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Chapter 6: Interruption

The café door opened with more force than necessary.

Three people entered. Not customers. The way they moved suggested training. Formation. Purpose. The lead operative was tall, broad-shouldered, with the kind of posture that suggested military background. The two behind him moved in coordination. Flanking positions. Sight lines. Threat assessment.

Mobile Task Force Theta-24. Shammy recognized the pattern. They assessed spaces like threats. They moved in coordinated units. They carried themselves with the particular tension of people who expected danger and were disappointed when it didn't materialize.

The café held its breath around them. Perfect temperature. Perfect light. Held air. Nothing changed. The café didn't respond to their entrance. It didn't register them as different from any other customer. It just waited.

Ace's body shifted. Ready. Her hand went to her side, where her katanas would have been. Then dropped. These weren't threats. They were colleagues. Of a sort. The Foundation had many Mobile Task Forces. Theta-24 specialized in anomaly containment. They were trained for threats, for dangers, for things that needed to be fought or contained or destroyed.

This was not that.

The lead operative approached the counter. His name tape read SANTOS. His eyes swept the café with the precision of someone who'd done this a thousand times. Threat assessment. Exit routes. Structural evaluation. The same patterns Ace used.

"We're investigating reports of anomalous activity at this location," Santos said. His voice was formal. The kind of formal that suggested he'd said these words many times. "Standard containment protocol. We need to assess the premises."

Yuki stood behind the counter. Her smile didn't falter. The same practiced warmth she showed everyone. "Of course. Can I get you anything?"

Santos paused. The question wasn't in his protocol. He glanced at his team. They shrugged.

"Coffee," one of them said. The shorter operative, name tape reading CHEN. "We've been on shift for fourteen hours. Coffee would be... appreciated."

"Coming right up." Yuki turned to the machine. Efficient. Automatic. She didn't ask what they wanted.

Mai looked up from her tablet. She'd been analyzing data when they entered. Her posture remained relaxed. These weren't threats. She'd dealt with Mobile Task Forces before. They were trained for containment, not investigation.

"The anomaly isn't dangerous," Mai said. Her voice was calm. Analytical. "You're here for threat

assessment. I'm telling you: there's no threat."

Santos turned. His eyes swept over Mai, then Shammy, then Ace. He recognized the posture. The readiness. These weren't civilians.

"You're Foundation?" Santos asked.

"Investigative Division," Mai said. "We've been here four days. The café optimizes customer preferences. It's not hostile. It's not dangerous. It's just... effective."

Santos's eyes narrowed. "Effective at what?"

"Giving people exactly what they want." Mai tilted her head. "That's the problem."

The third operative, name tape reading WASHINGTON, had spread through the café. Checking corners. Assessing exit routes. Doing exactly what Ace had done on the first day. The same patterns. The same assessment. The same readiness for threats that didn't exist.

Ace watched them. Her body was ready, but she didn't move. She recognized what they were doing. She'd done it herself. The threat assessment. The perimeter check. The structural evaluation. Finding nothing to fight.

"Ma'am." Santos's voice was strained. The formal address. "We've been sent to assess. Our protocols require—"

"Your protocols require you to assess threats." Mai didn't look away from her tablet. "This isn't a threat. It's a philosophical problem."

Santos stared. "Philosophical."

"Correct." Mai's voice remained analytical. "The café gives customers exactly what they want. The result is that they never return. That's not a containment scenario. That's a customer retention issue."

Chen had moved to the window. Checking sight lines. Assessing the street outside. Washington was by the service door. Checking exit routes. Santos stood at the center of the café, his body still ready, his training still active.

But there was nothing to fight.

"Protocol suggests we establish a perimeter," Santos said. His voice was formal. But Shammy could hear the uncertainty underneath. The training didn't cover this. "Evaluate for containment. Determine threat level."

"There's nothing to contain." Mai's voice didn't change. "The café optimizes. That's it. No hostile entity. No dangerous artifact. No reality-bending anomaly. Just... optimization."

"Then why—" Santos started.

"Because it works too well." Ace spoke from her position by the door. Her voice was flat. "The café gives people what they want. They get it. They leave. They never come back."

Santos looked at her. "That's... not in our protocols."

"Your protocols don't cover philosophical problems." Ace's eyes swept the space. "This isn't what you were trained for. This isn't a threat. This is... a question."

The three operatives exchanged glances. They'd come expecting danger. Ready for containment. With protocols and procedures and threat assessments.

They'd found a café that made perfect coffee and didn't have any customers.

Chen returned from the window. "Perimeter's clear. No visible threats. No anomalous signatures on initial scan."

Washington returned from the service door. "Rear exit is standard. No containment requirements."

