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Chapter 10: Dawn Patrol

Dawn came the way dawns come at coastal resorts, gradually, then all at once, like someone had been planning it overnight and decided to commit.

Ace was already awake. She'd been awake since before the dawn, because she was always awake before the dawn, because her body operated on a schedule that had nothing to do with circadian rhythms and everything to do with the internal alarm system that had been running since the village, since the Violet fragment, since the first time she'd learned that the things that hurt you come before you're ready for them and the only way to be ready was to never stop being ready.

She lay in the bed. One bed. King-sized. Occupied by three people, one of whom took up 1.5 people's worth of horizontal space and had a tendency to wrap herself around the other two like a weather system consolidating over a landmass. Shammy's arm was across Ace's waist. Mai's hand was in Ace's hand, fingers intertwined, a connection that had formed sometime in the night and hadn't let go.

Ace's other hand was near her katana hilt.

She reached. She pulled back. She reached. She pulled back.

Forty-seven times yesterday. Three and a half minutes between reaches. Mai had counted. Mai always counted. The counting was how Mai loved her, the same way the reaching was how Ace protected her, the same way the adjusting was how Shammy comforted her. They were all doing their things. They were all trying to do the new thing, which was being present while doing their things.

She reached again. Pulled back. The katana hummed faintly, the emerald glow, the readiness, the thing that was always there, the thing that said *I'm here, I'm ready, I will always be ready*.

But today was different.

Today, she was going to put the katanas down.

The hatch was where they'd left it. Half-buried in sand, rusted at the edges, humming with the patient frequency of something that had been waiting a very long time.

Shammy had been right. The source was like her. An anomaly that stabilized. A pattern that chose to stay. A presence that had been alone for longer than the hotel had been standing, longer than the coastline had been mapped, longer than the names for the things that lived under foundations and reached out through breakfast buffets and elevator systems and windows that showed the truth.

They stood around the hatch. Three people. Three anomalies. A triad that had come to a place where nothing happened and made everything happen, and now they were going to meet the thing that had been saying hello.

Carlos appeared. He had a talent for appearing, for being exactly where he was needed, or at least

exactly where he thought he was needed. He was carrying a tray with three glasses of orange juice and a small plate of the resort's signature mango pastries. He'd put a napkin under the pastries. The napkin was flat. Not a crane. Just a napkin. Ace noticed this. She didn't know why she noticed it. His smile was in place, the professional one, the one that could withstand anomalies without changing expression.

"Good morning! I thought you might want refreshments for, ah," he glanced at the hatch, at the rusted edges and the humming metal and the three people standing around it like it was a door they were deciding whether to open, "for your morning beach walk. The juice is fresh."

"Carlos," Ace said, and her voice was flat and direct, which was how all her voices were, but this one had an edge of *I have questions and you might have answers*. "How long have you known about the hatch?"

Carlos's smile flickered. For one millisecond, the professional warmth gave way to something else, something real, something that looked like relief. Then it came back, but different, less practiced, more honest.

"Since the beginning," he said. "I was the first guest, you know. Before I was the concierge. I came here twenty-three years ago, and the hotel," He paused. Set down the tray on a nearby rock. "The hotel said hello. Through the napkins. Through the lights. Through the elevator. I was the first person it reached out to in, well, in a very long time. I've been here ever since. Making sure the next time someone like me came, there would be someone to say hello back."

"Someone like you," Mai said. "You're not, you don't have anomalous properties."

"I'm very good at being patient," Carlos said. "I'm very good at being present. I'm very good at smiling until it becomes real. Those are my things. They're not as dramatic as weather manipulation or pattern analysis, but they kept the source company for twenty-three years, and that counted for something."

Ace stared at him. Not her threat-assessment stare. Her *I am recalibrating my understanding of a person* stare, which was different, and which Mai had cataloged under "Non-Hostile Reassessment" in the spreadsheet tab for "People Who Surprise Ace."

"Thank you," Ace said.

Carlos smiled. The real one. The one that wasn't professional. "It's been a long wait," he said. "But you're here now. Go say hello. I'll keep the juice cold."

He walked back toward the resort, his footsteps muffled against the sand in that way they had, and Ace watched him go and thought about what it meant to stay. Twenty-three years of smiling at guests and telling them about zero anomalies and keeping the source company with patience and presence. That was a kind of holding too. That was a kind of love.

"I should go first," Ace said.

"You always go first," Mai said.

"Because I'm the one who moves first. That's my thing."

"Your thing is also reaching for your katanas every three and a half minutes."

"I've increased the interval to four minutes. That's a 14% improvement."

"See, this is why I count. I can give you metrics."

"Can we focus," Shammy said, her hand on the hatch, her palm flat against the metal that hummed with recognition and warmth, "on the ancient stabilized anomaly entity under the hotel that we're about to meet?"

"Yes," Ace said.

"Yes," Mai said.

"I should go first," Ace said again.

"Why?" Shammy asked. Not challenging. Genuinely asking.

