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## Chapter 3: The Reading

Shammy stood in the center of the café.

Her eyes were closed. Her hands were at her sides. She wasn't reading, she was trying to read, but there was nothing to read. The atmosphere in the café was still. Not calm-still. Not quiet-still. Empty-still.

She reached for the weather.

The weather wasn't there.

She reached for the pressure.

The pressure didn't shift.

She reached for the air, the air that moved when people moved, the air that should shift when doors opened, the air that should carry sound and smell and the residue of human presence, and found nothing. Nothing that moved on its own. Nothing that carried anything. Nothing but stillness that wasn't peaceful, wasn't calm, wasn't anything but empty.

"The atmosphere is..." She paused. The word was difficult. "...held."

Mai looked up from her notebook. "Held how."

"Like it's frozen in place." Shammy's voice was soft. "Not frozen like ice. Frozen like... held. Like someone is holding the atmosphere in place. Keeping it from moving. Keeping it from—" She stopped. "I reach for the weather and there's nothing to hold. I reach for the pressure and it doesn't respond. The air is here, but it's not... alive."

"Air isn't alive."

"I know." Shammy's eyes stayed closed. "But air moves. Air shifts. Air carries things. This air doesn't carry anything. It doesn't move unless someone moves it. It doesn't shift unless someone shifts it. It's..." She paused again. "It's like the café doesn't have weather. It has atmosphere, but the atmosphere doesn't do anything."

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. The model was complete. But she was adding to it anyway.

"Atmospheric optimization," she said. "The café optimizes for temperature, lighting, sound. It would make sense that it optimizes for atmospheric conditions as well."

"It doesn't optimize for atmospheric conditions."

"Then what does it optimize for?"

"It optimizes for the absence of atmospheric conditions." Shammy's voice was barely a whisper. "It

optimizes for stillness. For... empty. For nothing moving. Nothing shifting. Nothing carrying anything." She opened her eyes. "The café doesn't have weather. The café doesn't have atmosphere. The café has..." She stopped. "...nothing."

Ace stood by the door. Her hand was at her side. Empty. She'd checked the exits thirty-one times since morning. The number didn't matter.

"Nothing," she repeated.

"Nothing." Shammy's voice was soft. "I read the atmosphere. There's nothing to read. I reach for the weather. There's no weather. I—" She stopped. Her voice became quieter. "I don't know what to do when there's nothing to read."

"You observe."

"I observe." Shammy's eyes closed again. "I've been observing since we arrived. The atmosphere doesn't change. The weather doesn't exist. The air doesn't move on its own. I observe nothing. I reach for nothing. I find nothing."

Mai's pen stopped moving.

"The model is complete," she said. "The café optimizes for everything. Temperature. Lighting. Sound. Atmosphere. The optimization is total. The stillness is part of the optimization."

"The stillness is the problem."

"The stillness is the result of optimization." Mai's voice was analytical. "The café optimizes for each customer's preferences. If a customer prefers silence, the café provides silence. If a customer prefers stillness, the café provides stillness. The absence of variation is—" She stopped. "The absence of variation is part of the service."

Shammy's eyes opened.

"The absence of variation is the service."

"The café gives customers exactly what they want. Some customers want movement. Some customers want stillness. The café optimizes for—" Mai's pen tapped against the page. "But you're not a customer. You're not part of the optimization."

"I'm part of the environment."

"You're part of the environment," Mai repeated. "And the environment here is..." She stopped. "...held. Frozen in place. Optimized for stillness."

"Optimized for empty." Shammy's voice was soft. "I read the environment. There's nothing to read. The atmosphere is held. The weather doesn't exist. The air doesn't move unless someone moves it." She paused. "I'm an elemental. I read the weather. I reach for the atmosphere. There's nothing here for me to reach. Nothing for me to read. Nothing for me to..."

She stopped.

The stillness around her was absolute.

Mai's pen started moving again. Faster.

"Elemental optimization," she said. "The café optimizes for humans. It optimizes for customers. It doesn't optimize for—" She stopped. "It doesn't account for elementals. It doesn't account for anyone who reads the atmosphere differently. The café optimizes for the absence of variation. You are variation. You are variation that the café doesn't account for."