Santos stood in the center of the café. His body was still ready. His training was still active. But there was nothing to engage. Nothing to fight. Nothing to contain.

"We should... report back," Chen said. Her voice was uncertain. "Confirm the location is non-hostile."

Santos nodded slowly. "Right. Non-hostile. We'll... file a report."

He looked at the café one more time. The perfect temperature. The held air. The empty tables. The three investigators who had been here for four days, drinking coffee and analyzing customer patterns.

The café didn't respond to him. It didn't register him as a threat. It didn't register him as anything special. He was just another presence. Another person who might want something.

"Sorry for the... interruption." Santos motioned to his team. "Let's go."

They left the way they came. Formation. Purpose. But no threat. Nothing to contain. Nothing to fight.

The door closed behind them. The café settled back into its held stillness.

Ace's body relaxed. Just slightly. The readiness was still there, but the tension had shifted. "They wanted this to be a threat."

Mai nodded. "They needed to feel useful."

Shammy felt the air settle. The held atmosphere pressed back into place. The café resumed its waiting. It hadn't changed. It hadn't responded. It just was.

"They were disappointed," Shammy said. She moved back to the window. "Because there was nothing to fight."

"Everyone wants something to fight," Ace said. Her voice was flat. But there was something in it. Recognition. Understanding. "When there's nothing, they don't know what to do."

Mai's tablet captured the observation. "The Perfect Cup Problem. Applied to Task Forces."

Ace looked at her. "What?"

"They came here expecting a threat. They found nothing to fight. So they left with nothing." Mai tilted her head. "The same way customers leave this café. Nothing to engage with. Nothing to remember."

Ace's jaw tightened. "So what do we do?"

"We change the café." Mai's fingers moved across the screen. "We introduce imperfection. We create something to remember."

Shammy felt the air. The held atmosphere. The perfect temperature. The perfect light.

"The café has been waiting for someone to want something," Shammy said. "Now we know what to want. We want it to change."

Ace stood by the doorframe. But her hand wasn't on it. She was just standing there. Present. Ready. But different.

"I've been there," Ace said. Her voice was quiet. Not directed at anyone. Just an observation. "Wanting to fight something. Having nothing to fight."

Mai looked up from her tablet. "You recognized them."

"They were doing what I do." Ace's eyes went to the doorframe. "Checking. Assessing. Ready. They wanted this to be a threat because that's what they know. That's what I know." Her hand went to the wood. "But there's nothing to fight here. There's just... a question."

Shammy moved to stand beside her. "Questions can be engaged too."

Ace's hand dropped from the doorframe. "I'm learning that."

Yuki came to their table. Her smile was the same practiced warmth. But her eyes were different. They'd watched the interaction. The Mobile Task Force. The containment protocol. The nothing to contain.

"Was that... normal?" Yuki asked.

"Foundation protocol," Mai said. "They send teams to assess anomalies. This one wasn't dangerous."

"None of them bought coffee." Yuki's voice was soft. "They just... left."

"They didn't want anything," Shammy said. "The café couldn't give them what they wanted because they didn't know what they wanted."

Yuki's hands tightened on the cloth she carried. "Like Hana."

"Like Hana." Mai's tablet displayed the data. "The café needs to want something to give. When customers don't know what they want, the café can't optimize."

"But those people..." Yuki's eyes went to the door. "They wanted something. They wanted... a threat. Something to fight."

"They wanted to feel useful," Ace said. Her voice was flat. "There's nothing wrong with that. But this isn't the place for it."

Yuki's smile flickered. Not the practiced warmth. Something more real. "So what is this place for?"

Mai's tablet glowed. "We're still figuring that out."

The afternoon passed. The café held its breath. The Mobile Task Force didn't return. No other customers came. The Triad sat at their table, analyzing data, feeling the air, checking the perimeter.

Ace checked the doorframe once more. But her hand lingered on the wood. Not checking. Just touching.

"The MTF team," Ace said. "They're trained for threats. They have protocols. Containment procedures. Threat assessments."

Mai nodded. "Standard Mobile Task Force training."

"But they couldn't use any of it here." Ace's voice was thoughtful. Not frustrated. Processing. "This isn't a threat. It's a question. And questions don't have containment procedures."

Shammy felt the air around them. The held atmosphere. The static perfection. "Some questions don't have answers."

"Some questions have to be lived with," Mai added. "Not solved. Just... understood."

Ace's hand dropped from the doorframe. She moved to the window. Her eyes swept the street outside. Not threat assessment. Observation.

"I've been trained to fight," Ace said. Her voice was quiet. "To engage. To defend. But this..." Her voice was quiet. "This is different."

