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Chapter One: The Sacred Routine

4:47 AM and the blade caught nothing but dark.

Ace sat cross-legged in her corner. The one nobody else used, where shadow stacked against the wall like something waiting. The whetstone moved. Four hundred seventy-three strokes. She'd counted once, years ago, when counting was the only way to prove she was still here. Now her hands just knew. The emerald glow along the edge had dimmed overnight, standby mode, the blades resting the way she couldn't.

Violet was quiet. Six days quiet. A record since Detroit. She didn't trust it. Didn't fight it either.

The fragment pressed sometimes. Pressed hard, behind her eyes, behind her sternum, a resonance that wanted out. When it surged, Shammy's hands found her grounding points. When it whispered, Mai's voice read tactical calculations until the static settled. But this morning it was just... still. Coiled.

She finished the stroke pattern. Set the whetstone aside. Hands already moving toward the kitchen's edge without her deciding to move them.

Mai woke at 5:58. Not because of an alarm. She'd trained herself off those during her second year at the Foundation, alarms being external dependencies and external dependencies being vulnerabilities. Her eyes opened and that was that.

The bedroom held residual warmth. Three bodies, shared space. Mai's side: sheets folded at the same angle, every morning, geometric precision that would be pathological if it weren't so useful. Ace's side: empty, cool, weight concentrated at the edge where she'd rolled out hours ago. Shammy's side: chaos. Sheets shifted by atmospheric drift, the air above them still carrying a faint static charge.

Third board near the counter: loose nail. The cabinet that stuck: adjust trajectory. The hardwood had learned her weight over eighteen months, specific creaks at specific points, which she'd memorized and now avoided.

Coffee maker. Two seconds from hand to power button. She'd recalibrated the temperature controls in her first month. Standard machines run a five-degree variance. Hers held one. Shammy had called it "the atmospheric quality of obsession." Mai had filed that under observations that don't require response.

Two sugars. Measured to the gram. Water temp monitored through the app in real-time. Brew time: four minutes, thirty-two seconds. Optimal extraction for current bean density.

The apartment responded to Mai's presence. Shadows shifting in Ace's corner, pressure redistributing. Shammy called it "the Mai effect." Mai called it being awake first.

Ace didn't look up from the counter's edge. Didn't need to. The sounds carried enough: coffee brewing, measured steps, the click of mug on counter.

"Coffee in four minutes."

Not a question. A projection.

"Thanks." Ace's blade completed its arc. Whetstone aside. "You calculated the grind coarseness again."

"Last batch was off by three percent."

"Is that why Thursday tasted wrong?"

"Thursday's water temperature fluctuated by two degrees." Mai positioned her mug, the one with the faded Foundation logo, a joke gift that had become routine, then ritual. "Building pressure dropped during the municipal maintenance window. I've since installed a regulator."

"You installed a pressure regulator for coffee."

"For consistency. Coffee's a consistent variable. Consistent variables should be controlled."

Ace rose. Four feet of contained pressure shifting from floor to standing without wasted motion. Seven steps to the kitchen. She'd counted once. The distance never changed.

"You're up early."

"Fragment's quiet. Six days."

"Six days is good."

"Six days is unusual." Flat. "I don't trust unusual."

The coffee finished. Mai took the first sip at optimal temperature.

"The fragment's been stable since Detroit. Shammy's grounding protocols are working."

"Shammy's protocols are why I'm stable." A pause. "That's the concern."

"Trust the protocols."

"I trust the protocols." Ace's hand found her blade's hilt. Not drawing. Just contact. "I don't trust stability."

6:14. Shammy arrived.

Not walked in. Arrived. The doorframe had learned to expect her, she ducked automatically, shoulders dropping two inches, 195 centimeters of stormfront passing through architecture that never accounted for her. Her hair held the static charge of eight hours between pressure layers. Silver-white roots fading into electric tips that shifted toward the kitchen's warmth, reaching for the steam like plants seeking light.

"Morning." Her voice came first. The temperature near the coffee maker rose half a degree.

Mai didn't turn. "You're fourteen minutes past optimal drift-recovery time."

"I'm exactly when I need to be." Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. Automatic. Eighteen months of muscle memory. The pressure released and Mai's spine straightened slightly, tension she hadn't acknowledged redistributing. "Someone was calculating too hard in their sleep again."

"I don't calculate in my sleep."

"Your projection dreams say otherwise." Shammy leaned against the counter. The coffee maker's steam slowed, suspended for half a second longer than physics intended. "You were running tactical scenarios at 3 AM. Something about civilian evacuation routes through the Riverside district."

