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Chapter 2: Investigation

The café looked different in the morning light. Shammy had arrived early, before the others, to feel the space when it was empty.

The air was the same. Held. Static. Like the café had been waiting all night for someone to want something from it.

She sat by the window, watching the street wake up. People passed by. A few glanced at the café, but none came in. As if the building itself was deflecting attention. The air around it pressed outward, subtle but present, making the space easy to forget. Shammy had felt this before in places that didn't want to be seen. But this was different. This wasn't malicious. The café existed, and it was waiting.

The window was clean. Spotless. No fingerprints, no smudges, no sign that anyone had ever touched it. Shammy ran her finger along the glass. Smooth. Perfectly smooth. The kind of clean that came from something that had never been dirty. Not cleaned. Never dirty in the first place.

The morning sun fell through at exactly the right angle. Warm without being hot. The temperature was exactly comfortable. Not a degree too warm, not a degree too cool. It should have been pleasant. But something about the precision of it made her skin want to move.

Mai arrived with her tablet already glowing. Sat across from Shammy without asking, eyes moving across the data in that particular way. Absorbing. Cataloging. Searching for patterns that would explain why forty-seven customers had entered this café and none had returned.

"Morning data," Mai said. Her fingers moved across the screen. "Customer count from yesterday: six. All unique. No returns. That brings the total to fifty-three customers in three months, with a return rate of zero point zero two."

"Zero point zero two?"

"One customer has returned. The woman Yuki mentioned. All others have not." Mai tilted her head. "That's statistically significant. In a normal café, even a poorly run one, you'd expect some return customers from proximity alone. People who work nearby. People who live in the neighborhood. But this café..." She tapped her tablet. "It's like it exists outside normal probability."

Shammy felt the air around her. The held stillness. "In what way?"

"Return rate should be twenty to thirty percent for a new establishment. Even accounting for poor service or product quality, zero point zero two is anomalous." Mai's fingers paused. "The data suggests something is preventing return visits."

"Or someone," Shammy said.

"Coffee?" Yuki's voice came from the counter. She was already preparing it.

Mai glanced up. "How did you know I was here?"

"I saw you come in." Yuki's smile was pleasant. Complete. The same smile she'd worn yesterday. "And you'll want the same as yesterday. Correct?"

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes."

Shammy watched the exchange. Yesterday, Yuki had known what they wanted before they asked. Today was no different. The café was already optimizing. Yuki hadn't asked what they wanted. She'd just known. Or the café had known. Or something in between.

Ace arrived through the front door. She'd been walking the perimeter of the building. Checking sight lines, exit routes. She did this automatically now, without thinking. The café had no back entrance she could find, no hidden threats, no structural weaknesses. It was just a café. But Ace checked anyway.

She sat at the table with her back to the wall, eyes on the entrance. Automatic. Her hand brushed the edge of the table. Checking its stability. Checking the distance to the nearest exit. Checking everything, even when there was nothing to check.

"You're early," Shammy said.

"Perimeter's clear." Ace's voice was flat. She wasn't making conversation. She was reporting.

"You checked it yesterday. Three times."

Ace didn't respond. She was looking at the doorframe again. Her hand went to the wood, testing its integrity. The café didn't have structural issues. But that didn't stop Ace from looking for them.

Shammy watched her partner. The way Ace's body held itself, even in stillness. The readiness that never quite went away. It was hard for Ace, being in a place with nothing to fight. Harder than being in a place with something to fight. At least when there was a threat, Ace knew what to do. Here, there was nothing. Just held air and perfect coffee and a question that didn't have a weapon.

Yuki brought their coffee. Three cups, each different, each exactly what they'd wanted yesterday. The same ceramic vessels. The same warmth. The same perfection. Shammy's cup had the same aroma as before, the same body, the same finish. It was exactly what she would have chosen if she'd been given a choice.

But she hadn't been given a choice.

None of them commented on it. They drank in silence for a moment, each processing the wrongness of something that was too right.

Mai's tablet was already displaying new data. "I've compiled the interview questions. We need to understand the anomaly's scope, its mechanism, and its impact on customer behavior."

"Scope?" Ace asked. Eyes still on the entrance.