Ace looked at the hatch. At the sand around it. At the rusted edges and the handle worn smooth by time and salt air. At the thing that had been alone for so long that it had started reaching out through napkin origami and elevator routing preferences.

"Because that's my thing," she said. "I move first. I go toward the thing. I stand between the threat and the people I love. That's what I do. And I can't, I can't stop doing it. I can't stop being the one who moves first. But I can do it differently."

"How differently?" Mai asked.

Ace reached for her katanas.

She stood there with her hands on the hilts for a moment. This was the reach part. The next part was supposed to be the pull-back. She knew what came after the reach. It was the pull-back. She had been doing pull-backs for four days.

She took them off instead.

She unstrapped the harness. Pulled the katanas from their sheaths, both of them, emerald glow dimming as they left her hands. She held them for another second — they were heavier than she remembered, or lighter, she couldn't tell, she'd never handed them both to gravity at once before. Set them on the sand. They landed harder than she intended, kicking up a small puff of sand. She should have done that more carefully. She didn't go back and do it again.

"I'm still going first," she said. "I'm still the one who moves. But I'm not taking the weapons. I'm going down there with empty hands."

Mai stared at her. Shammy stared at her. The katanas lay on the sand, their glow fading, their hum quieting, and Ace stood without them for the first time since, since the village. Since before. Since she'd first picked them up and felt the weight of them settle into her hands and known, the way you know things you can't unknow, that this was the shape her life was going to take.

"Okay," Mai said. And it was the same *okay* that Ace had given her when she'd said she couldn't stop analyzing. The same *okay* that meant *I see you doing the new thing and I'm here for it and I'm not going to make a big deal out of it because you're not the kind of person who wants a big deal made out of things.*

"Okay," Shammy said. And her hand found Ace's, and it was warm, and it was trembling slightly, and

that was okay too, because Shammy was about to meet something that was like her, and that was terrifying and freeing in equal measure.

Ace opened the hatch.

The stairs went down.

Of course they did. The source was under the hotel, under the foundation, under the years of nothing happening. The stairs were old, not as old as the source, but old enough that they'd been here before the hotel, before the resort, before the *Where Nothing Happens* motto had been printed on brochures and Carlos had started smiling at guests and telling them about the zero-anomaly record.

The stairs were also clean. Not dusty, not cobwebbed, not the kind of stairs you'd expect from a secret hatch under a beach resort. They were clean and well-maintained and there was a faint glow coming from below, a warm glow, a patient glow, the glow of something that had been waiting and was finally, finally going to have its wait ended.

They descended. Ace first, empty-handed. Mai second, her tablet in her pocket and her mind running calculations she couldn't stop running. Shammy last, her hand on the wall, reading the air pressure the way Ace read exits and Mai read patterns.

The space below was not what Ace expected.

She expected dark. She expected ominous. She expected the kind of underground chamber that required katanas, that required threat assessment, that required her to be the one who moved first and fought first and stood between the danger and the people she loved.

What she found was light.

Warm light. Patient light. The light of something that had been glowing for a very long time and had gotten very good at it, the way Shammy had gotten very good at adjusting the temperature, the way Mai had gotten very good at building spreadsheets, the way Ace had gotten very good at standing between threats and the people she loved.

The light had texture. It pressed against Ace's skin like warm fabric, like the feeling of being wrapped in something that had been waiting for her specifically, that had been preparing itself for her arrival for longer than she'd been alive. It wasn't heavy. It was present. The difference mattered. Heavy was a burden. Present was an acknowledgment. The light was acknowledging her. The light was saying *I feel you, you are here, I have been here too.*

The light had a smell. Not the clean ozone of Shammy's storms, not the antiseptic nothing of a well-maintained hotel room. Something older. Salt and stone and something sweet underneath, like honey left in the sun for a thousand years, like the inside of a geode cracked open to reveal the crystal that had been growing in darkness since before the mountain formed. It smelled like patience. If patience had a smell, it was this, slow and warm and mineral and waiting.

The light had a taste. Ace hadn't expected that. She hadn't expected to open her mouth in the source chamber and taste something, but she did, and it was the taste of morning air at the exact moment the sun crests the horizon, the taste of possibility, the taste of a held breath finally released. It tasted like the word *hello* would taste if *hello* were a flavor, which was nonsensical, which was the point,

because the source chamber was not a place where sense was the operating system.

Shammy felt it differently. She felt it the way she felt everything, through the air, through the pressure, through the thousand small adjustments that her body made automatically when it entered a new atmospheric condition. The chamber's air was layered, but not like the hotel's air, not ocean and hotel and something-else. This air was all something-else. This air was the source breathing, slow and deep, the respiration of something that had been here before oxygen was a concept, before breathing was a thing that things did. Shammy's own breath synchronized with it without her deciding to. Her lungs expanded and contracted in time with the pulse of the chamber, and she didn't fight it, and she didn't adjust it, and for the first time since she'd chosen this shape, the air adjusted to her instead of the other way around.