"I'm not variation." Shammy's voice was barely a whisper. "I'm just... I read the weather. There's no weather. I read the atmosphere. There's no atmosphere. I reach for something that should be there and it isn't and I don't—" She stopped. "I don't know what to do when there's nothing to read."

"You adapt."

Shammy's eyes stayed closed.

"I can't adapt. The weather isn't something I can turn off. The atmosphere isn't something I can stop reading. I reach for it automatically. I reach for it constantly. And here..." Her voice became quieter. "...there's nothing to reach for."

Mai's pen stopped moving.

Ace's voice came from the door. "What do you need?"

Shammy's eyes opened. "I need weather."

"There's no weather."

"I know." Shammy's voice was soft. "I need atmosphere that moves. That shifts. That carries things. I need—" She stopped. "I need variation. The atmosphere here doesn't vary. It doesn't move. It doesn't shift. It doesn't carry anything. It's..." She paused. "...empty."

Mai's pen moved. The model grew.

"Shammy needs variation," she said. "The café optimizes for the absence of variation. Shammy is an elemental who reads variation in the atmosphere. The café removes what Shammy needs."

"The café removes what everyone needs," Shammy said. Her voice was soft. "They just don't know it."

"They?"

"The customers. The people who come here once and never return." Shammy's eyes closed again. "They get exactly what they want. They don't know that what they want isn't what they need. They leave satisfied. They don't come back because there's nothing to come back to." She paused. "The atmosphere doesn't move. The weather doesn't exist. There's no variation. There's no... life."

"Life requires variation."

"Life requires variation." Shammy's voice was barely a whisper. "The café gives people exactly what they want. What they want is stillness. What they need is movement. The café gives them stillness. They don't come back because there's no movement to return to."

Mai's pen stopped moving.

"The model is complete," she said. "The model predicts customer behavior. The model doesn't predict customer needs."

"Customer needs are not predictable."

"Customer needs are not predictable," Mai repeated. Her voice became more analytical. The way it did when she was trying to solve something that wouldn't solve. "The café optimizes for wants. Wants are observable. Wants are predictable. Needs are—" She stopped. "Needs are not observable. Needs are not predictable. The model describes what customers want. The model does not describe what customers need."

"The model is correct," Ace said from the door. Her voice was flat. "The model is useless."

"The model is correct." Mai's pen started moving again. "The model describes the café's operation perfectly. The model describes what customers want perfectly. The model does not describe—" She stopped. "The model does not describe what customers need."

"What customers need is variation."

"What customers need is variation," Mai agreed. "The café removes variation. The café gives customers exactly what they want. Customers leave satisfied. Customers don't return because there's no variation. There's no reason to return to a place that gives you exactly what you want because—" She stopped. Her pen tapped. "Because you already got it. You don't need to come back. You already have what you came for."

Shammy's eyes stayed closed. The stillness around her was absolute.

"And what you came for," she said, "isn't what you needed. But you don't know that. You leave satisfied. You don't come back. You don't know that you needed something else." Her voice became softer. "You don't know that you needed variation."

The café door opened for another customer.

The system optimized. The customer received. They sat in the perfect light, in the perfect temperature, in the perfect atmosphere, the atmosphere that didn't move, didn't shift, didn't carry anything, and they would leave satisfied, and they would never come back.

Because what they wanted wasn't what they needed.

And the café couldn't tell the difference.

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The afternoon sun moved across the sky. The café stayed the same temperature. The same light. The same stillness.

Shammy hadn't moved from her position in the center of the café. Her eyes were still closed. Her hands were still at her sides. The stillness around her was spreading, not moving, because nothing moved in the café, but spreading like the absence of movement was catching.

Mai watched her. The notebook was open. The pen was moving. But Mai's handwriting had become less precise. Her pen tapped more often. Her voice was still analytical, but there were more pauses between words. She put her pen down once, just briefly, to look at Shammy. Really look.

"The atmosphere is held," Mai said. Her voice was analytical. "Shammy reads atmosphere. The atmosphere is held. Shammy has nothing to read."

