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Chapter 1: The Sky Changed

The briefing room smelled like coffee and something burnt underneath it.

Ace stood by the window. Her shadow pooled wrong. At her feet but reaching toward the door, not away from the light. Outside, the sky had been purple for three months now. Not sunset purple. Not storm purple. Just purple, like someone had replaced the atmosphere with a bruise.

“You're doing it again,” Mai said without looking up from her tablet.

Ace didn't ask what. She knew.

She turned from the window and checked the doorframe. Structural integrity: intact. Metal frame, reinforced hinges, standard Foundation installation. The door opened outward. Anyone entering would be silhouetted for a half-second before they could see into the room.

Good sight lines from the briefing table. Bad sight lines from the window, too much light behind her.

She moved to the wall instead.

“Director Chen's running late,” Shammy said. She'd folded her 195-centimeter frame into a chair built for someone six inches shorter, knees angled outward, one arm draped over the back. The air in the room moved slightly toward her, like the ventilation system had decided she was the most interesting thing in it. “The pressure's different today. You feel it?”

“I feel the ventilation struggling to maintain exactly sixty-eight degrees,” Mai said. Her pen moved across her tablet. Calculations, not notes. “Which is absurd, because it's not even working that hard, which means something else is drawing power from the—”

“Mai.”

Mai's pen stopped. “Right. Sorry.”

Ace watched the door. Not because she expected anything through it. Just because that's where doors were.

Director Chen entered fourteen minutes late, which meant something was wrong. Chen was never late. Chen's calendar had been described, more than once, as “aggressive” and “borderline hostile to the concept of rest.”

“The good news,” Chen said, setting a folder on the table, “is that it's contained.”

Mai's pen didn't move. “And the bad news?”

"We don't know what 'it' is yet."

The folder contained photographs. Ace leaned forward to look. A coffee shop. Standard urban layout, espresso machines and pastry cases and those little tables that never quite fit four people. Normal. Except for the coffee maker in the corner, which was glowing a faint, sickly green.

"Three days ago, this establishment's primary espresso machine began exhibiting anomalous properties," Chen said. "It produces coffee. The coffee is normal. The machine, however, has developed what our preliminary analysts are calling 'preferences.'"

"Preferences," Mai repeated.

"It refuses to make decaf. It produces approximately thirty percent more espresso than the input grounds should allow. And two days ago, it spat a latte at a customer it apparently didn't like."

Shammy laughed. Warm, startled, genuine. "It didn't."

"Full cup. The customer was unharmed, though significantly less confident about their order." Chen's face remained neutral. "This is the ninth domestic object anomaly in three months. The pattern suggests magic is settling into infrastructure. Finding purchase."

"Domestication," Ace said.

Everyone looked at her. She'd spoken five words in the last hour. Six was unusual.

"Magic is domesticating objects," she said. "Like animals."

Chen's eyebrow twitched. The closest she got to surprise. "That's not an official term."

"It's what's happening."

Mai's pen started moving again. "If Ace is right, and she might be, the pattern fits. We're looking at magic seeking hosts in the built environment. Objects with enough complexity to hold intention, but enough passivity to accept programming. It's like—" She stopped. Started again. "It's like the magic is learning how to be here. Using things that don't fight back."

"The containment team on-site has requested assistance," Chen said. "Their protocols keep failing. Every time they try to isolate the coffee maker, it responds."

"Responds how?" Shammy asked.

"It made a twenty-cup pot of espresso in four seconds. Pressurized steam. One technician required treatment for second-degree burns."

Ace stood. Her shadow pooled at her feet, steady now. "When do we leave?"

The van smelled like ozone and old takeout. Mai had hung a whiteboard on the interior wall, and her calculations were already spreading across it. Ley line measurements, infrastructure maps, probability curves that meant nothing to anyone who wasn't Mai.

"The anomaly density in this district is four point three times higher than the city average," Mai said. Her pen moved in quick, precise strokes. "Which doesn't tell us why, but it does suggest this isn't

random. Something's concentrating the effect."

"Something or someone?" Ace asked from the passenger seat.

