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## Chapter Three: The Reservation Problem

The restaurant's booking system had been designed by someone who never tried to reserve a table for three people working anomalous hours.

Mai stared at the terminal. Availability grid: time slots grayed out, or slashed with the kind of aggressive red that suggested this place took its exclusivity personally. She refreshed. Nothing changed.

"Still nothing?" Shammy's voice carried from the kitchen, half-drowned by the hiss of air pressure adjusting around the stovetop.

"Saturday. Saturday's the problem." Mai's fingers swept her tablet, pulling up permutations. "Mission pushed our window past their standard seating. I've run fourteen scheduling variations. None of them account for Foundation callback windows."

Ace appeared at Mai's shoulder. No sound. A pressure displacement, more than footfall. She tracked the calendar on-screen, then her gaze dropped to the phone beside Mai's terminal. The life phone. The one that was supposed to stay quiet.

"We reschedule." Not a question.

"I've been trying." Three attempts in her message history: polite, then direct, then technically precise in a way that probably read as a threat. "Forty-eight-hour cancellation policy. We missed it. By about eleven hours and—"

"Call them."

"I called. They explained that their policy exists for a reason. I explained that our scheduling constraints exist for reasons they don't want details about." She tapped the terminal once, hard. "They suggested we try somewhere less demanding."

Shammy ducked through the kitchen doorway, storm-gradient hair catching the late light through the high windows. She moved into the living space the way weather fills a valley. Not arriving so much as expanding into it. Her head cleared the ceiling fixture by habit, that slight unconscious angle she'd developed over years of architecture built for shorter frames.

"Let me try." She didn't reach for the phone. Settled onto the couch beside Mai instead, her presence creating a pocket of different air. "What's the place called?"

"Verdant. Small plates, seasonal, menu changes weekly. You need to know someone."

"Or be someone." Shammy smiled. "I'll make a call."

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The apartment caught late afternoon differently than morning. Kitchen light slanting after 4 PM. There

was a corner near the bookshelf where pressure always built during disagreements. The plaster there had a hairline crack that none of them had fixed, maybe because acknowledging it would mean acknowledging why. The spot by the eastern window belonged to Ace. Specifically to 3 AM Ace, the one who couldn't sleep, who stood there watching the city like it might need containing.

Three people living together made patterns you couldn't design. Only discover.

Shammy's call lasted four minutes. When she set the phone down, the reservation confirmation lit up Mai's terminal.

"How?" Actual curiosity. The kind that surfaced when Mai's calculations failed to predict something.

"I asked." Shammy stretched, unbothered. "Mentioned we'd had an unexpected work situation. Didn't say what kind. The hostess has a cousin in emergency services. She understood 'unpredictable schedule' better than 'anomaly containment.'"

"You didn't mention the Foundation."

"Didn't need to. People understand exhaustion better than classified briefings." Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. Brief contact, grounding, not lingering. "Sometimes the analytical approach isn't the right one."

"Sometimes." Mai looked at the confirmation. Saturday, 8 PM, table for three. "This is optimal. I had calculated a sixty-three percent probability of total scheduling failure."

"Your percentages are always so cheerful." Shammy stood, and something in the room's atmosphere shifted with her, not dramatic, just the way a room feels different when someone large and warm stops sitting in it. "I'm going to finish dinner. Unless Ace wants to help?"

Ace had moved to the window. Compact and still. The fading light caught her differently than it caught Shammy. It settled on her like it didn't know what to do with someone that small and that dense with held force.

"No." A pause. "Fire risk."

"Right." Shammy's laugh was soft. Not mocking. "Forgot. Again."

Ace didn't respond. She watched the window, the city, the movements of a world that had no idea what she contained.

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The life phone sat on the counter like a promise that might not be kept.

Separate from their Foundation-issued devices. A concession to normalcy they'd negotiated years ago, a number for family (such as it was), friends (few, specific), the occasional attempt at a life outside containment protocols. The phone itself was ordinary. No encrypted channels, no anomaly signatures. Just a standard device that rang for reasons having nothing to do with cosmic horrors.

Or it was supposed to.

"Are we going to discuss the call pattern?" Mai's voice came from the kitchen, where she was

reviewing grocery delivery options with the same focus she applied to tactical assessments.

Shammy looked up from the stovetop. "What call pattern?"

"Incoming. Since we got back." Mai's terminal displayed a log, timestamps, durations, hang-ups. "Five calls in six hours. Unknown numbers. No voicemails."

