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Chapter 3: Frustration

The temporary quarters were too quiet.

Ace stood by the doorframe. Her hand rested on the wood. Load-bearing. Solid. No structural weaknesses. She'd checked it four times since they'd arrived. Each time, the same results. The building was sound. The exits were clear. There was nothing to fight.

The room was small. A table, three chairs, a window, a door. Standard temporary quarters. The kind they'd used a hundred times before. Safe. Boring. Predictable.

Safe should have been good. Safe should have been relaxing. Safe should have been what she'd wanted all her life.

But safe felt wrong.

She moved to the window. Checked the frame. Solid. Checked the glass. No cracks. Checked the sight lines. Clear.

The window looked out over the street. People walking. Cars passing. The world continuing, unaware that anything was wrong. And there wasn't anything wrong. That was the problem. The café worked. The coffee was perfect. The air was held. Everything functioned exactly as it should.

But no one came back.

Ace's hand went to the window frame. Checking. Solid. No structural issues. The glass was clean. The seal was intact. Nothing wrong with this window, just like nothing was wrong with the café, just like nothing was wrong with anything.

"Ace." Mai's voice came from the table behind her. "You've checked that five times."

"Four." Ace's hand dropped from the frame. "Five would be excessive."

Mai didn't look up from her tablet. Her fingers moved across the screen, processing data, building models, searching for patterns.

Ace turned from the window. The room was small. A table, three chairs, a window, a door. Standard temporary quarters. Nothing unusual. Nothing threatening.

She should have been able to relax. There was no danger here. No enemy. No crisis. Just a café that was too perfect and a question that didn't have a weapon.

But her body didn't know how to relax. It had learned to be ready. Unlearning was harder than learning.

Shammy sat by the window, her hand resting on the glass. The air in their quarters was different from the café. It moved. It responded to her touch. But even here, she could feel the held atmosphere from outside. The café was three blocks away, but its influence pressed against her awareness like a distant pressure system.

She'd felt this before. Places that held their breath. Spaces that didn't want to be noticed. But this was different. The café wasn't hiding. It was waiting. Waiting for someone to want something from it.

"The air here is better," Shammy said. "It moves."

Mai looked up from her tablet. "The café's influence doesn't extend this far?"

"It extends." Shammy moved her hand through the air, feeling the subtle resistance. "But it's thinner. Like the café is holding its breath, but out here, the air can still respond. The pressure is less."

"Interesting." Mai's fingers moved across her screen. "So there's a radius to the effect. Or a gradient. The held atmosphere is strongest at the source and dissipates with distance."

Shammy nodded. She felt the air as a living thing. Something that moved, that responded, that breathed. In the café, the air didn't breathe. It waited.

Ace was at the doorframe again. Her hand touched the wood. Checking.

"Ace." Shammy's voice was gentle. "The building is sound."

Ace's hand dropped. "I know."

"Then why keep checking?"

Ace didn't answer. She moved away from the doorframe and stood in the center of the room. Her body was still ready. Eyes sweeping the space. Exit routes. Sight lines. Potential threats.

There were none.

The morning passed. Mai analyzed data. Shammy watched the air. Ace checked the perimeter.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Each check was the same. The building was sound. The exits were clear. No threats. No hidden dangers. No structural weaknesses. The doorframes were solid. The windows were intact. The floor was stable. Everything was exactly as it should be.

By the third check, Ace had memorized every crack in the ceiling, every imperfection in the floor, every potential weakness in the walls. There were none. The building was solid. Safe. Unthreatening.

But her body didn't care. It kept checking.

That was what it did. What it had learned to do. Check the perimeter. Assess the threats. Be ready. Even when there was nothing to be ready for. Even when the threats didn't exist. Even when the perimeter was already secure.

Her body didn't know how to stop.

"Ace." Mai's voice was careful. The kind of careful that meant she was about to ask a question Ace might not want to answer. "What are you looking for?"

Ace stopped at the doorframe. Her hand was on the wood again. She hadn't realized she'd moved there. "I don't know."

"You've checked the perimeter four times this morning."

"I know." Ace's voice was flat. She counted each check. Not because she wanted to, but because her body kept track of these things. Part of being ready. Part of knowing where you were. Part of being prepared.

"The results are the same each time."

"I know." The building was sound. The exits were clear. There was nothing to fight. She'd known it since the first check. But that didn't stop her body from checking again.

