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Chapter 1: Arrival

The café sat at the corner of a street that had learned to be forgettable. Shammy noticed these things. How air moved around buildings. Which places invited the eye and which deflected it. This one deflected. The air here didn't want to be noticed. It settled into corners, pressed gently against windows, held itself still in a way that made her skin want to move.

She paused at the entrance. The atmosphere shifted around her. Most places had air that responded to people, that moved when you entered. This place felt different. Static. Like the air had decided where it wanted to be and refused to budge.

Mai walked beside her, tablet already out, fingers scrolling through data. She absorbed it the way she absorbed everything. Systematically. Without emotional attachment. That was Mai's gift. Chaos in, patterns out.

"The anomaly report cites forty-seven customers in the past three months," Mai said. "None have returned."

Ace moved on Shammy's other side, eyes scanning the street. Not checking for threats. There weren't any. Just checking. Her hand brushed against her side, near where her katana would hang in a combat zone. They weren't in one. This was supposed to be simple. The kind of investigation that didn't require weapons or tactical formations. But Ace's body didn't know that. It had learned to be ready. Unlearning was harder than learning.

Shammy had learned to read the small movements. The way Ace's weight shifted entering a new space. Her eyes tracking sight lines without thinking. That hand resting near a weapon that wasn't there.

"Forty-seven." Shammy tilted her head, feeling the air press against her. "That's a lot of coffee for no one to come back."

"Which is why we're here." Mai's fingers didn't stop. "Something is driving customers away. We're determining what."

"Driving away or not drawing back?" Ace's voice was brief. Eyes still on the street. "Different problems."

Mai paused. "Clarify."

"If customers leave and don't return, that's retention. If they feel uncomfortable and leave early, that's experience. Both look the same in the data. Different causes." Ace's hand moved to the doorframe. Touched the wood. Checking structural integrity without thinking about it.

Shammy watched her partner's fingers trace the grain. Load-bearing. Solid. No rot, no weakness. Ace had checked every doorframe since the village. Since before. It wasn't conscious anymore. Just something her body did. Like breathing.

“Structural assessment?” Shammy asked.

Ace didn't look away from the frame. “Solid.”

“It's a café, Ace. Not a bunker.”

No response. She never responded to Shammy's observations about her behavior. Not because she didn't hear them. Acknowledging them would require explaining why she did these things, and Ace didn't explain. She just did.

She opened the door.

The smell hit Shammy first. Coffee. Not just coffee, but the particular warmth of it. The way good coffee smell fills a space and makes it feel like somewhere you want to stay. Chocolate underneath. Something sweet from the pastry case. And below all of it, the scent of a place that had been making the same thing long enough that the air remembered.

Light fell through a large front window, catching dust that drifted. Wooden tables, mismatched chairs, a long counter with glass pastry cases. Walls painted warm cream. A few plants in ceramic pots, the kind that didn't need much attention. A café that knew what it was.

“Nice,” Shammy said. She moved toward the window, drawn by the light. The air near the glass felt different. Thinner. Almost responsive. Like it wanted to move but couldn't quite manage it.

Ace had already positioned herself near the entrance. One exit behind her, one visible service door in the back, windows that could serve as exits if necessary. She wasn't tense. Just present. Ready for something that wasn't coming. Her body knew the positions even when there was nothing to fight.

Mai stepped to the counter, tablet still in hand. A woman stood behind the register. Mid-thirties, warm expression. The kind of face that suggested she'd been smiling so long it had become her resting state.

“Welcome,” the woman said. “I'm Yuki. What can I get for you?”

Something in how she said it. Not just politeness. Something more specific. Like she already knew what they'd want.

Mai tilted her head. “You don't need to ask.”

Yuki's smile didn't falter. “I like to. It's polite.”

“We're investigating an anomaly report for this location. I need to ask you some questions about customer patterns.”