Shammy's eyes stayed closed. "I reach for the weather. There's no weather. I reach for the atmosphere. There's no atmosphere. I reach for—" She stopped. "I reach for something that should be there and it isn't and I keep reaching because that's what I do and there's nothing there and I—" Her voice became quieter. "...I don't know how to stop reaching."

"You don't stop reaching."

"I don't know how to stop." Shammy's voice was barely a whisper. "The weather is what I do. The atmosphere is what I read. I reach for it automatically. I reach for it constantly. And here..." The stillness around her deepened. "...there's nothing to reach for. Nothing to read. Nothing to—" She stopped. "Nothing."

Ace stood by the door. Her hand was at her side. Empty. She'd checked the exits thirty-seven times since morning.

"Shammy."

Shammy's eyes stayed closed. "I'm here."

"You're not here."

"I'm here." The stillness around her was absolute. "I'm just... reaching. For something that isn't there."

"You're not reading."

"I can't read." Shammy's voice was soft. "There's nothing to read."

Mai's pen stopped moving. She looked at Shammy. Really looked. At the stillness that had spread. At the absence of movement around her. At the way the atmosphere around her had become, like the café itself, held in place.

"Shammy."

Shammy's eyes stayed closed. "I'm here."

"You're becoming the café."

Shammy's eyes opened.

The stillness around her stopped spreading. Not moving, because nothing moved, but stopped spreading. Like it had reached a limit. Like it had found a boundary.

"I'm what?"

"You're becoming the café." Mai's voice was careful. "You're reaching for the atmosphere. There's no atmosphere. You're reaching for the weather. There's no weather. You're reaching for something that isn't there, and the café is..." She stopped. "The café is still. You're reaching for stillness. You're becoming still."

Shammy's hand moved through the air. The air moved because she moved it. But it didn't move on its

own.

"I'm not becoming the café. I'm..." She paused. "I'm reaching for something that isn't there. I'm trying to read something that doesn't exist. And the reaching is—" She stopped. "The reaching is what I do. The reading is what I do. When there's nothing to read, I..." Her voice became softer. "I become nothing."

"You don't become nothing."

"I become still." Shammy's voice was barely a whisper. "I reach for the atmosphere. There's no atmosphere. I reach for the weather. There's no weather. I reach for nothing. I become... still. Like the café. Like the air that doesn't move." Her eyes closed again. "I become the nothing I'm reaching for."

Ace's hand moved to her side.

"Stop reaching."

Shammy's eyes stayed closed. "I can't."

"You can stop reaching."

"I can't." Shammy's voice was soft. "The reaching is what I do. The reading is what I do. I reach for the atmosphere automatically. I reach for the weather constantly. I don't know how to stop reaching." The stillness around her deepened. "I don't know how to stop becoming nothing."

Mai stepped toward Ace. Not saying anything. Just standing near her. Close enough that their shoulders could touch if they wanted.

Ace's hand moved from her side. Found Mai's. Squeezed once.

Mai's pen started moving. Faster.

"Shammy needs variation," she said. Her voice was analytical. "Shammy is an elemental who reads the atmosphere. The atmosphere here doesn't move. Shammy reaches for something that isn't there. Shammy becomes the stillness she's reaching for." Her pen tapped. "The café optimizes for stillness. Shammy is being optimized. Shammy is becoming still."

"Shammy is being optimized," Ace said. Her voice was flat. "The café is optimizing her."

"The café is not sentient. The café is not—" Mai's pen stopped. "The café optimizes. It optimizes for each customer's preferences. It optimizes for stillness. Shammy is in the café. Shammy is being optimized for stillness."

"The café is optimizing Shammy."

"The café is optimizing everything in its environment." Mai's voice became more analytical. "The temperature. The lighting. The atmosphere. Everything in the café is being optimized for stillness. Shammy is in the café. Shammy is being optimized."

Ace's hand moved to her side. Empty.

"Then Shammy needs to not be in the café."

Shammy's eyes opened. The stillness around her stopped spreading. Stopped, because she stopped.