"Unknown. The pattern could be natural, magic flowing toward some kind of convergence point, or artificial, someone directing it." Mai's voice carried the particular cadence of thinking out loud. "The Return's been three months. We're still in early data collection phase. Anything could—"

"Let's focus on the coffee maker," Shammy said gently. She was wedged into the back seat, knees bent, one hand on the window where condensation had started to form. "The air's different near the ground. Heavier."

"Heavier how?"

"I don't know yet. It's like the magic has weight here. Like it's sunk into the concrete."

Ace's hand moved to her blade. Reflex, not intention. The van's suspension creaked over a pothole, and outside, the purple sky seemed slightly darker than it had been an hour ago. Or maybe that was just her eyes adjusting.

"How far?" she asked.

"Two blocks," Mai said. "We'll park and approach on foot. Standard reconnaissance, no engagement until we've—"

"Until we've assessed the anomaly's behavior and response thresholds." Ace finished. "I know."

Mai smiled. Brief, private. "Just making sure."

Shammy leaned forward, her breath fogging the window slightly. "Something's wrong with the wind pattern ahead. It's circling. Like there's a drain in the air."

"That's not normal," Mai said.

"No." Shammy's voice dropped. "It isn't."

The coffee shop was called The Daily Grind, which was either irony or prophecy. Ace stood across the street, watching the windows. Inside, she could see movement. Not people, but light. The green glow from the espresso machine pulsed like something breathing.

"Containment team's pulled back to the perimeter," Mai said, consulting her tablet. "They've established a forty-meter exclusion zone, but it's not holding. The anomaly's output has increased every time they've tried to contain it."

"Escalation response," Ace said. "It knows it's being contained."

"Possible. Or it's just reacting to environmental pressure. We don't have enough data to—" Mai stopped herself. Took a breath. "Sorry. Processing."

Shammy stood behind them, one hand raised toward the building. Her eyes were half-closed, the particular stillness she got when reading atmosphere.

"It's scared," she said.

"Scared?" Mai's pen froze.

"The air in there, it's tight. Contracted. The anomaly isn't aggressive. It's defending." Shammy opened her eyes fully. "Whatever's happening to that coffee maker, it's not choosing to do it. It's responding."

Ace's hand found her blade hilt. Not because she expected to use it. Because the weight of it was familiar, and familiar things were in short supply.

"I'm going in."

"Ace—" Mai started.

"Watch from here. If it escalates, pull me out."

"That's not—" Mai stopped. Exhaled. "Be careful. Please."

Ace crossed the street.

The door opened onto a scene that shouldn't have been possible.

The coffee shop was normal. The chairs were in place. The pastry case held croissants that looked two days old. The menu board advertised things like "Vanilla Bean Latte" and "Seasonal Spruce-Up," which seemed to have been written before the sky changed color and never updated.

But the air tasted like copper and burnt sugar.

Ace moved to the counter. Her shadow stretched behind her. Not wrong now, just present. Waiting.

The espresso machine sat in the corner like something hunched. Its chrome surface rippled with faint green light, and when she got closer, she could hear it. A low, almost subsonic hum, like a frequency just below hearing.

"I'm not here to contain you," she said.

The machine hummed louder.

"I don't even drink coffee."

The humming dropped an octave. Almost curious.

"I'm going to touch the counter now. Okay?"

She didn't wait for permission. Her hand met the surface. Cold, slightly damp, normal. And she let her shadow pool outward, just a little, just enough to feel the edges of the room.

The espresso machine flared.

Not violent. Not aggressive. But bright, sudden, like a startled animal freezing in headlights. The green glow intensified, and Ace felt something push against her. Not physically. But atmospherically. Like the air pressure had doubled in the space of a heartbeat.

Her shadow retreated. Not by choice.

It just pulled back. Like something had grabbed it and yanked.

She stood in the coffee shop, hand on the counter, and watched her own shadow fail to obey.

“Ace!”

Mai's voice over comms, sharp with concern. “Your vitals spiked. What happened?”

“The anomaly—” Ace started, then stopped. How to explain it? Her shadow had been a tool for years. An extension of instinct. It moved when she needed it to, held still when she didn't, and never, ever acted without her permission.

Until now.

“It pushed back,” she said. “My shadow, it's not responding.”

