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## Chapter 3: Pattern Recognition

Mai's apartment smelled like old coffee and static electricity. Three monitors glowed in the dark, casting her face in pale blue light. The whiteboard behind her desk had grown metastatic. Diagrams spiraling outward, string connecting pushpins on a map of the city, equations in the margins that no longer applied. Empty takeout containers stacked in the corner. A half-empty water glass she kept meaning to refill.

She'd been at this for fourteen hours.

The anomaly locations weren't random. She'd known that since the third incident, but knowing something and proving it were different animals. The coffee shop. The office building. The subway station. Each one had felt like a data point waiting to become a pattern, and Mai had never met a pattern she could ignore.

Her pen moved across a fresh page of her notebook. Coordinates, times, environmental readings from the Foundation's sensors. The ink bled slightly where her hand pressed too hard. She'd gone through three pens today.

"Third one this week," she muttered. "That's not coincidence. That's structure."

The apartment building across the street hummed with something she couldn't see. Not magic exactly, more like magic's shadow. The Return had changed everything six months ago, but the changes kept changing. Magic wasn't static. It was growing. She could feel it sometimes, a pressure behind her eyes, like the world had developed a new frequency and she was still tuning in.

Her phone buzzed. Ace's name on the screen.

"Status?" Mai answered.

"Site secured. Shammy's checking perimeter." Ace's voice was flat, efficient. A car horn in the background. "What'd you find?"

Mai looked at her whiteboard. "Something. Maybe. I need to run the numbers again."

"Ace out."

The line went dead. Mai smiled, barely, just the corner of her mouth, and turned back to her screens. Ace never wasted words. It was one of the things Mai loved about her, though she'd never said that out loud. Some things didn't need analysis.

The spreadsheet mocked her.

Mai had built it three months ago, when the Foundation first realized the Return wasn't a single event but an ongoing process. Every anomaly logged, every environmental reading catalogued, every timeline cross-referenced. But the data kept doing things it shouldn't do. Variables she'd controlled for kept shifting. Patterns that should resolve kept fracturing.

The coffee shop anomaly had appeared on a Tuesday at 3:47 PM. The office building: Friday, 11:23 AM. The subway station: Sunday, 6:15 PM. No time pattern. No shared infrastructure. The locations formed a triangle on her map, but triangles were the simplest shapes. Everything could be a triangle if you tried hard enough.

She needed more data. Or she needed to look at the data differently.

Mai pulled up the geological surveys. The city had been built on sedimentary rock, mostly limestone, with fault lines running northeast to southwest. Standard stuff. The Foundation's containment teams had mapped the area before. Nothing anomalous about Seattle's geology. Just another city built on bones and water and the slow movement of tectonic plates.

But that was before the Return.

She overlaid the anomaly locations on the geological map. Nothing. She tried the power grid. Nothing. She tried the subway lines, the water mains, the cellular tower network. The city's infrastructure stared back at her, perfectly ordinary, perfectly unhelpful.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Her grandmother's voice surfaced without warning.

*The beauty is in the crack, Mai-chan. Not the bowl. The crack.*

Mai's hand stopped moving. She could see her grandmother's kitchen. Tatami mats worn smooth by decades of feet, the smell of matcha steeping, the afternoon light through paper screens. The chawan with the deliberate chip in its rim. She'd been twelve, maybe thirteen. Her grandmother had placed the bowl in front of her and said the wabi-sabi wasn't about accepting imperfection. It was about seeing where the imperfection revealed the true shape of the thing.

*The crack shows you where the bowl wants to break. The flaw is honest.*

The memory had surfaced without her asking for it. Mai blinked. She hadn't thought about that lesson in years, not since before the Return, before the Foundation, before everything became about containment and protocols and the endless categorization of things that refused to be categorized.

She looked at her whiteboard again. The pushpins. The string. The spiraling diagrams.

She'd been looking for what connected the anomalies. What if she looked for what was missing instead?

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Ace stood in the warehouse district with her hand on her blade.

She shouldn't need it. The site was secure. Shammy had cleared the perimeter, the Foundation's sensors showed no anomalous activity, and the team that had responded to the call had already left with their containment unit. The building was empty. The danger had passed.

But her hand found the hilt anyway. Muscle memory. Or something deeper.