“Of course.” Yuki's voice was pleasant. Complete. All the right inflections, all the right pauses. “Would you like coffee first? It's easier to talk over coffee.”

Mai glanced at Ace, who shrugged. Shammy was already at the window, her hand resting on the glass. The air near it felt different. Thinner. Wanting to respond but not quite managing it.

“Sure,” Mai said. “Three coffees. However you recommend.”

Yuki nodded and turned to the machine. Efficient. Not rushed, not slow. The efficiency of doing something thousands of times. She didn't ask what kind they wanted. Didn't ask about milk or sugar or light versus dark roast. She just made it.

Steam rose. Coffee dripped. Within a minute, three cups sat on the counter.

Each cup was different. Not a matching set. Three distinct vessels, each with its own character. A dark ceramic mug, a delicate teacup, a sturdy white cup. They looked like they'd come from different kitchens. Different lives.

"Sit anywhere," Yuki said. "I'll bring them to you."

Shammy chose the table near the window. Back to the glass, facing the café. Old habit. Always know where the exits are, always have sight lines, always be aware of the space. For Shammy, that meant feeling the air. For Ace, checking structural integrity. For Mai, knowing where the data was.

Ace took a position with sight lines to both exits. Back to the wall. Eyes moving across the space in a pattern Shammy recognized. Threat assessment. Exit routes. Structural vulnerabilities. Finding nothing wrong, but unable to stop looking.

Mai sat across from Shammy, tablet already displaying data. Fingers pulling up customer records, timestamps, purchase histories. The tablet was an extension of her. As natural as breathing.

Yuki brought the cups. Placed them with care. Attentive. The coffee in each cup smelled different. Shammy's had a warmth that matched the café, but with an undertone she couldn't name. Something that made her want to drink it.

"Enjoy," Yuki said, and returned to the counter.

Shammy picked up her cup. Warm ceramic. The right temperature. Not so hot she'd have to wait, not so cool it had been sitting. She brought it to her lips.

The taste was—

"Good," Ace said. She'd already taken a sip. Her eyes had shifted. Just slightly. A minute change in focus that Shammy had learned to read over their time together. Ace was processing something. Filing it away.

Shammy drank. The coffee moved through her mouth, and every part of it was right. Not the best she'd ever had. She'd had coffee in places that made art from beans, in cities where the craft had been elevated to something approaching religion. But this was something else. This was exactly what she wanted. Not too bitter, not too smooth, not too strong. The temperature matched what she needed. The body of it filled her mouth without overwhelming. Clean finish. No acidic bite.

She tried to identify what made it different. The roast was somewhere between light and medium, but that wasn't it. The extraction was even, but that wasn't it either. There was something about the balance of flavors she couldn't quite name. Like the coffee had been made specifically for her. For this moment. For exactly what her body wanted.

She set the cup down. Looked at Mai, who was staring at her own cup with the expression she wore when data didn't fit the model. Analytical, but with an undercurrent of something else. Confusion. Or

the particular frustration of a system that should work but didn't.

It was perfect.

She lowered the cup. Mai was staring at hers. Took a sip. Eyes narrowed. Took another sip.

"Good," Mai said again. But her voice was careful. The careful that meant she was analyzing, processing, trying to fit data into a framework that wasn't quite working.

Shammy set her cup down. The air in the café still felt held. But now she noticed something else. A completeness that had nothing to do with the air. The coffee had given her exactly what she wanted. And that felt—

"Too good."

Mai looked up from her tablet. "What?"

Ace took another sip. Set the cup down. "It's exactly right. Every part of it. That's not normal."

Shammy nodded slowly. She moved her hand through the air near the table, feeling it press against her palm. The air didn't resist. It just held. "It's not just the coffee. The air in here. It's held. Like someone pressed pause on the atmosphere."

Ace's eyes went to the doorframe again. She wasn't drinking anymore. Her body had shifted. Slightly. Subtly. Ready. The way it always was when something wasn't right, even when she couldn't name what.