"I can't leave." Her voice was barely a whisper. "I'm part of this. I'm part of the Triad. I'm part of—" She stopped. "I can't leave because there's nothing to do here and leaving means there's something else to do and there isn't. There's nothing to do. There's nothing to read. There's nothing to reach for. There's—"

"There's nothing," Ace said. "That's the point."

"There's nothing." Shammy's voice was soft. "And I can't stop reaching for nothing. I can't stop reading nothing. I can't stop—" She paused. "I can't stop becoming nothing."

Mai's pen moved. The model grew. But her pen was tapping faster. Her handwriting was less precise. Her analytical voice had more pauses.

"The café optimizes for stillness," she said. "Shammy needs variation. The café removes variation. Shammy is being removed." She stopped. "The model is complete. The model describes what the café does. The model does not describe what to do about it."

"The model is correct," Ace said. Her voice was flat. "The model is useless."

"The model is correct." Mai's pen tapped. "The model is useless. The model describes optimization. The model does not describe—" She stopped. Her pen stopped. "The model does not describe how to stop optimization."

Shammy's eyes stayed closed. The stillness around her was absolute.

"You don't stop optimization," she said. Her voice was barely a whisper. "You introduce variation."

Mai's pen stopped moving.

"What?"

"You introduce variation." Shammy's voice was soft. "The café optimizes for stillness. The absence of variation. I need variation. You need variation. The customers need variation. They don't know it, but they need it. They leave satisfied. They don't come back because there's no variation. There's no reason to come back to a place that gives you exactly what you want because there's nothing new to discover." Her eyes opened. "You introduce variation. You give the café something it doesn't expect. You give the customers something they don't know they need."

"How?"

"I don't know." Shammy's voice was soft. "I read the atmosphere. I don't know how to create atmosphere. I read the weather. I don't know how to create weather. I reach for something that isn't there and I become the nothing I'm reaching for." Her eyes closed again. "I don't know how to introduce variation. I only know how to read."

Mai's pen started moving. Faster.

"Shammy needs variation," she said. "Shammy can't create variation. Shammy can only read variation." Her pen tapped. "Shammy is an elemental who reads the atmosphere. She can't create atmosphere. She can only read it."

"I can shift atmosphere." Shammy's voice was barely a whisper. "I can regulate atmosphere. I can't

create it from nothing. I can only shift what's there. And here..." The stillness around her deepened. "...there's nothing to shift."

Ace's hand moved to her side. Empty.

"Then Shammy needs someone else to create variation."

Shammy's eyes opened. The stillness around her stopped spreading.

"Who?"

"Someone who doesn't read atmosphere. Someone who doesn't need atmosphere." Ace's voice was flat. "Someone who can create variation without reading it first."

Mai's pen stopped moving. She looked at Ace. Her analytical expression had shifted, not much, but enough.

"You."

"I don't read atmosphere." Ace's hand found her other hand. Held. "I don't need variation. I need—" She stopped. "I need something to fight. There's nothing to fight. But I don't need atmosphere. I don't need weather. I don't—" She checked the exits. "I don't need to read. I observe. I don't reach. I watch."

"You watch," Shammy said. Her voice was soft. "You observe. You don't reach."

"I don't reach." Ace's voice was flat. "I don't reach for things that aren't there. I don't become the nothing I'm reaching for. I don't—" She stopped. "I don't reach."

Shammy's eyes stayed open. The stillness around her receded. Not moving, because nothing moved, but receding. Like it was retreating. Like it was being replaced by something else.

"Mai reads patterns. I read atmosphere. You read..." She paused. "What do you read, Ace?"

"I don't read." Ace's voice was flat. "I observe. I watch. I—" She stopped. "I wait for something to change. I check the exits. I—" Her hand moved to her side. "I reach for a weapon that isn't there. But I don't reach for things that aren't there. I don't become the nothing I'm reaching for. I just..." She stopped. "...I just reach."

Mai's hand found Ace's. Squeezed. Briefly.

The café door opened for another customer.

The system optimized. The customer received. The customer exited.

And the Triad watched.

Because that was all they could do.

For now.

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