"The Riverside district has suboptimal evacuation architecture. The street grid creates bottlenecks during mass movement events."

"The street grid isn't our problem at 3 AM." Shammy moved toward the refrigerator. "The thing is our problem at 3 AM. You should be thinking about the thing."

"The tactical scenarios are relevant to—"

"The thing." Shammy's smile had weight. Warmth concentrated around her. "The thing we've been planning for three weeks. The thing that's supposed to happen tonight."

"The thing." Mai's fingers flexed against the mug. "I'm aware of the thing."

"Are you? Because your subconscious was running evacuation scenarios instead of bread quality projections."

"What thing?" Ace. Direct. Cutting through without disrupting.

Mai turned. That particular intensity behind her eyes, the one that meant she'd already organized the information before speaking.

"Dinner reservation. The new place on Seventh, private booths, menu that doesn't require tactical analysis to navigate. We've had reservations for three weeks."

"The one with the good bread." Shammy pulled a covered dish from the refrigerator. "I've been reading about their bread. Apparently it has the right atmospheric density for proper crumb structure."

"Bread has atmospheric density now?"

"Everything has atmospheric density. Most people just don't notice."

"Is that why you've been researching bread physics at 2 AM?"

"Yeast activation patterns are relevant to atmospheric quality." Shammy began uncovering the dish. "And the baker's forum has surprisingly detailed technical discussions."

Breakfast started.

The kitchen was designed for three people in a space built for two, and over eighteen months it had learned to accommodate. Mai had reorganized the cabinets into a tactical grid, ingredients by frequency, tools by retrieval path. Ace had cleared sightlines to every entrance, removing decorative

obstacles that blocked peripheral vision. Shammy had adjusted the airflow until the small room felt bigger than its square footage, warmer in her corner, cooler near the window where Ace stood.

Three bodies through a space designed for two, never colliding.

Mai handled the eggs. Six of them, cracked with identical force, whisked in a bowl selected for volume-to-weight ratio. Removed from the fridge exactly twelve minutes prior. Seasoning in a spiral, maximum surface area coverage.

Shammy handled the bread. The sourdough from her 3 AM expedition. Sliced with impossible grace, the knife completing arcs that shouldn't have been possible for someone too tall for the kitchen, but somehow were.

Ace handled the watching. Her position by the window let her see both the street below and the kitchen's interior. Her body held stillness, not meditation, but observation. Patrol pattern compressed into a kitchen corner, position shifting every four minutes.

"The phone's been silent." Her voice from the window. "Thirty-five hours."

"It's our day off. Foundation protocol requires minimum forty-eight hours between active deployments."

"Thirty-five. Mission ended at 5:47 PM day-before-yesterday."

Mai's whisking paused. "You're right. Thirty-five." A beat. "We've gone longer."

"We've gone longer." Shammy kept slicing. "But longer isn't the goal. The goal is the thing."

"The thing." Ace. No inflection.

"The thing." The eggs began their final transformation. "Which requires us to not be deployed tonight."

"The Foundation doesn't optimize for date nights." Warmth from Shammy. "The Foundation optimizes for containment efficiency."

"Our efficiency is a subset of Foundation efficiency. Our date night is not a Foundation variable."

"Maybe it should be." Ace collected her plate. "Efficiency requires recovery. Recovery requires..." A pause. "The thing."

"Did you just advocate for date night optimization?" Shammy's atmospheric presence condensed slightly. Surprise held in air pressure.

"I observed. Observation isn't advocacy."

"It's close enough." Shammy's hand found Ace's shoulder briefly. Warrior-sister contact. Grounding before the meal. "Closer than you usually get to talking about feelings."

"Feelings aren't tactical."

"What time's the reservation?" Ace redirected.

"Seven. Private booth. I specified the corner position, optimal sightlines for you, minimal through-traffic for Shammy, proximity to the exit without suggesting anxiety."

"You specified our seating to the host."

"I specified parameters that optimize our experience. They accommodated."

"They always do." Shammy's smile warmed the air. "You have a very specific way of asking for things."

"I have a specific way of ensuring optimal outcomes."

"That's what I said."

Breakfast continued. Ace watched, Mai ate, Shammy held the space between them. The kitchen found its rhythm.

"You went out for bread at 3 AM." Mai said it like a fact. The tactical framework had already registered the variable. Shammy's atmospheric signature had vanished between 2:45 and 3:30. The bread confirmed it.