Ace shifted from the window. Movement toward the counter. Toward the phone. Toward potential action.

"Could be nothing." Shammy's tone was measured. Not dismissive. Careful.

"Could be something." Mai's counter came fast. "Pattern suggests intent. No voicemails means either a wrong number with unusual persistence, or someone avoiding a record."

Ace's hand rested near the phone. Not on it. Near.

"Answer."

Mai looked at the device. At Ace. At Shammy. "Together?"

"Together." Shammy moved to stand with them. The triad's positioning shifted, no longer scattered across the apartment's geography, but clustered near the counter.

Mai lifted the device. Answered.

Silence. Then breathing. Then a voice none of them recognized.

"Is this." Papers shuffling. "Is this the number for... I'm trying to reach someone about." Another pause. "Look, I was given this number for information about a property, and I've been trying to—"

Mai ended the call. Set the phone down. Exhaled through her nose.

"Telemarketer. Rotating number generator. Probability of anomaly: negligible. Probability of nuisance: high."

Ace's hand moved away from the counter. The tension in her frame released, not much, but enough that someone who'd learned to read her could see it.

"The number's been registered for six months." Mai pulled up the registration data. "We used it for..."

She stopped.

The silence held. Shammy finished the thought.

"Date nights. Restaurant reservations. Grocery deliveries." She moved to stand between Ace and Mai, not separating, connecting. "The number isn't compromised. It's just connected to the life part of our lives. Which means it's traceable. Which means it's not really separate from the work."

"We knew that." Mai's voice was controlled. Too controlled. "Statistical certainty of eventual contact was seventy-eight percent. We accepted that risk when we created the line."

"Accepting risk isn't the same as having it call you five times in six hours." Ace's voice was flat. Something underneath it shifted. Not vulnerability. Acknowledgment of something she'd rather not

acknowledge.

Shammy felt the room. The way tension sat in it, the way it would stay until someone moved it. She didn't try to move it. Just held the space.

"Dinner." She said it like a rope thrown. "Let's finish dinner. Reservation's confirmed. We have three days. And right now I'm keeping the risotto from drying out, so if anyone wants to help by not helping, that would be useful."

Ace moved away from the counter. Toward the window again. The same spot.

Mai returned to her terminal. Calculations resumed. But her eyes flicked once to the life phone. The ordinary device that kept trying to be ordinary and kept running into the reality of who they were.

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The risotto was not drying out.

Shammy had that effect on food. On environments, on moods, on the subtle atmospheric pressures that made a kitchen feel like a home instead of a waypoint between missions. She didn't cook the way Mai did (precision, measurement, tactical heat application) or the way Ace didn't (couldn't, shouldn't, fire hazard). She cooked like weather, intuitive, responsive, adjusting conditions rather than controlling them.

"Rice needs two more minutes." Her hand hovered over the pot. The air around her fingers shimmered, faint. "Mushrooms are done. If I take them out now they'll hold. If I leave them—"

"Take them out." Mai didn't look up from her terminal. "You'll compensate for the rice. You always do."

Shammy smiled. The mushrooms moved to a separate plate, lifted by a combination of her hands and the subtle pressure shift she created around them. Small changes. The kind that made living with Shammy feel like living in a space that was always paying attention.

Ace watched from the window. Not the cooking. The perimeter. Old habit. Deep training. The world outside the glass, the movements below, the patterns that might mean nothing or might mean threat.

"Anything?" Mai's voice came from the counter. Softer than her usual.

"No." Ace's response was immediate. "Nothing. That's the problem."

Mai understood. Not because Ace explained, she wouldn't, but because Mai had learned to read the difference between Ace's active vigilance and her stillness. Active vigilance meant something to track. This stillness meant the absence of threat, which, for someone shaped by threat, was its own kind of wrong.

"Come sit." Shammy's voice was gentle. "Risotto's almost done. I need someone to taste-test the mushrooms."

Ace didn't move. Then, increment by increment, she did. She crossed to the kitchen table, compact, pressure-light, and sat. Not relaxed. Ready.

But that was Ace. Ready was as close to relaxed as she got.

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Three plates. Three people. A table that had seen them through good days and bad, through pre-mission tension and post-mission decompression, through the kind of silences that three people who knew each other well could hold without effort.

Mai set the plates with the same precision she brought to everything. Placement mattered. Proximity mattered. The table was small enough that distance wasn't really an option, but the geometry of how they faced each other, how they shared space, had evolved over years into something choreographed without being discussed.