Mai picked up her cup. Examined it. Took another sip. "You're saying the coffee is anomalous."

"I'm saying it's perfect." Ace's voice was flat. "Every part of it. That's not normal."

"Perfection isn't anomalous." Mai set her cup down. "It's desirable."

"Not like this." Ace's eyes went to the doorframe again. "This is targeted."

Shammy watched them. The air in the café pressed gently against her skin. Not uncomfortable, but present. Aware. Like the café itself was paying attention. Waiting to see what they would do next.

"Yuki." Mai didn't raise her voice. Just enough to carry. "Do you have a moment?"

Yuki came to their table. Her smile was still in place. The pleasant, professional expression of someone who'd been serving customers for years. But Shammy noticed something underneath it. A stillness. Like the smile had been held for so long it had stopped moving.

"Is something wrong with the coffee?"

"No." Mai tilted her head. "That's not the problem. The problem is that it's too good."

Yuki's smile didn't change. "Too good?"

Mai tilted her head. "The coffee is exactly what each of us would want. Temperature, body, roast

profile. It's optimized.”

“I've been making coffee for ten years.” Yuki's voice was pleasant. “I know what I'm doing.”

Shammy leaned forward. “It's not about skill. The air in here. Yuki, do you feel it? The way it doesn't move?”

Yuki's expression shifted. For the first time, something behind her eyes. A flicker of recognition. “The air?”

“Like someone's holding it,” Shammy said. “Like the whole café is holding its breath.”

Yuki was quiet. Her hands, which had been resting on the table, tightened slightly. “I... yes. I've felt that. Since I opened, actually. The air is different here.”

Mai's tablet was out again. Typing. Notes, observations. The screen reflected in her eyes. “You've felt it since opening. Three months ago.”

“Yes.”

“Has it always been like this?”

Yuki considered. “I think... at first, I thought it was just a good location. Good airflow. Good atmosphere. But now...” She stopped. Her smile flickered. “Now I'm not sure what it is.”

Ace spoke without looking away from the doorframe. “Why don't customers come back?”

Yuki's hands tightened on the cloth she held. “I don't know. I've asked myself that every day for three months. The coffee is good. The service is...” She paused. “I think it's good. People seem happy when they leave.” Her voice softened. “But they don't come back.”

Shammy looked at the other tables. Empty. No one else in the café. Just the three of them and Yuki and the held air and the perfect coffee. The café should have been busy. The kind of place that should have had regulars. People working on laptops, reading books, meeting friends. But there was no one.

“When you serve coffee,” Shammy said, “how do you know what to make?”

Yuki's brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Do they tell you what they want? Or do you... intuit it?”

Yuki was quiet for a long moment. “I just... know. When someone walks in, I know what they'll want. I don't think about it. I just make it.”

Mai's typing had stopped. “You don't think about it.”

“No. It's instinct, I suppose. Ten years of experience.”

“Or,” Mai said, “something else.”

The words hung in the air. Something else. Something that wasn't instinct, wasn't experience, wasn't the normal way of things. Something that knew what people wanted before they asked.

Ace stood up. She wasn't tense. But she wasn't relaxed either. “We're going to need to observe for a

while. Is that acceptable?"

Yuki nodded slowly. "Of course. Whatever you need."

Shammy returned to the window. The air near the glass was different. Thinner, almost responsive. Like it wanted to move but couldn't quite manage it. She pressed her palm flat against it. Outside, the street went about its business. People walked past without looking at the café. A bus went by. The world continued, uninterested.

But inside, the air didn't move.

"It's not just the coffee," Shammy said. "It's everything. The temperature in here... it's exactly right. Not too warm, not too cool. The light comes through the window at exactly the right angle. The sound level. Do you hear it?"

Mai listened. "Hear what?"

"That's the point. There's nothing to hear. No distant traffic, no hum from the machines. It's silent."