"How widespread is the effect? Does it extend beyond the café? Is Yuki aware of it? Is it conscious or unconscious?" Mai's fingers moved across the screen. "Mechanism: how does the optimization work? Is it technological, anomalous, or something else? Impact: why don't customers return?"

"Observation plan," Mai continued. Her tablet displayed a structured list. "I'll interview Yuki this

morning. Systematic questions. We need to understand the pattern of customer behavior, the timeline of when the anomaly started, and any changes she's noticed."

"Shammy watches the space," Ace said. It wasn't a suggestion. "You feel the air."

Shammy nodded. "I'll track the atmospheric changes. See if there's a pattern to when it shifts."

"I'll check the perimeter." Ace's eyes swept the café again. "Again."

Mai looked at her. "You checked it three times yesterday."

Ace didn't respond. She stood up and moved toward the service door. Her body knew the motions even when there was nothing to find.

Yuki stood behind the counter, wiping down a surface that was already clean. She'd been doing that a lot, Shammy noticed. The small, repetitive motions that filled the time between customers. The café was empty. It was always empty, except for the one woman who came back.

"Yuki." Mai approached the counter with her tablet. "Do you have time for some questions?"

"Of course." Yuki's smile didn't change. "What would you like to know?"

Mai's fingers moved across the screen. "You opened this café three months ago. Had anything unusual happened before that? During the renovation, perhaps?"

Yuki considered. "The renovation was normal. We updated the floors, painted the walls. Nothing special."

"We?"

"My husband and I. He's... not here anymore." Yuki's voice stayed pleasant. "He passed away last year. I opened this café in his memory."

Mai paused. The personal information didn't appear in her notes. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Yuki's smile remained. It didn't waver. It didn't reach her eyes. "It was his dream. A café where people could always find what they wanted."

Mai's tablet captured the detail. "Tell me about him."

Yuki's hands stilled. For a moment, something shifted behind her eyes. "He loved coffee. The way it brings people together. He used to say that the perfect cup was the one you didn't know you wanted." Her smile flickered. "I thought I was honoring that. I thought..." She stopped. The practiced pleasantness returned. "I thought this was what he would have wanted."

"What was his name?"

"Kenji." Yuki's voice softened. "He would have loved this place. The light. The warmth." She looked around the café, and for a moment, Shammy saw past the held air, past the perfection, to the woman who had built this space in memory of someone she loved. "He would have made it better. He would have made people want to stay."

Mai's tablet captured everything. "And when did customers stop returning?"

Yuki's hands stilled on the cloth. The first real break in her practiced movements. "It was gradual. At first, people came. They seemed happy. They thanked me. But they didn't come back. I thought I was doing something wrong. But the coffee was good. The service was good. I couldn't figure it out."

"When was the last time you had a repeat customer? Before the current one?"

Yuki thought. "Three months ago. A man who came in every morning for a week. He ordered the same thing each time. An espresso, double shot. After that... no one. Except her."

"The woman who orders differently."

"Yes." Yuki's smile flickered. The first time Shammy had seen it falter. "She comes in every few days. She never orders the same thing twice. She sits by the window. She doesn't stay long."

"Does she talk?"

"Sometimes. She asks questions. She seems... uncertain." Yuki's hands had started moving again, wiping the same surface. "I don't know what she's looking for. The café gives her something different each time. Maybe that's why she comes back."

Mai's tablet captured everything. "You said the café gives her something different. Does that mean you don't decide what to make?"

Yuki's hands stopped again. "I... make the coffee. I choose the beans, the temperature, the method. But it's like I know what to make. Before they ask. Before they even know themselves." Her voice softened. "I've always been good at reading people. But this... this is different. It's like the café knows."

"Does that bother you?"

Yuki's smile finally shifted. Not fading, but changing. "I thought it was a gift at first. Kenji always said I had good instincts. But now..." She looked at the empty café. "Now I'm not sure. The coffee is perfect. The customers are happy. But they don't come back. And I haven't had a real conversation in three months."

Shammy moved through the space, feeling the air. Same everywhere. Held. Static. The temperature was constant. The humidity was constant. Even near the window, where the morning sun should have warmed the glass, the air pressed against her skin with the same gentle insistence.