"Tell me about the restaurant." Ace's voice cut through the quiet. Not demanding. Directing.

"Verdant." Mai pulled up information on her terminal, then minimized it. "Small plates. Emphasis on seasonal. The chef has a reputation for..." She paused. "For paying attention."

"To what?"

"The food. The ingredients. The way flavors combine." Mai's voice shifted, less analytical, more considering. "It's the kind of place where the experience is designed to be uninterrupted. Good acoustics. Tables spaced for privacy. The kind of environment where..."

She stopped. The implication sat there.

"Where we might actually have a dinner." Shammy finished. "Without someone calling about a containment breach."

"Statistically improbable. Foundation recall rate for field teams is fourteen percent during off-hours. Probability of uninterrupted—"

"Ace didn't ask about probability." Shammy's interruption was gentle but firm. "She asked about the restaurant. She wants to know what we're protecting."

Ace's eyes lifted from her plate. She didn't speak. The question was there in her stillness.

Mai looked at Ace. At Shammy. At the table, the simple setting, the plates, the food they'd made together. The ordinary they kept trying to carve out of the extraordinary.

"It's supposed to be a place where we're just three people." Mai's voice lost some of its precision. "No protocols. No classifications. No briefings. Just dinner. Together. Like people who don't fight cosmic threats for a living."

The weight of that sat in the room. No one rushed to lift it.

"Three days." Ace spoke. "Three days until Saturday."

"Three days." Shammy confirmed. "And seventy-two hours until we find out if the Foundation's scheduling algorithms respect personal time more than they did last month."

"They won't." Mai's voice was certain. "But we'll manage. We always manage."

"That's not the same as succeeding." Ace's words were quiet. Not defeatist. Honest. "Managing isn't

the same as having.”

Shammy felt the shift. The way Ace's words landed, not as accusation, but as something they all carried and rarely spoke.

The triad sat with that. Not resolving it. Not trying to. Just sitting with it.

“Show me how you found each other.”

The question came from nowhere. Or it felt like it, Shammy's voice breaking the silence with an openness that invited rather than demanded.

Ace's stillness shifted. Mai's hand stopped mid-scroll.

“What?” Mai's voice carried the edge of someone whose past was not a subject she volunteered.

“The restaurant. The apartment. The life we keep trying to protect.” Shammy's eyes moved between them. “We don't talk about how it started. We just are. And that works. It does. But sometimes—”

“Sometimes we need to remember.” Ace finished the thought. Not resistant. Processing.

“Yes.” Shammy's hand found Mai's on the table. Her eyes found Ace's across the distance. “Sometimes we need to remember what we're protecting.”

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The memory came in fragments.

Not from any one of them. From all of them, layered, a story told in pieces.

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### **Mai's fragment:**

Tokyo. A containment breach that wasn't supposed to happen. She'd been a tech-lore engineer then, not field, assigned to analyze the breach's origin rather than contain its spread.

The anomaly was fragment-class. Slipped through a crack in the protocol nobody had thought to check. Mai found it the way she found everything: as a system, a structure, a set of variables waiting to be understood.

What she hadn't expected was the shadow moving through the chaos.

Compact. Pressure-light. Moving like something trained to move through worse. Mai watched from her terminal, watched the shadow approach the fragment, watched the fragment react, watched something happen her analysis hadn't predicted.

The fragment stabilized. Not contained. Stabilized. As if the shadow had done something to its resonance that made it manageable.

Mai tracked her afterwards. Found her in the debrief, this small, violet-eyed figure with blades she hadn't drawn and a stillness that felt more like a held breath than a natural state.

"You're not standard MTF." Direct. Analytical. "Your approach to the fragment was non-standard. Efficient, but non-standard."

The shadow looked at her. Assessing. Not speaking.

"I'm not criticizing. I'm cataloguing." Mai adjusted. "You changed the fragment's resonance. Stabilization requires specific equipment. You did it with—"

"Pressure." The shadow's first word. "Shadow-pressure."

"Shadow-pressure isn't in the catalog."

"No." The shadow's second word. "It isn't."

Mai stared at her terminal later, running calculations. Probability of what she'd witnessed. Probability of who. The numbers kept coming back incomplete.

That was the beginning. Not a bond. An observation. The bond came later, through containment after containment, through the slow recognition that Mai's analytical anchor and Ace's pressure-vector approach created a stability neither achieved alone.

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### **Ace's fragment:**

Pressure.