Mai closed her eyes for a moment, listening. Her tablet was still in her hands, but she wasn't looking at it. She was doing what Shammy was doing. Feeling the space. Mai's version was different. More analytical. Processing sound the way she processed data, looking for patterns, structures, anything that would make sense of the input.

"Good acoustic design?"

"No." Shammy turned from the window. "The café optimizes everything. Not just coffee. Everything. The whole experience."

Ace had moved to the counter. Not interrogating Yuki. Just standing there. Present. Her eyes swept the space. Exit routes. Sight lines. Structural integrity. Finding nothing wrong, but unable to stop looking.

"The building is sound," Ace said. "No structural issues. No hidden dangers. It's just a café."

"A café where customers don't return," Mai said. "And where the coffee is exactly what you want."

Shammy looked at her cup. The coffee was still warm. Still perfect.

She didn't want to finish it.

That was strange. She always finished good coffee.

She looked at Ace's cup. Still mostly full. Mai's too.

None of them had finished.

"We should set up observation," Mai said. "Track customer patterns. Interview regulars if there are any... which, according to the report, there aren't."

Shammy's eyes went to Yuki. The owner had returned to the counter, wiping down a surface that was

already clean. The movements were efficient. Automatic. She'd done this thousands of times. The wiping, the straightening, the small tasks that filled the time between customers. But something was off about it. Too precise. Too practiced. Like the café itself.

"Yuki," Shammy said. "How many customers have returned? In three months."

Yuki's hands stopped. "One."

"One?"

"A woman. She comes in every few days. Orders something different each time."

Mai's tablet was out again. "What's her name?"

"I don't know. She doesn't talk much. She just... sits. Drinks. Leaves."

"Orders something different each time," Mai repeated. Her fingers moved across the screen. "Interesting."

Shammy watched Mai's face. The slight furrow in her brow that meant she was processing. The way her eyes moved across data, looking for patterns. She wouldn't find any. Not here. That was the point.

Shammy moved away from the window. The air in the café pressed against her, gentle but constant. Like the space itself was paying attention. Waiting to see what they would want next.

The feeling was strange. Shammy had been in places that felt wrong before. Places where the air didn't move the way it should, where the atmosphere pressed in ways that made her skin crawl. But this was different. This wasn't malevolent. It was just present. Aware. Waiting to give them exactly what they wanted.

"We should stay," Shammy said. "Watch. See what happens when other customers come in."

Ace nodded. She'd found a position near the service door, her back to the wall, her eyes on the entrance. Ready for something. She didn't know what. Neither did the rest of them. But ready.

It was what Ace did. What she'd always done. Find the exits, check the perimeter, be prepared. Shammy had watched her do it a hundred times, in places that mattered and places that didn't. The habit so ingrained that Ace probably didn't even notice it anymore. Her body just moved. Found the position. Scanned for threats that weren't there.

Mai sat at the table, tablet out, ready to observe. Ready to record. Ready to analyze. This was what Mai did. Find patterns, build models, understand systems. But Shammy could see the slight tension in her shoulders. The way her fingers moved across the tablet without finding purchase. There were no patterns here. Not yet. Just a café that was too perfect and customers who never came back.

Shammy took a breath. The air filled her. Warm, still, held. It should have felt welcoming. It didn't. It felt like the café wanted something from her. Like it was waiting for her to want something back.

She set her cup down. She wasn't going to finish it.

None of them were.

The café held its breath around them, waiting to see what they would want next. But none of them wanted anything. Not from this place. Not from this perfection that felt like a question they didn't

know how to answer.

Outside, the street continued. People walked past without looking in. The world didn't know that something was wrong here. This wasn't a threat. This wasn't a danger. This was just a café where customers didn't return.

But Shammy felt it. The wrongness. The held breath. The perfection that asked a question she didn't know how to answer.

And none of them finished their coffee.

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