursts. The constructs screamed. Dissolved. Collapsed.

Silence.

Shammy stood in the center of the destruction. Her breathing came fast. Her hands still sparked.

Ace appeared beside her. Hand on her arm.

“Ground.”

Shammy nodded. The storm inside her began to settle.

Mai picked her way through the wreckage. Her notebook was intact. Her calculations continued.

“They knew we were close,” she said. “The Architect is accelerating her timeline.”

“Then we accelerate ours,” Ace said.

The plaza was waiting.

They walked through empty streets. No people now, no smiling faces. The optimization had withdrawn. Pulled back. Left the city bare.

At the fountain, they stopped.

The presence from before was stronger now. Closer. The seal was weakening visibly. Cracks in the stone. The water ran red.

“We need to go below,” Ace said. “Find the source. Make a choice.”

Shammy raised her hand. The atmosphere around the fountain was thick. Held. But not suppressed anymore.

Released.

“The storm is breaking through,” she said. “Whatever's been contained, it wants out.”

“Then let it out,” Mai said. “Or don't. But we decide tonight.”

They looked at each other. Three vectors. Three perceptions. Three keys.

“Ace,” Mai said. “What do you feel?”

Ace pressed her hand against the fountain rim. Her eyes closed.

“Violence. Fire. Death.” A pause. “But also hope. The ones who made the first seal, they thought they were saving everyone. They sacrificed themselves to stop the fire.”

“And were they right?”

“I don't know.” Ace opened her eyes. “But they made a choice. And now we have to make one too.”

“Shammy?”

Shammy closed her eyes. Read the atmosphere. The held breath of a hundred and seventy-nine years.

“The storm wants to break,” she said. “It's been waiting. It's tired of being held. If we renew the seal...”

we become the jailers. Forever.”

“And if we don't?”

“The fire returns. The memories return. The cost that was deferred must be paid.”

Mai nodded. Her calculations were complete.

“Then the question isn't which choice is better. The question is: which cost are we willing to bear?”

The fountain waited.

The sky above waited.

And in the administration building, at the edge of the plaza, the Architect watched.

“Choose,” she whispered. “Choose and accept the consequences.”

end of chapter nine

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