Her shadow pooled at her feet. It did that more often now, spreading without her commanding it, responding to shifts in the air she couldn't name. The Return had changed how her pressure worked.

She was still learning the new rules, still learning when to trust her instincts and when to override them.

"Air's clean," Shammy said. She towered over Ace, nearly six and a half feet of storm-light and grace. Her hair shifted in currents Ace couldn't feel, silver-white roots catching the dying afternoon light. "Whatever was here, it's moved on."

"Moved where?"

Shammy tilted her head. Her eyes went distant, reading something in the atmosphere that Ace couldn't access. "Northeast. Something's pulling the anomalies, love. I can almost see it. Like a thread in the wind."

Ace's hand tightened on her blade. Her thumb traced the emerald glow along the edge, a habit, not a threat. "We follow?"

"We wait for Mai."

Ace didn't argue. Mai had asked them to hold position, and Mai's instincts were usually right. Usually. But something about the air felt wrong. Not Shammy's domain, but Ace's. Her threat detection hummed at a frequency she couldn't name. The warehouse behind them looked safe. The perimeter was clear. But her body didn't believe it.

The warehouse had been an anomaly site. Something had grown inside it, something the Foundation hadn't catalogued yet. The containment team had reported "spontaneous crystallization," walls that had developed geometric patterns overnight, like frost forming on glass. The building was structurally sound, supposedly, but Ace checked the doorframe anyway. Load-bearing. Good sight lines. Clear exit.

She didn't know why she checked doorframes. She'd never told anyone about the habit. It was just something her body did, the way other people checked their phones or adjusted their glasses.

Her earpiece crackled. Mai's voice: "Get me the geological survey data for the warehouse district. Specifically, anything from three months ago."

Ace pulled out her tablet. The screen glowed in the late afternoon dim. "Sending."

"Thank you." A pause. Mai's keyboard clicking in the background. "Something's not right about these locations. They're not random, but they're not following any pattern I can calculate. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless the pattern isn't about where they are. It's about where they aren't."

Ace tucked the tablet away. Her shadow spread another inch across the concrete. She watched it go.

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The negative space told her everything.

Mai stared at her screen. The geological survey from three months ago showed what she'd expected. Sedimentary rock, fault lines, standard Seattle geology. But when she overlaid it with the current survey, something had changed.

New lines.

Not fault lines. Not underground utilities. Not anything that should exist. But there they were, thin threads of something running beneath the city like veins. They appeared on the survey as faint thermal anomalies, pressure differentials, magnetic fluctuations. They hadn't been there before the Return. They'd grown.

"Ley lines," Mai breathed. "New ley lines."

Her hands shook. She grabbed the edge of her desk to steady them.

Ley lines were supposed to be ancient. Permanent. The magical infrastructure of the world, laid down before humanity learned to write. Every text said the same thing: ley lines were geological features, as fixed as mountains, as constant as gravity.

But these were new. Earth had grown them.

Mai overlaid the anomaly locations on the new ley line map. The coffee shop. The office building. The subway station. The warehouse district Ace and Shammy were standing in.

Each one sat exactly where a new ley line intersected with an old one.

"It's a grid," she whispered. "The Earth is building a grid."

Her grandmother's voice again: *The crack shows you where the bowl wants to break.*

The anomalies weren't random. They weren't attacks. They were nodes. Earth was growing a magical immune system, responding to the Return the way a body responded to infection, by building new pathways, new defenses, new structures. The thought was absurd and obvious at the same time.

But something was wrong.

The ley lines were growing too fast. The intersections were triggering too often. The anomalies were supposed to be rare, natural events, the magical equivalent of growing pains. Instead, they were spreading like a rash, each one more frequent than the last.

Mai pulled up the timeline. The first new ley line had appeared three months ago, right after the Return. Since then, the network had expanded outward from a central point, intersecting with old ley lines and triggering anomalies at each junction. The growth rate was accelerating. Exponentially.

Someone was speeding this up.

Her phone buzzed. Ace's name.

"Talk to me," Mai answered.

"Warehouse district. Something's happening." Ace's voice was tight. Controlled. "The air's changing. Shammy says—"

Shammy's voice cut through, fragmented: "The pressure's, it's building, it's like when a storm decides to, something's coming—"

Mai's screen flickered. The new ley line under the warehouse district was pulsing. Not growing. Pulsing. Like a heartbeat.

“Get out,” Mai said. “Now. I know what it is.”