She stopped near the corner where the wall met the ceiling. A vent there. Air conditioning, probably. But no air came through it. The system wasn't running. The café didn't need it. The temperature was already perfect.

The held air should have felt oppressive. It didn't. It felt patient. Like the café was waiting for something. Like it had all the time in the world to give people exactly what they wanted.

Shammy pressed her palm against the wall. Smooth. Clean. No dust, no imperfection. The café maintained itself. Or something maintained it. The air didn't move because it didn't need to. Everything was already where it should be.

She moved to the window. Outside, people walked past. Some glanced at the café. Most didn't. Not that they were avoiding it. More like the café didn't register. Easy to forget. Easy to overlook.

"Ace." Shammy found her partner near the service door. "Did you find anything?"

Ace's eyes were on the doorframe. Her hand rested on the wood. Checking. "Nothing."

"No structural issues?"

"No." Ace's voice was flat. "The building is sound. No hidden passages. No threats." She paused. "It's just a café."

Shammy watched her. The tension in Ace's shoulders that never quite went away. The way her body held itself ready, even when there was nothing to fight. "What did you expect to find?"

"I don't know." Ace's hand dropped from the doorframe. "Something to engage with. Something to do."

Shammy understood. Ace had been raised in violence. Trained to fight. And now she was standing in a café that was too perfect, with nothing to fight, nothing to defend against. Just a held-breath space that asked nothing of her.

"The air is wrong here," Shammy said. "It doesn't move."

"I noticed." Ace's eyes swept the space again. "But wrong isn't the same as dangerous."

"No." Shammy moved back toward the window. "But wrong is worth investigating."

Ace's jaw tightened. "I know. It's just..."

"I know." Shammy touched her partner's arm. Brief. The kind of reassurance that didn't need words. "There's nothing to fight here. But there's something to understand."

"I don't understand things." Ace's voice was flat. "I fight things."

"Then let Mai do the understanding. Let me do the feeling." Shammy moved back toward the window. "You do what you do. Check the perimeter. Make sure we're safe. That's what you're good at."

Ace's hand went to the doorframe again. "That's what I'm good at."

Mai joined them at the table. Her tablet displayed a pattern of customer data she'd been building since yesterday.

"The anomaly appears to have started three months ago," Mai said. "Coinciding with the café's opening. Yuki's husband died last year. She opened this café in his memory. The timing suggests a connection, but I can't determine causality yet."

"Yuki doesn't seem malevolent," Shammy said. "She seems... tired."

"Tired people can cause harm." Mai's fingers moved across the screen. "But I agree. Her responses suggest genuine confusion. She doesn't understand why customers don't return. She's tried different things. Changing the menu, adjusting the hours, adding pastries. Nothing worked."

"And the optimization?" Ace asked. Eyes still on the entrance. "Where does that come from?"

"Unknown." Mai's tablet displayed a new screen. "Yuki claims she doesn't consciously decide what to make. She 'knows.' That suggests either unconscious pattern recognition, or an external influence. I need more data."

"More customers," Shammy said. "More observation."

"Exactly." Mai's tablet glowed. "We need to see the optimization in action. Track customer behavior. Measure the held air. Understand why the one woman returns when no one else does."

Ace stood by the window, eyes on the street outside. "So the café works. It does exactly what it's supposed to do. And that's the problem."

"Exactly." Mai tilted her head. "The coffee is perfect. The atmosphere is perfect. The service is perfect. But no one comes back."

"Why?" Ace asked. "Why wouldn't people come back for something perfect?"

Shammy felt the air around her. The held stillness. The perfection that pressed against her skin. "Because perfection doesn't ask anything of you. It gives you exactly what you want, and then you leave. There's no reason to stay. No reason to return."

Mai's tablet paused. "That's... an interesting hypothesis."

"It's not a hypothesis." Shammy moved her hand through the air. "It's what the air tells me. This place doesn't want you to stay. It wants to give you what you want and let you go. There's no friction. Nothing to make you want to come back."

Ace turned from the window. "So what do we do?"