Mai's tablet paused. The screen reflected in her eyes. She was processing something. Ace could see the gears turning. Mai's analytical mind, always working.

"Then why keep checking?"

Ace's jaw tightened. Her hand dropped from the doorframe. "Because I don't know what else to do."

The words hung in the air. Ace hadn't meant to say them. They'd come out before she could stop them. The truth, spoken aloud, in a room that was too quiet, in a building that was too safe.

She didn't know what else to do.

Shammy felt the shift in Ace before she saw it. The tension in the air. The way her partner's body held itself, even when there was nothing to fight. Shammy had learned to read Ace over their time together. The tight shoulders when she was frustrated. The eyes moving across a space, even when there was nothing to find. The hand going to doorframes without conscious decision.

She moved to where Ace was standing. Near the doorframe. Again.

"The air here moves," Shammy said. "Can you feel it?"

Ace's eyes were on the wood. Her hand was still near the frame, even though she'd dropped it. The ghost of the check. The motion that hadn't quite finished. "I don't feel air the way you do."

"I know." Shammy stood beside her. Not touching. Just present. "But you feel something. Your body knows when something is wrong."

"My body knows when something is wrong." Ace's voice was flat. "There's nothing wrong here. That's the problem."

Shammy understood. Ace had spent her life in danger. Trained to fight. Raised in violence. The village. The Blood-Moon Rift Event. The years of learning to survive, to protect, to engage. And now she was standing in a temporary room, in a city that wasn't dangerous, investigating a café that wasn't a threat.

There was nothing to engage. Nothing to fight. Nothing to do.

And for Ace, who had defined herself through action, through readiness, through fighting, there was nothing.

"What am I supposed to do here?" Ace's voice was quiet. Not a complaint. Just a question. Genuine confusion. The kind that came from someone who'd spent their entire life knowing exactly what to do, suddenly faced with a situation where there was nothing to do.

Shammy didn't have an answer. She moved her hand through the air, feeling it press against her palm. The air in the quarters moved. It responded. It was alive. Three blocks away, the café held its breath, and Ace stood in a room with nothing to fight.

"We figure out what's wrong with the café," Shammy said. "We understand why customers don't return. We... solve it."

Ace's hand went to the doorframe again. Automatic. Her body knew the patterns even when her mind was somewhere else. "Solving isn't fighting."

"No." Shammy watched her. Watched the hand touch the wood, the eyes sweep the perimeter, the body hold itself ready. "But it's something."

"Something isn't enough." Ace's voice was flat. "I don't know how to do something. I know how to fight. I know how to engage. I know how to be ready for threats." Her hand dropped from the frame. "I don't know how to... this."

Shammy moved closer. "You can learn."

Ace's eyes went to the window. "I'm not good at learning new things. I'm good at fighting. That's what I do."

"You're good at more than fighting." Shammy's voice was gentle. "You're good at assessing situations. You're good at finding structural weaknesses. You're good at being ready. Those are skills. They apply here too."

Ace's jaw tightened. "They don't apply. There's nothing to assess. There are no weaknesses. There's nothing to be ready for."

"Then maybe..." Shammy paused, feeling the air. "Maybe we find a way to apply them differently."

Mai sat at the table, her tablet displaying data that didn't make sense. Customer patterns. Atmospheric readings. Temperature logs. Exit interviews. All of it pointed to the same conclusion: nothing was wrong. The café worked. It did exactly what it was supposed to do.

And that was the problem.

She'd run the numbers three times. Customer satisfaction was perfect. Product quality was perfect. Service was perfect. By every metric that should have indicated success, the café was succeeding.

She'd built models before. Systems that should have worked but didn't. Patterns that should have emerged but didn't. This was different. The café was working. It was doing exactly what it was designed to do. The problem was that what it was designed to do wasn't what humans needed.

"Ace." Mai's voice was precise. "I need your perspective."

Ace turned from the doorframe. Her eyes swept the room. Exit routes. Sight lines. Potential threats. There were none. There never were.

"What kind of perspective?"

"Tactical." Mai's fingers moved across the tablet. "If you were designing a system to keep people from returning, how would you do it?"

Ace's jaw tightened. "I would make them not want to return."

"How?"

Ace moved to the window. Her hand went to the frame. Checking. "Make it uncomfortable. Dangerous. Threatening. Give them a reason to stay away."

"The café does the opposite." Mai tilted her head. "It gives them exactly what they want. No discomfort. No danger. No threat. And they stay away."