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The air in the warehouse district tasted like copper and ozone.

Shammy felt it before she saw it, the pressure building in ways that didn't match weather patterns, the wind carrying something that wasn't wind. The atmosphere had teeth now, sharp edges she couldn't predict. She grabbed Ace's arm.

“Move, love. Now.”

Ace was already moving. Her shadow pooled wrong, spreading too fast, responding to something she hadn't commanded. She didn't question it. She ran.

The ground beneath them shuddered. Not an earthquake. Something else. Something that moved in pulses, like the Earth itself was breathing. Shammy felt the air resist as she ran, thick and slow, like moving through water that didn't want to let go.

Shammy spread her arms. The air answered her, lifting, clearing a path, but it was harder than it should have been. The atmosphere was wrong, charged with something that fought her control. Like trying to conduct an orchestra where half the musicians were playing a different song.

“It's not natural,” she said, gasping between words. “Someone's, there's something pushing this, it's not just—”

A crack split the pavement behind them. Light spilled out, not sunlight, not electric light. Something else. Something that hurt to look at directly. The new ley line was breaking through the surface, pushing up through concrete and rebar like a bone through skin.

Ace's hand found her blade. She shouldn't need it. She didn't know what she was fighting. But her body remembered what her mind couldn't calculate, and she drew anyway, the emerald edge humming in the copper-tasting air.

“Mai,” Ace said into her earpiece. “We need extraction.”

Mai's voice crackled back: “Four blocks north. I've got transport. Don't stop moving.”

The crack in the pavement widened. More light. The sound of breaking stone.

Ace and Shammy ran.

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They made it to the van with the smell of ozone burning their clothes.

Mai was driving before Shammy's door was fully closed. Her hands gripped the wheel too tight, knuckles white, eyes fixed on the road ahead. Ace sat in the passenger seat, shadow still pooling at her feet, watching Mai's profile in the dashboard light.

“What did you find?” Ace asked.

Mai didn't answer. Her mouth was moving, calculating out loud, processing faster than she could

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speak. The words tumbled over each other.

“The intersections form a grid pattern which means they're not random which means someone's triggering them deliberately which means there's a central point where—”

“Mai.” Ace's voice was flat. “Stop. Breathe. Tell us.”

Mai took a breath. Her hands unclenched slightly on the wheel. Another breath. The words came slower now, more controlled.

“The Earth is growing ley lines. New ones. They didn't exist three months ago. The anomalies are appearing where the new lines intersect with the old ones.”

Shammy leaned forward from the back seat. “That shouldn't be possible.”

“No. It shouldn't.” Mai's words were speeding up again. “Ley lines are supposed to be permanent, geological features, but these are growing like, they're like veins, like a circulatory system. Earth is building a magical immune system.”

Ace processed this in fragments. “Someone's triggering them.”

“Yes.” Mai's voice cracked. “The growth rate is too fast. The intersections are too frequent. Someone is accelerating the process, pushing the grid to expand faster than it should.”

Shammy's hand found the back of Mai's seat. A grounding touch. “Why?”

“That's what we need to find out.”

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The safehouse was a Foundation-owned apartment in a building that didn't officially exist. The lobby was empty. The elevator required a keycard that Mai had to dig for. The walls were painted the particular shade of beige that suggested government oversight.

Mai spread her maps across the kitchen table. The new ley lines glowed red on her tablet screen, traced over the old geological survey in blue. The intersections pulsed like tiny wounds. The table was scuffed, the chairs mismatched, and someone had left a coffee ring on the counter that no amount of scrubbing would remove.

“The first anomaly was here.” She pointed to the coffee shop location. “Three months ago. Right after the Return. Then here, here, and here.” Each point marked a new intersection. “The grid is expanding outward from a central point.”

Ace studied the map. Her shadow had settled, pooling at her feet in a dark circle. “Where's the center?”

Mai zoomed out. The ley lines spread across the city like a spider web, threads radiating from a single point. The pattern was too precise to be natural. Too deliberate.

“Downtown. Near the old Foundation headquarters.”

Shammy moved to the window. The air in the apartment was still, too still for her taste. She could feel the pressure outside, the weight of something building. The city lights flickered in patterns that

weren't quite random.

"The air's different now," she said. "Lighter. Like the storm passed through and forgot to take the tension with it."