"We observe." Mai's tablet glowed. "We watch. We wait for customers. And we try to understand why one woman keeps coming back when everyone else doesn't."

The morning passed. A few customers came in. Shammy watched each one. They entered, ordered without looking at the menu, received their coffee, drank it in silence, and left. None lingered. None talked to each other. None looked at the café with appreciation. None seemed to feel anything that would make them return.

The first was a man in a business suit. Walked in, stood at the counter, waited. Yuki prepared his coffee without asking. He drank it, nodded once, and left. Less than five minutes.

The second was a woman with a stroller. She didn't even stop at the counter. Yuki handed her a cup as she entered. The woman drank, looked at her phone, and left. The baby slept through the whole thing.

The third was an older man with a newspaper. Sat at a table, read a single page, drank his coffee, and left. The newspaper stayed on the table, perfectly creased, as if it had never been touched. Shammy watched Yuki clear the table. Automatic. Wipe, straighten, reset. The table looked exactly as it had before the man arrived. No trace of him remained.

The fourth was a young woman with headphones. Didn't remove them. Walked in, received her coffee, drank it in three sips, and left. No acknowledgment of Yuki. No awareness of the space. Just efficiency.

The fifth was a couple. They entered together, received two cups without ordering, drank in silence, and left without speaking to each other. Shammy noticed they didn't hold hands. Didn't look at each other. They were together, but they weren't together. The café had given them what they wanted, but it hadn't given them connection.

The sixth was a man in running clothes. Breathless, like he'd just finished a jog. Yuki handed him a large cup without asking. He drank it in one long pull, nodded once, and left. Less than two minutes.

Shammy watched all of it. The held air. The perfect coffee. The efficiency. Like watching a machine. Everything worked. Nothing lingered. No one looked at Yuki and said "thank you" with warmth. No one looked around and thought "I should bring my friends here." No one had an experience that made them want to repeat it.

The café gave them what they wanted.

And that was exactly the problem.

"Did you see it?" Mai asked. Her tablet was full of notes.

"The efficiency?" Shammy nodded. "No wasted motion. No unnecessary interaction."

"Exactly. The café gives them exactly what they want. No more, no less." Mai's fingers moved across the screen. "But that's not how humans work. We want friction. We want surprise. We want something that makes us come back. We want to find something new each time we return."

Shammy moved her hand through the held air. "The air doesn't change. The temperature doesn't change. Nothing changes. It's the same every time. Perfect. Unchanging."

"Which means there's no reason to return," Mai said. "If everything is always exactly what you want, there's no discovery. No growth. No reason to come back and see what's different."

Ace had spent the morning walking the perimeter, checking doorframes, assessing sight lines. She returned to the table with a tension in her shoulders that hadn't been there yesterday.

"Anything?" Shammy asked.

"Nothing." Ace's voice was flat. "The building is sound. The exits are clear. There's nothing to fight here."

Shammy saw it in Ace's eyes. The frustration of having nothing to do. The body that had learned to be ready, with nothing to engage.

"Maybe that's the point," Shammy said. "Maybe there's nothing to fight."

Ace's jaw tightened. "Then why are we here?"

"Because something is wrong." Mai's tablet displayed a new data point. "And wrong doesn't always mean dangerous. Sometimes wrong means broken in a different way."

Ace didn't respond. Her hand went to the doorframe again. Checking.

Shammy felt the air around them. The held perfection. The question none of them could answer.

The café waited for them to want something. But none of them wanted anything.

Not from this place.

Not yet.

Outside, the day continued. People walked past without looking. The street went about its business. The café held its breath, patient, waiting. Giving exactly what was wanted. Never more. Never less. Never anything that would make anyone want to stay.

And somewhere in the held air, Shammy felt the question that Yuki couldn't answer: why doesn't anyone come back?

The answer was there. In the static atmosphere. In the perfect temperature. In the coffee that gave you exactly what you wanted.

Because there was nothing to come back to. Nothing had changed. Nothing would change. The café would give you the same perfect experience every time, and that was exactly why you would never return.

Perfection. Efficiency. No friction. No reason.

Just held air and perfect coffee and a question no one had asked before: can something be too right?

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:18**