"The bakery opens at 2 for the morning bake. I caught the first batch. Best atmospheric density. The baker was awake. We talked about yeast activation patterns."

"You discussed yeast with a stranger at 3 AM."

"A professional. At optimal baking time." Shammy's plate was nearly empty. "He has opinions about humidity and flour protein content. Strong opinions."

"Strong opinions about flour protein." Mai's eyebrow. "At 3 AM."

"Strong opinions don't observe sleep schedules." Shammy collected her plate. "The bread is good. The opinions are irrelevant to the quality."

"You bought bread based on atmospheric density."

"I bought bread based on knowing it would be good. The atmospheric density was confirmation, not cause."

The coffee maker hummed its completion.

The sacred phone rang at 6:47.

Not the Foundation device. That one sat dark and silent, off-duty, observing the forty-eight-hour minimum. This was the personal phone. The private one. Known to approximately six people, none of whom should call before 8 AM unless something was wrong.

Mai's hand stopped halfway to the coffee pot.

Ace's posture shifted. Shoulders dropping a fraction, combat-ready stance releasing into something slightly less coiled, but her hand drifted toward her blade anyway. Muscle memory. The sacred phone didn't ring often. When it did, it meant something.

Shammy's presence condensed. The kitchen's air pressure increased. "That's not the work phone."

"No." Mai crossed to the counter. Her fingers identified the caller ID before her eyes did. The restaurant's name in precise letters. "It's the restaurant."

"The restaurant." Ace. Flat.

Mai answered. Her voice shifted into the mode she used for non-tactical communication, still precise, but warmer. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end was apologetic. Professional. The particular anxiety of someone delivering news they knew wouldn't be received well.

"Water main break... the entire block... three-day minimum for repairs... so sorry about the reservation..."

Mai's expression stayed controlled. Her silver-blue eyes tracked the conversation's trajectory, calculating variables invisible in her responses. She ended the call.

The kitchen held silence. Not comfortable. Tense.

"The restaurant flooded." Shammy. Not a question.

"Water main break. Affects the entire block. Three-day minimum for repairs."

"Three days." Ace. "The reservation was tonight."

"The reservation was tonight." Mai set the phone down with geometric precision. Her fingers flexed once. The only visible indicator. "We'll reschedule. There are seventeen comparable restaurants within five miles. I'll identify alternatives and—"

"We've been planning this for three weeks." Shammy's voice was warm but direct. "The private booth. The bread with good atmospheric density. The thing."

"The thing." Mai's tactical calculation stopped. Her hand found the counter's edge. "Yes. We've been planning the thing."

Shammy's presence adjusted. Warmth concentrating around Mai's shoulders. Not demanding. Just there.

Ace moved from the window. Four steps. Compact. She stopped at Mai's side. Her hand didn't reach for Mai's shoulder. That was Shammy's language. She just stood there. Present. Weight shifting slightly toward Mai. Not crowding. Proximity. Shadow-pressure meeting anchor-pressure. The contact was invisible but structural.

"We find another restaurant." Ace. Short. "Or we don't. Doesn't matter."

"It matters." Mai. Analyzing her own state. "The planning. The anticipation. The ritual of—"

"The ritual isn't the restaurant." Shammy's presence settled around both of them. Warm. Stabilizing. "The ritual is us. Together. Doing something that isn't work."

Mai's posture shifted. Shoulders dropping, barely perceptible, but Ace noticed. Shammy noticed. The

triad's shared awareness, running without discussion, acknowledged the tension releasing.

"The ritual is us." Mai repeated it. The analytical edge fell away. "Yes. You're right."

"I'm often right. It's part of my atmospheric presence."

"Your atmospheric presence is part of your charm." Mai's hand found Ace's. Brief contact. Grounding. "We reschedule. Or we find an alternative. The thing happens regardless of venue."

"The thing happens." Ace's hand didn't release Mai's. "Together. That's the point."

Shammy's presence adjusted. Slight pressure increase, warmth around the two smaller figures at the counter. Not dramatic. Just present.

Three weeks of planning. Three weeks of choosing a restaurant for specific reasons, Mai's sightline optimization, Shammy's atmospheric requirements, Ace's corner positioning. Three weeks of protecting a single evening.

And now a water main had broken on Seventh Street.

The thing would wait. The triad would reschedule. The sacredness of their time together wasn't dependent on venue.

But the interruption carried weight. The ordinary world, plumbing, infrastructure, municipal water systems, had intruded on their sacred ordinary. Not the Foundation. Not an anomaly. Just a broken pipe.