Ace's shadow rippled. She didn't notice.

"Someone's in that central point," Ace said. "Accelerating the grid. Triggering the anomalies."

"Yes." Mai pulled up her spreadsheets again. "The timing matches. Every anomaly triggered within a twelve-hour window of ley line growth. Someone's pushing the system."

"To what end?"

Mai's hand hovered over her keyboard. The question was good. Too good. She didn't have an answer.

"I don't know yet," she admitted. "But the pattern's clear. Earth is adapting to the Return by building a magical infrastructure. And someone is hacking it."

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Ace slept fitfully that night.

The safehouse bedroom was too quiet. Her shadow pooled wrong in the darkness, spreading across the floor in patterns she didn't recognize. The Return had changed something fundamental about her pressure. It responded to instinct now, not will. She didn't know if that was good or bad, just that it was different.

She thought about the warehouse district. The crack in the pavement. The light spilling out, too bright to look at. Her hand had found her blade without thinking, the way it always did when something felt wrong.

Ace checked the doorframe before she slept. Load-bearing. Sight lines clear. Exit through the window possible if the door was blocked. The ceiling had a water stain in the corner, spreading like a map of somewhere she'd never been. She didn't know why she checked doorframes, just that her body wouldn't let her sleep until she had.

The bed was too soft. The sheets smelled like detergent, industrial, government-issue, the same scent in every Foundation safehouse she'd ever stayed in. She dreamed about her village. The last normal day. Her mother's hands shaping dough, flour dusting the counter, the smell of bread baking in the oven. The way the light had come through the window, golden and ordinary, nothing suggesting that ordinary was about to end.

The bread had tasted like ash after that. Everything had.

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Mai didn't sleep.

She sat at the kitchen table with her spreadsheets and her maps and her grandmother's voice in her head. *The crack shows you where the bowl wants to break. The flaw is honest.*

The ley line grid was beautiful in its structure. Whoever had designed the acceleration pattern

understood magical topology better than anyone at the Foundation. They weren't just triggering anomalies, they were guiding Earth's immune system, steering it toward something. The mathematics of it were elegant. Horrifying, but elegant.

Mai traced the expansion pattern with her finger. If the current rate continued, the grid would reach the city limits within two weeks. After that, it would spread to the surrounding region. And after that—

She didn't want to calculate what came after that.

The coffee she'd made at midnight had gone cold. She drank it anyway, grimacing at the bitterness. The spreadsheet on her screen kept expanding, each new data point confirming what she already suspected: this wasn't random growth. It was guided. Engineered. The mathematics were too clean, the expansion rate too consistent. Whoever was doing this knew exactly what they were building.

Someone knocked on the apartment door.

Ace's voice from the bedroom: "Mai. Door."

Mai checked the monitor. Foundation credentials. Agent Chen, the junior operative assigned to shadow them. Their face was pale, their breathing rapid. Looked like they'd run the whole way.

Mai opened the door.

"Director Velasco needs you," Chen said. "There's been another anomaly. Downtown."

Mai looked at her map. The central point. The source of the grid.

"Where exactly?"

"The old Foundation headquarters." Chen swallowed. "Whatever triggered it... it's still there."

Mai grabbed her coat. Ace appeared from the bedroom, blade at her hip, shadow pooling at her feet. Shammy emerged from the guest room, hair shifting in currents no one else could feel.

"Let's go," Mai said. "I want to see who's been breaking my city."

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The drive downtown took twenty-three minutes through empty streets.

Mai spent it on her tablet, pulling up every record the Foundation had on the old headquarters. The building had been decommissioned after the Return, too close to the first anomaly site, too much magical interference in the foundation. No one had been inside in months. The lights were supposed to be off. The power was supposed to be cut.

"Who has access?" Ace asked from the passenger seat. Her eyes tracked the streets, checking intersections without meaning to.

"Foundation personnel only. Level 4 clearance and above." Mai's fingers moved across her screen. "But the clearance logs show no entries since decommissioning. If someone's been using it, they've been doing it off the books."

Shammy leaned forward. "The air's getting heavier. We're close."

Mai felt it too, not the atmospheric pressure Shammy read, but something else. A hum in her teeth. A charge in her fingertips. The ley lines were converging here. The grid was reaching its apex.