Always pressure. The fragment inside her, Violet, she'd learned to call it, was a resonance that moved like weather. Sometimes calm. Sometimes storm. Always there, beneath the surface, waiting for moments when control slipped.

She'd learned to manage it. Alone. In the field. In the spaces between operations where silence was the only thing that didn't ask her to explain.

Then Mai.

Mai, who didn't ask her to explain. Mai, who analyzed instead of questioned, who treated Ace's pressure-resonance as a variable instead of a problem. Mai, whose eyes held calculation instead of fear.

Ace had never had that before. Someone who saw what she was and chose to stand next to it.

"Your stabilization technique." Mai's voice, early days. "Not Foundation-standard. Not anything-standard. It's..."

"Effective." The only word that mattered.

"Effective." Mai agreed. "But inefficient. You're burning through reserves you don't need to burn. The pressure-release is too fast. If you modulated—"

"Don't need modulation. Need containment."

"Containment isn't enough for what you're carrying." Mai's voice shifted. Not softer. More precise. "You need equilibrium. I can calculate equilibrium. If you let me."

Ace had looked at Mai then, really looked, past the analysis, past the tactical assessment. What she saw was someone who didn't flinch. Someone who held stillness as well as Ace did, but differently. Mai's stillness came from calculation, from the peace of knowing where all the variables were.

Ace's came from holding something back.

"Equilibrium." A question.

"Equilibrium." An answer.

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### **Shammy's fragment:**

She hadn't planned to join them.

The triad, that was what people called them, even then, before it was official, before it was anything. The shadow-vector and the analyst-anchor. Two vectors, holding each other in place.

Shammy had been something else. Something between. An atmospheric fragment that had chosen form over dispersion. She came to the Foundation's attention during the Detroit Blacklist incident, a containment that required her particular ability to read environmental flows, to modulate rather than destroy.

She met them during debrief. Ace, compact and silent, watching the room from the corner. Mai, silver-eyed and precise, cataloguing the atmospheric residue Shammy left in her wake.

"You're reading the room differently than we do." Mai's observation. "You're reading the air."

"The air has information." Shammy's response. "Pressure systems. Flow patterns. The space between people has texture."

"We read space for tactical advantage." Mai pulled up her analysis. "You read it for something else."

"I read it for balance." Shammy settled into the chair, the debrief room's atmosphere shifting around her. "The space tells me what it needs. I try to provide it."

"Provide what?"

"Whatever's missing. Too much tension, I can ease it. Not enough focus, I can sharpen it. I don't create. I modulate. It's what I am."

Ace looked at her then. Violet meeting storm-blue. Something passed between them, not communication, recognition. The same recognition Shammy had felt when she'd first seen them together.

"You're incomplete." Ace's voice. Not accusation. Observation.

"Yes." Shammy agreed. "I'm between things. I'm the vertical axis with nowhere to rise."

"You need ground." Ace's assessment.

"I need..." Shammy paused, feeling the room, feeling the two of them. "I need vectors. A depth to rise

from. A horizontal to anchor me.”

“You need us.” Mai's voice. Not arrogant. Running probabilities.

“I think I do.” Shammy's admission. “Or you need me. Or.” She smiled, the first warm expression she'd allowed herself in that sterile room. “Or we need each other. The triad isn't complete without a vertical axis.”

Ace looked at Mai. Mai looked at Ace. The calculation was instant, wordless, the product of years of learning to read each other's stillness.

“Equilibrium.” Ace's voice.

“For all three of us.” Shammy's confirmation.

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Back in the apartment, the present settled around them.

“You remember.” Mai's voice was quiet. Not a question.

“I remember.” Shammy's hand was still on Mai's. “I remember why I chose this. Why I chose you. Why we chose each other.”

Ace's stillness had changed. Not softer, Ace's stillness never softened. But something underneath now, something that looked almost like peace.

“Three vectors. Depth. Horizontal. Vertical. Incomplete alone.”

“Complete together.” Mai's voice. “The probabilities supported it. The data—”

“Not data.” Ace's interruption. Not harsh. Honest. “Not probabilities. Choice.”

The word sat in the room. Heavy. Lived-in.

“We chose each other.” Shammy's voice was the warmest thing in the room. “That's what we're protecting. Not dinner. Not a reservation. Each other. The choice we made. The choice we keep making.”

The life phone sat on the counter. Silent. No incoming calls. No interruptions. Just a device connected to the part of their lives that had nothing to do with cosmic threats and everything to do with the people they were trying to be.