Then the work phone rang.

The sound was different. Harsher. Designed to cut through noise, interrupt thought, demand attention regardless of context. The sacred phone connected. The work phone commanded.

Ace's hand released Mai's. Her body shifted. Posture realigning, weight redistributing, pressure focusing. Less than a second. From domestic presence to combat-ready. Her hand found her blade's hilt. The emerald glow brightened along the edge, responding to her shadow-pressure.

Mai's expression followed similar architecture. Analytical framework reasserting, tactical calculator activating before her hand reached for the device. The warmth evaporated, replaced by operational precision.

"It's our day off."

"It's ringing." Ace. No complaint. Just observation.

Shammy's presence expanded. Not dramatically. But the air pressure redistributed around her partners, creating space for what came next. Her hand drifted from Mai's shoulder. The grounding contact released.

Mai answered. "This is Mai."

The voice on the other end was controlled. Professional. Foundation dispatch, something escalated beyond normal parameters. Mai's expression didn't change, but her free hand found the counter's edge. Grip tightening.

"Classification?" A pause. "Yes. Understood. Theta-24 en route. We'll be secondary support. Estimated arrival... twenty minutes if we leave now. Yes. We're coming."

She ended the call.

Breakfast dishes sat on the counter. Eggs half-eaten, coffee cooling, bread abandoned. The sacred phone rested beside the Foundation mug, its screen dark, the restaurant's apology recorded but not answered.

"Classification pending." Mai's voice had shifted. Analytical precision with something underneath. "Urban containment site. Anomaly breached secondary containment protocols. Theta-24 is primary response."

"We're backup." Ace's hand found her blade fully. "Secondary support."

"Secondary support." Mai moved toward her terminal. "I need thirty seconds for preliminary threat assessment."

"Take forty." Shammy's voice had changed too, still warm, but sharpened. Stormfront energy held in reserve. "I need to ground first."

"Grounding protocol." Ace's voice was flat. Business. But she moved toward Shammy, not hand-to-shoulder contact, just proximity. Her body positioned itself between Shammy and the window, blocking the light pressure that sometimes destabilized grounding.

Shammy's hand found Ace's shoulder. Structural. Not romantic, not warrior-sister, but something in between. The grounding required physical contact. Required presence. Required the triad's architecture to hold steady while one member reorganized internal atmospheric pressure.

"Breathe." Ace. Not a suggestion. A command. The same one Shammy used for her when Violet surged, except reversed. Shammy needed Ace's shadow-pressure presence to ground her atmospheric drift.

Mai's terminal hummed. Data scrolled. Her eyes tracked, processing, calculating. But her posture had shifted. Not fully operational. Holding space for Shammy's grounding.

"Threat assessment incomplete." Mai. "Anomaly breached secondary containment at 6:43. Primary containment failed at 6:51. Active breach in civilian-adjacent area."

"Casualties?"

"Unknown. Civilian evacuation protocols initiated at 6:45. Theta-24's ETA: 7:10. Our ETA, if we leave in ten minutes: 7:12."

"Two minutes behind Theta-24." Shammy's atmospheric presence had stabilized. Grounding complete. "Close enough for coordinated entry."

"Close enough." Mai's fingers completed their extraction. "No preliminary coordination. We integrate on-site."

"On-site integration." Ace. No complaint. Acknowledgment. "We go. We contain. We come back."

“We come back.” Shammy's hand released. “And then we do the thing.”

“The thing.” Mai's terminal went dark. “The reservation can be rescheduled. The thing can happen tomorrow.”

“Or tonight.” Ace moved toward the door. Blade secured, emerald glow stabilized. “Post-containment. If we're fast.”

“If we're fast.” Shammy followed, ducking the doorframe automatically. “If the anomaly cooperates.”

“Anomalies don't cooperate.” Mai's hand found her disruptor pistol. Checking the rune-markings by touch. “We make them cooperate.”

The apartment held its breath as they left.

Their kitchen stayed silent. The breakfast dishes on the counter. Eggs half-eaten, coffee cooling. The sacred phone beside the Foundation mug. The bread Shammy bought at 3 AM, the bread with the right atmospheric density, half-consumed on a plate.

The morning routine had held. The breakfast ritual had completed, interrupted, but complete. The sacred ordinary had happened.

That was the point.

The thing would wait. The triad would return.

But somewhere in the city, something had broken containment. And the three vectors that made their work possible were already moving.

The sacred routine would be waiting when they came back.

It always was.

That was the point of having it.

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