Ace's hand dropped from the frame. "Because there's nothing to make them remember it."

Mai's tablet paused. "Explain."

"When I fight something, I remember it." Ace's voice was flat. "The danger. The threat. The feeling of being alive. This café... there's no danger. No threat. Nothing to remember. It gives you what you want, and then you leave, and there's nothing that makes you think about it again."

Mai's fingers moved across the screen. "That aligns with Shammy's hypothesis. Friction creates memory. Without friction, there's no reason to return."

Ace turned from the window. "I don't understand friction."

"I know." Mai looked up from her tablet. "But you understand threat. You understand danger. The café has neither. And that's what makes it wrong."

Ace moved back to the doorframe. Her hand touched the wood. Checking again.

The conversation was over. Mai had what she needed. But she could see it in Ace's shoulders. The tension that never went away. The readiness that had nothing to be ready for.

The afternoon passed. Ace checked the perimeter again. Mai analyzed data. Shammy watched the air.

At some point, Shammy found herself sitting by the window, feeling the atmosphere shift. Ace was at the doorframe. Mai was at the table. The three of them, in a room that was too small, investigating a

café that wasn't a threat.

Shammy moved to where Ace was standing. She didn't say anything. Just stood there. Present.

Ace's hand was on the doorframe. Checking.

"The café isn't dangerous," Ace said. Her voice was flat. "I know that. But my body..."

"I know." Shammy touched her partner's arm. Brief. "Your body learned to be ready. It doesn't know how to stop."

Ace's hand dropped from the frame. "What do I do when there's nothing to fight?"

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

"You find something else," Shammy said. "Something that isn't fighting. Something that matters."

Ace's eyes swept the room. Exit routes. Sight lines. Structural integrity. "I don't know how to do that."

"I know." Shammy's voice was gentle. "We'll figure it out. Together."

Ace didn't respond. But her hand didn't go back to the doorframe. She stood in the center of the room, her body still ready, her eyes still scanning.

But she wasn't checking anymore.

The evening came. Mai's tablet glowed with data that didn't add up. Shammy's hand rested on the window glass, feeling the air move outside. Ace stood in the center of the room, her body still, her eyes on nothing.

"What am I supposed to do here?" Ace asked again. Not a complaint. Just a question.

Shammy turned from the window. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to fight something. I want to engage. I want to... do something."

"There's nothing to fight."

"I know."

"Then maybe..." Shammy moved closer. "Maybe we find something that isn't fighting. Something that needs doing."

Ace's eyes went to the doorframe. Her hand twitched. But she didn't check it again.

"Like what?"

"Like understanding." Shammy felt the air around her. "Like figuring out why this café works the way it does. Like... solving a problem that doesn't have a weapon."

Ace was quiet. Her body was still ready. But something in her eyes shifted.

“Is that... something?”

“It's something.” Shammy moved back to the window. “It's not fighting. But it's not nothing.”

Ace stood in the center of the room. Her hand didn't go to the doorframe. Her eyes didn't sweep the perimeter.

She didn't check.

The night passed. The three of them slept in temporary quarters. The air moved outside. The café held its breath three blocks away.

Shammy slept by the window, her hand resting on the glass. Even in sleep, she felt the air. The held breath of the café. The static perfection pressing against her awareness. She dreamed of places that didn't move. Spaces that didn't respond. Air that had forgotten how to breathe.

Mai slept at the table, her tablet still glowing. Even in sleep, her mind processed data. Patterns that didn't fit. Systems that worked but failed.

And Ace lay in the dark, her body ready, her mind asking a question that didn't have an answer.

What am I supposed to do here?

Her entire life, she'd known what to do. Fight. Engage. Protect. Be ready. The patterns were clear. The threats were identifiable. The actions were defined.

But here, in a temporary room, in a city that wasn't dangerous, investigating a café that wasn't a threat... there was nothing to fight. Nothing to engage. Nothing to do.

Her body didn't know how to stop being ready. Her mind didn't know how to rest. Her entire being was tuned to a frequency that didn't exist here.

But somewhere, in the held air and the static perfection, there was a problem that needed solving. A question that needed answering. A café that gave people exactly what they wanted and never saw them again.

And Ace, who had learned to fight, was learning that not all problems had weapons. Not all questions had enemies. Not all solutions required combat.

She just didn't know what to do with that yet.

But she would learn.

She had to.

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