“Not responding how?” Mai's voice was rapid now, the pace she got when her analytical frameworks were crumbling. “Is the anomaly suppressing your abilities? Is it—”

“Mai.” Ace's voice came out flat. Calm. The way it always did when things went wrong. “I need you to not panic.”

“I'm not panicking. I'm processing. There's a difference.”

Shammy's voice cut through. “Ace, the air in there just, it shifted. What did you do?”

“Nothing. That's the problem.”

The espresso machine's glow pulsed again. A single cup appeared on the counter. Steaming, dark, perfect crema.

Ace stared at it.

“Ace?” Mai asked. “What's happening?”

“It made me coffee.”

Silence over the line.

Then Shammy laughed. Bright, startled, inappropriate to the moment. “Oh, that's, it's trying to communicate. It made you coffee. It's trying to tell you something.”

“Or bribe me.”

“That too.”

Ace looked at the cup. Then at the machine. Then at her shadow, pooled at her feet like something stunned.

“I'm coming out,” she said.

The debrief happened in the van, with Mai's whiteboard covered in new calculations and Ace sitting very still on the bench seat.

"Your shadow technique failed," Mai said. Not a question.

"It didn't fail." Ace's voice was flat. "It was cancelled. The anomaly pushed it back."

"That shouldn't be possible. Your shadow-pressure is a fundamental—" Mai stopped herself, pen hovering. "We need new approaches."

"Obviously."

Shammy leaned forward, one hand pressed against the van's ceiling where condensation had formed a perfect circle around her palm. "The air in there changed when Ace's shadow pulled back. It was like the anomaly was breathing out. Like it had been holding something in."

"You're saying it was scared of me," Ace said.

"I'm saying it was responding to you. And when you withdrew, it relaxed." Shammy's eyes were serious now, the laughter gone. "Whatever's happening to that coffee maker, it's not hostile. It's defensive."

"Defensive against what?"

"I don't know. But the wind pattern around the building—" Shammy stopped, head tilting. "It's circling. Like water going down a drain. There's something underneath the anomaly. Something pulling."

Mai's pen moved again. "The infrastructure. If Shammy's right, and the magic has sunk into the concrete—"

"Then the coffee maker isn't the source," Ace said. "It's a symptom."

They sat with that for a moment.

Outside the van, the purple sky had darkened further. Night was coming, not with sunset colors, because the sky didn't do those anymore, but with a deepening of the bruise, a shift toward something almost black.

"If the coffee maker is a symptom," Mai said slowly, "then treating the symptom won't solve the problem. We need to find the source."

"The source of what, though?" Shammy asked. "We don't even know what's causing the domestication effect. Magic is just here. It's not coming from anywhere. It's not being directed by anyone. It's just present."

"Is it?"

They both looked at Ace.

“Three months,” Ace said. “Nine objects. All in this district. The pattern isn't random.”

Mai's eyes sharpened. “You think someone's triggering them.”

“I think something's making them happen. And I think—” Ace stopped. Her hand had moved to her blade again, without her noticing. “I think my shadow not working is part of it.”

“Part of what?”

“A test.” Ace's voice was quiet now. “Something's testing whether we can adapt.”

Shammy laughed again. Not bright this time, but soft, almost wondering. “You know what's funny? The anomaly made you coffee. A defensive, scared, magic-infused object made you coffee. That's—” She shook her head. “That's either the most absurd thing I've ever heard or the most significant.”

“Probably both,” Mai said.

Ace said nothing. She was watching the coffee shop through the van's window, watching the green glow pulse behind the glass, watching the purple sky darken around it like a bruise spreading.

“The coffee maker isn't the source,” she repeated. “It's a symptom.”

Mai nodded slowly. “Which means there are more symptoms.”

“Somewhere in this district, something is making objects come alive.” Shammy's voice had gone distant again. “And we just walked into its territory.”

The van's engine hummed. Mai's pen scratched across the whiteboard. Ace's shadow sat at her feet, motionless, waiting for a command it might not follow.

Outside, in a city where the sky had changed color and magic had come back after millennia of sleep, a coffee maker pulsed with green light and wondered why the humans were afraid.

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