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# Chapter 1: Arrival

The café door opened before Ace reached it.

She stopped. Her hand moved to her side, empty, where the katana should have been, and she stood in the entrance scanning the space with reflexes that had nowhere to land.

Three tables. One counter. Two windows. One door behind her.

The entrance was always the problem.

“Door.” Her voice was flat. “Windows. Counter. Three exits.”

Mai stepped past her, notebook already open. “It's a café.”

“The entrance is the problem.”

“Is it.”

“Yes.”

The café was small. Clean. The kind of place that served coffee and pastries to people who worked in nearby buildings. The kind of place that shouldn't have doors that opened on their own.

The light was warm. The temperature was comfortable. A customer sat at one of the tables, drinking something from a cup that hadn't been ordered, or had it, and the whole space felt prepared. Curated. As if someone had arranged it for a specific guest.

For them?

No. That wasn't right either.

Ace's hand found her other hand. Held. The empty space at her side where a weapon should be, where a weapon always was, felt wrong. She wasn't used to wrong.

She was used to threat.

“Threat assessment,” she said.

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. “Zero.”

“Threat level.”

“Zero.”

“Then why does the door—”

“I don't know yet.” Mai's voice was analytical. Precise. “The door opened. That's data. The timing

suggests predictive capability, or presence detection, or—” She stopped. Flipped a page. “The model is incomplete.”

Shammy stood near the window. Her eyes were closed.

The air in the café moved around customers, around the counter, around the coffee machine, but it didn't move on its own. Shammy reached for something. Her hand moved slightly, her fingers tracing patterns in the atmosphere.

She found nothing.

“The weather doesn't exist here.”

Mai looked up from her notebook. “The weather?”

“The atmosphere.” Shammy's voice was soft. She didn't open her eyes. “The pressure should shift when people enter. It doesn't. The whole space is... held.”

“Held how.”

“Still.” Shammy's hand dropped to her side. “Not calm-still. Empty-still. The air only moves when someone moves it. There's no weather here. There's no...” She paused. The word was difficult. “...variation.”

Ace scanned the space again. Three tables, one occupied. One counter. One person behind the counter, moving with the kind of precision that suggested practice, or programming, or something else entirely. Two windows. Clean. The light coming through them was the same warm temperature as the rest of the space.

The customer at the table lifted their cup. Drank. Set it down.

The cup was empty.

The customer didn't leave.

“You're checking exits again.” Mai's voice came from beside her. Close. The way Mai always was, close enough that Ace could feel the slight shift in air where her warmth was.

“Three. Windows. Counter.” Ace didn't turn. “The counter could be a fourth exit. Through the back.”

“The counter is not an exit. The counter is where they serve coffee.”

“The counter could—”

“Ace.” Mai's voice was patient. “It's a café.”

“The door opened before I reached it.”

“Yes.”

“Before I reached it.”

“That's what you said.”

"The timing suggests predictive capability." Ace's voice was clipped. "Or presence detection. Or threat assessment. Or—"

"Or the café is what we came to investigate, and it's doing exactly what anomalies do." Mai's pen moved. "Which is?"

"Something unusual."

"Correct. And what is the threat level?"

Ace's hand moved to her side. Empty.

"Zero."

"Correct." Mai made a note. "So we observe."

Ace stood in the entrance. The door had closed behind her, perfectly timed, no one touching it, and the space in front of her was clean and warm and exactly the right temperature, and the customer at the table was drinking coffee they hadn't ordered, and the person behind the counter was moving with mechanical precision, and—

There was nothing to fight.

She checked the exits again.

Three tables. One counter. Two windows. One door.

The exits didn't change.

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The customer at the table was a man in his forties. Suit. Tie loosened. The kind of person who worked in one of the nearby buildings and came here for lunch.

Or came here once.

Mai approached his table. Notebook open. Pen ready.

"Excuse me."

The man looked up. His expression was, what? Not uncomfortable. Not exactly. More like... satisfied. Complete.

"May I ask you a few questions?"

The man nodded. His cup was empty. The coffee had been good. He'd finish his sandwich, maybe, and then he'd leave, and then—

"Did you order the coffee?"

The man looked at the cup. Looked at the counter. Looked back at Mai.

"I don't remember."

"You don't remember ordering?"

"I don't remember." He picked up the cup. Looked at it like he was seeing it for the first time. "But it's here. So I must have."

Mai made a note. "And how was it?"

"Good." The man's voice was calm. "Perfect, actually. Exactly what I wanted."

"What did you want?"

"I don't remember that either." He smiled. It was a polite smile. A nothing smile. "But it was exactly right. You know?"

Mai's pen stopped moving.

"Will you come back?"

The man considered this. His cup was empty. His sandwich was half-eaten. The space around him was warm and comfortable and exactly the right temperature.

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

He considered this too. His face showed the effort of trying to find an answer to a question that shouldn't need an answer.

"It was perfect." He looked at the empty cup. "I got what I came for."

"Yes. But—"

"There's no reason to come back." He smiled again. "I got exactly what I wanted. Why would I need to come back?"

Mai's pen wasn't moving.

Ace stood by the door. Her hand was at her side. Empty. The exit was behind her. The entrance was always the problem, but the entrance was behind her now, and the space in front of her was clean and warm and still, and—

Shammy stood by the window. Her eyes were open now. She was watching the air, the air that didn't move on its own, the atmosphere that was held in place, the pressure that didn't shift when people entered, and her expression was the expression of someone who had found something, or hadn't found something, or was trying to find something that wasn't there.

"The model," Mai said. Her voice was low. "Customer enters. The system optimizes. Customer receives. Customer exits. The return rate—"

She flipped a page in her notebook.

"—is zero."