"Different isn't bad," Shammy said. "Different is just different."

Ace was quiet for a moment. Her eyes were still on the street. The people walking past. The world continuing.

"I'm learning," Ace said. "Different is just different."

The café was quiet after the MTF team left. The held air pressed back into place. The perfect temperature. The static perfection. Nothing had changed. The café didn't respond to threats because it didn't see threats. It only saw people who wanted things.

Mai sat at the table, her tablet displaying the encounter. She wasn't analyzing it. She was filing it. The MTF visit would be in the report. Standard protocol. Threat assessment. Nothing to contain.

"They wanted this to be a threat," Ace said. Her voice was flat. But there was understanding in it now. Recognition. "They needed it to be a threat."

"Mobile Task Forces are trained for containment," Mai said. "Their protocols don't cover philosophical problems. They have threat assessments, containment procedures, extraction plans. They don't have frameworks for cafés that work too well."

Ace moved to the window. Her hand went to the frame. Not checking. Just resting. "I know what that

feels like. Wanting something to fight. Having nothing to fight.”

Shammy felt the air around them. The held atmosphere. The waiting. “The café gives them what they want too. But what they want isn't here.”

“The café can't give them what they want,” Mai added. “Because what they want, threat, danger, something to contain, doesn't exist here. So it gives them nothing. They leave unsatisfied.”

Ace's jaw tightened. “Like everyone else.”

“Exactly like everyone else.” Mai's tablet displayed the correlation. “The Perfect Cup Problem applies to everyone. Even Mobile Task Forces. They came here wanting something. They left without it. They won't return.”

Shammy moved to stand beside Ace. The window looked out on the street. People walked past without looking at the café. The held air pressed against the glass.

“Tomorrow,” Shammy said. “We start the implementation.”

Ace nodded. Her hand wasn't on the doorframe. She was just standing. Present. “Tomorrow.”

Yuki came to their table. Her smile, the practiced warmth, was still there, but underneath it was something else. She'd watched the MTF team leave. She'd watched the Triad watch them go.

“Are they coming back?” Yuki asked.

“No,” Mai said. “There's nothing for them here.”

Yuki's hands moved on the cloth she carried. The automatic motion. “They looked... disappointed. Like they wanted something.”

“They wanted a threat,” Ace said. Her voice was flat. “There isn't one.”

“Is that what happens to everyone?” Yuki's voice was quiet. “They come in, get what they want, and leave disappointed?”

“No.” Shammy shook her head. “They come in, get what they want, and leave with nothing to remember. That's different.”

Yuki's hands stopped. “Nothing to remember. That's... that's what this place is. Perfect. Forgettable.”

“Not anymore,” Mai said. “Tomorrow, we change it.”

Yuki's smile flickered. Not the practiced warmth. Something real. “What will it become?”

“Something alive,” Shammy said. “Something that breathes.”

Yuki nodded. Her hands started moving again. The familiar motion. But her eyes were hopeful.

“I'll be ready.”

The evening came. The Triad sat at their table. The café held its breath around them. The held air. The perfect temperature. The waiting.

But tomorrow, they would change it. Not destroy it. Change it. Make it breathe. Make it live. Make it something that people could come back to.

And somewhere in the held atmosphere, the Triad had found something worth doing.

Not a fight. Not a threat. Just a problem that needed solving.

And for Ace, who had been frustrated by the lack of something to engage with, there was finally something to do. Not fight. Change.

The café held its breath, waiting for them to want something.

This time, they knew what they needed to do.

Night fell over the café. The Triad stayed late, watching the space, feeling the changes. The held air still pressed against them, but they knew what to do now. The MTF team was gone. The interruption was over. Tomorrow, the real work would begin.

Shammy stood by the window. The street outside was quiet. The few people who passed didn't look at the café. The held atmosphere still pressed outward, deflecting attention. But tomorrow, that would change. The air would move. The café would breathe.

"Are you ready?" Mai asked. Her tablet displayed the plans. The variation coefficient. The atmospheric changes. The human intervention.

Shammy nodded. "I'm ready."

Ace stood by the doorframe. Her hand wasn't on it. She was just standing. Present. Ready.

"I'm ready," Ace said. Her voice was flat. But there was something in it. Something different. "I'm ready to do something."

Mai's tablet glowed. "Then tomorrow, we begin."

The café held its breath around them. The held air. The static perfection. The waiting.

But something had changed. The Triad had found their solution. Not a fight. Not a threat. Just a problem that needed solving.

And for the first time since they'd arrived, they knew what to do.

They would change the café. Not destroy it. Not break it. Just change it.

Make it breathe. Make it live. Make it something that people could come back to.

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