The old headquarters loomed ahead. A thirty-story building that had once housed the Foundation's Pacific Northwest operations, now dark and silent. But the windows on the top floor glowed with something that wasn't electricity. Something that pulsed.

Mai pulled the van to a stop.

"There," she said. "Top floor. That's where the grid's centered."

Ace's hand found her blade. Her shadow spread wrong, responding to something before her mind caught up.

"Let's move," Ace said.

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The elevator didn't work. They took the stairs.

Thirty floors. Mai counted them in silence, her legs burning, her mind processing the ley line data she'd memorized. The grid spread across the city like a neural network, each intersection a synapse firing magical energy into the infrastructure. Whoever had built this knew exactly what they were doing.

Shammy's breathing changed on the twentieth floor. "The pressure's wrong," she said. "Like the air's being pulled. Toward something."

Ace didn't speak. She moved like water, each step silent, her shadow trailing behind her like something alive. By the twenty-fifth floor, her hand had found her blade again. She didn't remember reaching for it.

The thirtieth floor door was locked. Ace's blade made short work of it.

The top floor had been an executive suite once. Corner offices, glass walls, a view of the city. Now the glass was covered with diagrams, ley line maps, magical equations, something that looked like a schematic for a ritual Mai didn't recognize. The carpet was scorched in geometric patterns. The air tasted like lightning.

And in the center of the room, surrounded by candles that burned without heat, stood a woman.

She was tall. Not Shammy-tall, but tall enough. Her hair was dark, her eyes reflected the candlelight, and her smile was too wide, like she'd been waiting for them. She wore a coat that looked expensive but practical, the kind of thing someone wore when they expected to move quickly. Her posture was relaxed. Unconcerned.

"You found me faster than I expected," the woman said. "I was hoping for at least another day before the Foundation noticed."

Mai's hand went to her disruptor pistol. "Who are you?"

"Someone who understands what's happening." The woman spread her arms. The candles flickered. "Earth is waking up. The Return isn't an event, it's a process. I'm just helping it along."

Ace's shadow pooled at her feet. "You're triggering the anomalies."

"Accelerating them, yes. There's a difference." The woman's smile didn't waver. "The grid would grow eventually. I'm just making it grow faster. Building the infrastructure humanity will need to survive the next phase."

Mai's mind raced. The calculations didn't add up. The variables kept shifting. "Survive what? The Return already happened."

"The Return was the beginning." The woman stepped forward. The candles guttered. "Earth isn't just reclaiming magic. It's reclaiming itself. The ley lines are the first step. The anomalies are growing pains. And when the grid is complete..."

She didn't finish.

Mai's voice came out too fast: "When the grid is complete, what happens?"

The woman's smile widened. "The Earth finishes waking up. And everything changes again."

Ace moved. Shadow surged from her feet, spreading across the floor toward the woman.

And stopped. The shadow hit something invisible and fell back, pooling uselessly at Ace's feet. The woman's smile never flickered.

"I've been studying the Foundation's techniques for years," she said. "Your shadow-pressure is impressive, but it follows rules. And I know those rules better than you do."

Shammy's voice came from behind Mai: "The air's, there's something wrong with the air, it's not responding—"

"I know that too." The woman gestured, and the candles flared. "The atmospheric elemental. One of the most interesting mutations from the Return. But your connection to the air follows patterns, and patterns can be disrupted."

Shammy staggered. Her hands went to her throat. The air in the room had turned against her, thick and hostile.

"Stop." Mai's voice cracked. "Whatever you're doing, stop."

The woman tilted her head. "You're the analyst. The one who found my grid. I'm impressed, it took my own people two months to see the pattern."

Mai's hand tightened on her pistol. "Your people?"

"I'm not alone." The woman stepped back, toward the windows. "There are more of us. We've been waiting for the Return for a very long time. And now that it's here, we're going to make sure humanity is ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Whatever comes next."

The woman raised her hand. The candles flared again, and the windows behind her shattered outward. Wind rushed in, carrying the smell of ozone and something older, something that tasted like

the first storm after a drought.

And then she was gone. Not running. Just gone. The air folded around her and swallowed her whole. One moment she was there, and the next, there was nothing but empty space and the echo of a smile.

Ace's shadow snapped back to her feet. Shammy gasped, air returning to her lungs. Mai stood frozen, her mind trying to process what she'd just seen.

The woman had walked through magic like it was a door.