"Zero?" Ace's voice came from the door.

"Zero." Mai looked up. "Not because of complaints. Not because of quality. Because of..." She stopped. Her pen tapped against the page. "The model is complete. Customers receive exactly what they want. There's nothing to return to."

Ace's hand moved to her side.

"So there's nothing to fight."

"Correct."

"Nothing to contain."

"Correct."

"Nothing to do."

Mai's pen started moving again. The taps were faster now. "That's not what I said. There's something to understand. The model—"

"The model is useless if there's nothing to fight."

"The model is useful for understanding. Understanding is the first step toward—"

"Toward what?"

Mai's pen stopped.

"I don't know yet."

The café continued to operate. The person behind the counter moved with mechanical precision. The customer at the table finished his sandwich. The light stayed warm. The temperature stayed comfortable. Somewhere beneath it all, the faintest smell of roasted coffee and something sweet, something like vanilla and brown butter, drifted through the still air.

Shammy's voice came from the window.

"The air doesn't move here. I can feel that. But you're right, Ace. There's nothing to fight." She paused. "The question is whether there's something to do."

Ace looked at the café door. It had closed behind them. Perfectly timed. No one had touched it.

She didn't like that.

She checked the exits again.

Three tables. One counter. Two windows. One door.

The exits didn't change.

But her hand moved to her side anyway. Empty. Where the katana should have been.

The fight that wasn't coming.

The second customer entered ten minutes later.

The door opened before they reached it. They didn't notice, most people don't notice doors that open at exactly the right moment, because why would they, and they walked to the counter with the easy stride of someone who knew what they wanted.

Or thought they did.

"I'll have a—" The customer stopped. The person behind the counter was already preparing something. "Actually, that's what I was going to order."

They paid. They received. They sat.

Mai watched from a corner of the café. Her notebook was open. Her pen was moving.

"The system predicted the order. Or, no. The system optimized. There's a difference. Prediction suggests estimation. Optimization suggests..." She stopped. "The model is incomplete."

"The model is incomplete," Ace said. Her voice came from her position by the door. She hadn't moved. "Or the model is wrong."

"The model is not wrong. The model is—" Mai's pen tapped. "Incomplete. There's data missing. There's always data missing."

Shammy stood near the window. Her eyes were closed again. She was reaching for the atmosphere, for the pressure that should shift, for the weather that should exist, and finding nothing.

"Still," she said. "Still-still. The air is..."

"Empty-still," Ace said.

Shammy's eyes opened. "You felt it."

"I don't feel." Ace's voice was flat. "I observe. The atmosphere is wrong. The door is wrong. The customers—" She stopped. Her hand moved to her side. "The customers are wrong."

"How are they wrong?"

"They're not threatened." Ace's voice was clipped. "They're not running. They're not scared. They're sitting in a café that opens doors before they reach them, that serves drinks they don't remember ordering, that gives them exactly what they want—" Her hand found her other hand. Held. "And they don't come back."

Mai's pen stopped moving.

"That's the pattern," she said. "The return rate. Zero. Not because of dissatisfaction. Because of..."

"Satisfaction," Shammy said. Her voice was soft. "Complete satisfaction."

"Complete satisfaction is not a problem."

“Complete satisfaction is—” Ace's voice cut off. She looked at the door. At the counter. At the customer who had received exactly what they wanted and would never come back. “Complete satisfaction is the problem.”

The café continued to operate. The door opened for the third customer. The system optimized. The customer received. The customer exited.

The return rate stayed zero.

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. The model was being built. The pattern was being mapped. The data was being gathered.

But her pen tapped faster than usual. Her handwriting was more precise than usual.

Because the model was correct.

And that was the problem.

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The afternoon light came through the windows. The same warm temperature. The same comfortable atmosphere. The café was exactly as it had been when they entered.

Ace stood by the door. Her hand was at her side. Empty. She hadn't moved from her position in hours.

Mai moved closer. Not saying anything. Just standing near enough that Ace could feel her there, the way she always could. The slight warmth. The familiar weight of presence.

Ace's hand found Mai's. Squeezed once. Let go.

Shammy stood by the window. Her eyes were closed. She hadn't moved either. The stillness around her was absolute.

Mai sat at a table. Her notebook was open. Her pen was moving. The model was growing.

“So.” Ace's voice was flat. “We observe.”

“We observe,” Mai said. “We gather data. We build the model. We—”

“And then?”

Mai's pen stopped.

“I don't know yet.”

“Because there's nothing to fight.”

“Because there's nothing to contain.” Mai's voice was careful. “That's not the same as nothing to do.”

Ace's hand moved to her side. Empty. Empty. Empty.

“What do you do,” she said, “when there's nothing to fight?”

“That's not my area of expertise.”

“Then whose is it?”

Mai looked at Shammy.

Shammy's eyes were still closed. The stillness around her hadn't changed. The atmosphere didn't move unless someone moved it.

“I read the weather,” she said. “There's no weather here. I read the pressure. The pressure doesn't shift. I read the atmosphere.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “There's no atmosphere to read.”

“So what do we do?”

Shammy's eyes opened.

“I don't know.”

The café door opened for another customer.

Ace watched it. The timing was perfect. The customer didn't notice. They walked in, received their optimized drink, and sat in the optimized light, in the optimized temperature, in the optimized space—

And they would never come back.

Because what was there to come back to?

They'd already gotten exactly what they wanted.

Mai's pen moved. The model grew. Shammy stood still. Ace checked the exits.

Three tables. One counter. Two windows. One door.

The exits didn't change.

But the café did.

Not in any way that could be seen. Not in any way that could be measured. But in the way that mattered—

The café was too perfect.

And that was the problem.

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