“Three days.” Mai's analytical edge had softened. “Three days until the reservation. Then however many hours we get before the Foundation calls us back.”

“Then we make them count.” Ace's voice carried the weight of someone who had learned to value stolen moments. “We make them count. We don't apologize for the time we need.”

“The Foundation doesn't care about our time.”

“No.” Ace agreed. “But we do. That's the point. That's always been the point.”

Shammy felt the room settle. The pressure of their conversation releasing into something warmer.

"Verdant." Shammy said the name like a promise. "Saturday. 8 PM. Three people who don't fight cosmic threats for three hours."

"And if the Foundation calls?" Practical. Not pessimistic.

"We answer." Ace's voice was firm. "We always answer. But after, we come back. We come back to this. To each other. That's the promise."

The triad sat in the warm light Shammy had created. The risotto was cooling. The mushrooms were waiting. The phone was silent. And for a moment, just a moment, three people who spent their lives containing the uncontainable simply existed.

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The moment lasted twelve minutes.

Then the life phone rang.

Mai reached for it first, reflex, training, the automatic response of someone who'd spent too long expecting the worst. Her eyes scanned the number. Unknown. Not rotating this time. Specific.

She answered. The room's atmosphere shifted. Shammy felt it before Mai spoke, the way the air tightened, the way Ace's stillness crystallized into readiness.

"This is Mai." Precise, controlled, the voice she used for briefings, debriefs, the kind of calls that ended with deployment orders.

The voice on the other end wasn't Foundation-issued. It was tired, bureaucratic, and deeply annoyed.

"Foundation Internal Affairs. Automated notification for Agent Mai, callsign Anchor." Tinny. Recorded. "You have been flagged for mandatory psychological evaluation. Report date: Monday, 09:00 hours. Location: Site-15, Evaluation Wing. Failure to report will result in operational suspension pending review. This message will not repeat."

The line went dead.

Mai lowered the phone. Looked at Ace. At Shammy.

"Psych evaluation." Her voice carried the particular tone of someone running calculations on an unexpected variable. "Not containment. Not deployment. Evaluation."

"They've been trying to schedule these." Ace's voice was flat. "Since the incident. They want to know if we're functional."

"We're functional." Automatic. "Our metrics are within acceptable parameters. Our performance ratings—"

"They don't want metrics." Shammy's voice was gentle. "They want to understand us. And they don't."

"The Foundation doesn't 'understand' us. We're a statistical anomaly." Mai's tone sharpened. "Three operatives with interlocking capability profiles and emotional bonds that enhance performance rather

than compromise it. Their models don't account for—”

“They don't account for us.” Ace's interruption was direct. “They want to put us in a system that doesn't fit.”

“Monday.” Shammy's voice carried the weight of the timeline. “Monday. Two days after our reservation. They're not even trying to space these out anymore.”

“They don't need to.” Mai's analytical edge had returned. “We're valuable enough to keep, unusual enough to monitor, inconvenient enough to assess. The scheduling is deliberate. The message is clear.”

“What message?” Ace's eyes tracked Mai's face.

“That our time isn't ours.” Mai's voice lost some of its precision. “That even when we try to build something separate, something that matters, they'll remind us that we belong to them first.”

Saturday. Verdant. Three hours of pretending to be people who didn't fight cosmic threats.

Monday. Evaluation. Three hours of proving they were still the people the Foundation needed them to be.

“Will it interfere with the reservation?” Ace's voice was practical. Not fearful. Ready.

“No.” Mai's answer was immediate. “Evaluation is Monday. Reservation is Saturday. Statistically, we have—”

“Probability doesn't matter.” Shammy's hand found Mai's again. “What matters is they scheduled this two days after we finally got a reservation. What matters is they timed it to remind us that our life isn't our own.”

“Our life is our own.” Ace's voice carried the weight of absolute certainty. “The Foundation has our hours. They don't have our choice.”

“Then we choose.” Shammy's voice was warm, firm, a stormfront that held steady instead of breaking. “We go to dinner on Saturday. We go to evaluation on Monday. And in between, in the spaces they don't control, we're us.”

Mai looked at the phone. The silent, ordinary device that kept connecting them to a world that wanted to pull them apart.

“Three days.” Her voice was quiet. “Three days until we try again.”

“Three days.” Ace confirmed.

The risotto had cooled. The mushrooms had waited. And somewhere in the city, a restaurant called Verdant held a reservation for three people who had no idea how hard it would be to actually show up.

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