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The Foundation team arrived fourteen minutes later.

By then, Mai had documented everything. The diagrams, the candles, the pattern of the ritual that had allowed the woman to fold space. Ace stood guard at the door, her hand still on her blade. Shammy sat on the floor, breathing carefully, relearning how to feel the air.

Director Velasco arrived in person. A slight woman with perpetually tired eyes and a perfectly pressed suit, she surveyed the scene with the expression of someone who had seen too much and expected to see more.

"Report," she said.

Mai opened her mouth. The words came out too fast, tumbling over each other: "The woman we encountered is part of an organized group accelerating the ley line growth. They've been operating from this location for at least three months, triggering anomalies to expand the magical grid. Their stated goal is to prepare humanity for 'whatever comes next,' though their actual objective remains unclear. They have knowledge of Foundation techniques and magical topology that suggests inside information or deep research into pre-Return anomalous practices—"

"Mai." Ace's voice cut through. "Breathe."

Mai stopped. Her hands were shaking. She hadn't noticed.

Velasco's eyes narrowed. "Organized group?"

"Yes. She said there were more of them. They've been waiting for the Return." Mai forced her voice to slow. "This wasn't random acceleration. It was coordinated. Strategic. They know things they shouldn't know."

"And the woman?"

"Gone. She used a ritual I've never seen before. Folded space." Mai's voice steadied. "I need to analyze the remnants. If I can understand how she did it, we might be able to track her. Predict her."

Velasco nodded. "Get me everything you have. I want this group found."

She turned and left, her phone already at her ear. Mai watched her go, then turned back to her team.

Ace stood in the doorway, shadow pooled at her feet. Shammy rose from the floor, hair still shifting in invisible currents.

"So," Shammy said. "Earth's growing a magical immune system. Someone's hacking it. And there's a group of people who've been waiting for magic to come back." She let out a breath. "That's a lot."

Mai looked at the diagrams on the glass walls. The ley line grid. The expansion pattern. The schematic that made no sense yet.

"The grid's still growing," she said. "Whatever she was doing, she's not done. She just moved."

Ace's hand finally left her blade. "Then we find her."

"Yes." Mai pulled out her tablet. Already, her mind was racing, the pattern, the woman's technique, the implications of a coordinated group accelerating the Return. "Yes, we do."

Her grandmother's voice surfaced again: *The beauty is in the crack, Mai-chan. Not the bowl.*

The crack. Where the bowl wanted to break.

Mai looked at the ley line map. The grid spreading across the city like veins. The intersections pulsing with new magic. The pattern was clear now. The question was what to do about it.

Whatever was coming next, Earth was already preparing for it. And now, so were they.

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Outside the windows, the city lights flickered. The grid pulsed beneath the streets, invisible to everyone who wasn't looking for it. Mai thought about her grandmother again, the deliberate chip in the chawan, the lesson about cracks and flaws and the shapes they revealed.

Maybe that was what the Return was, in the end. Not a catastrophe, but a crack. The Earth showing where it wanted to break. And maybe that was what the woman and her people were trying to do, not fix it, but guide it. Shape what emerged from the fracture.

But guided by whom? Toward what? And why accelerate the process when the natural growth was already happening?

Mai closed her tablet. Her eyes burned. Fourteen hours and counting, and she was no closer to understanding the woman's actual goal. The grid explained the anomalies. The acceleration explained the frequency. But neither explained why. What was the purpose of making the Earth's immune system develop faster? What came next?

She looked at Ace and Shammy, her team, her family, the two people she trusted with everything. Ace stood by the door, still and watchful, her shadow settled now into a dark pool at her feet. Shammy had moved to the window, her hair shifting in currents that existed only for her, her tall frame silhouetted against the city lights.

"We should eat something," Shammy said, her voice softer than usual. "And sleep. This'll still be here in the morning."

Ace nodded once. A short, sharp motion. Her eyes were still scanning the room, still checking corners and exits, but her hand had finally left her blade.

Mai wanted to argue, to keep working, to solve this now. But her hands were still shaking, and her eyes were still burning, and Shammy was right. The mystery would still be here tomorrow. The

woman would still be out there, building her grid, accelerating the Return toward something none of them understood.

Tomorrow, they'd find her. Tomorrow, they'd understand what she was building.

But tonight, they'd rest. Together. The way they always did.

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*End of Chapter 3*

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