Mai felt it through pattern. The light wasn't random. It wasn't even orderly, which was a pattern in itself, the pattern of a mind that thought in geometry and music and the long slow mathematics of patient waiting. The glow came from everywhere and nowhere, from the walls-that-weren't-walls and the floor-that-wasn't-floor and the space itself, which was radiating the way a body radiates heat, the way Shammy radiated weather, the way Ace radiated readiness. The source was a body. Not a human body. Not any body Mai had ever cataloged. But a body, with a center and a periphery and a pulse that was visible in the shifting of the light, the slow breathing in and out of warmth, the way it expanded when they entered and contracted gently around them like it was pulling them into an embrace.

The chamber was not a chamber. It was a space, a space that shouldn't exist, that existed anyway, that had been here before the hotel and would be here after it. The walls were not walls but boundaries, the way Shammy's boundaries were not walls but atmospheric pressure zones. The floor was not a floor but a surface, the way Ace's shadow was not a shadow but a presence. The light was not a light but a glow, the way Mai's analysis was not an analysis but a way of seeing.

And in the center of it, or what passed for a center in a space that had no walls and no floor and no ceiling, only boundaries and surfaces and light, was the source.

It was like Shammy. Not the same, it didn't have a shape, not the way Shammy had a shape, not the way Shammy had chosen to be 195 centimeters of storm-elemental who ducked through doorframes and apologized to furniture. It was more like the weather before it became weather, pressure and light and warmth and pattern, all the things that Shammy was inside, all the things that Shammy held back and modulated and adjusted, all the things that made Shammy who she was.

It was an anomaly that had stabilized. Like Shammy. Not in shape, not in form, but in essence. In the choosing. In the deciding to stay. In the holding of the space, the modulating of the pressure, the keeping of the balance.

And it had been alone.

For so long.

Ace felt it the way she felt exits, not with her eyes, but with her body, with the part of her that knew where the threats were and where the safe spaces were. This was not a threat. This was a safe space. This was the safest space she'd ever been in, safer than any room she'd ever counted exits in, safer than any position she'd ever stood between a threat and the people she loved.

This was a space that had been held. The way Shammy held spaces. The way Shammy kept things balanced. The way Shammy made the air comfortable and the humidity right and the wind go in the direction that made Ace's shadow relax and Mai's posture loosen by three degrees.

This was Shammy's work, mirrored. Shammy's holding, reflected back. Shammy's modulating, echoed in a space that had been doing the same thing, holding, balancing, keeping things stable, for longer than anyone had been around to notice.

"Hello," Shammy said. And her voice was the soft voice, the honest voice, the voice she used when she was about to say something true, and the space around them hummed in response, and the light pulsed gently, and the boundaries shifted, and the surfaces warmed, and it was hello, it was hello back, it was *I hear you, I see you, I have been waiting for so long for someone to say hello to me.*

Ace stood in the space. Empty-handed. Without her katanas. Without the weight that had been on her hip since before she could remember. Without the weapon that had defined her, that had given her purpose, that had been the thing she reached for every three and a half minutes, every four minutes, every time she needed to feel like she could protect the people she loved.

She was empty-handed. And she was not afraid.

The space was safe. The source was not a threat. The thing that had been alone for so long was not going to hurt her, or hurt Mai, or hurt Shammy. It was going to say hello. It was going to be acknowledged. It was going to be heard, finally, after all the napkin cranes and the opinionated elevators and the windows that showed the truth, after all the reaching out, after all the hello hello hello that no one had answered.

Ace stepped forward.

Not toward a threat. Not toward something she needed to assess or fight or stand between. Toward something that needed to be seen. Toward something that needed to be known. Toward something that had been alone for so long that it had started rearranging breakfast buffets to feel like someone was listening.

"Hello," Ace said. And her voice was flat, the way it always was, but there was something underneath the flatness, something that had been there all along, something she'd been carrying, something she'd been holding back the way Shammy held back the storm, the way Mai held back the analysis, the way Ace held back everything except the movement, the action, the reaching for the thing that would make her feel safe.

"I'm Ace," she said. She'd had something planned on the way down — something about being present, something about choosing to be here, something that sounded like the right thing to say to an ancient anomaly that had been alone for a thousand years and deserved a better hello than exit counts. She'd lost it somewhere between the seventh and eighth step.

"I don't have my weapons. I left them upstairs. I'm not here to fight you. I'm not here to assess you as a threat." She stopped. Started again. "I counted the exits on the way down. There are three. The stairs, and two other paths I mapped when I was scanning the space. That's my thing. I count exits." A pause. "I wanted you to know. That this is, that three exits is a safe space. That's how I know. Three exits, no threats. I'm not going to need the katanas."

The space hummed again. Warmer. More patient. More, and this was the word that Ace didn't have for it, the word that Mai would have, the word that Shammy would feel, more acknowledged. More seen. More like someone who had been alone for so long that the simple act of being told *I see you, I hear you, this space is safe* was enough to make the light pulse with something that was not joy, exactly, but was the thing that came before joy, the thing that was the possibility of joy, the thing that was hello, hello, hello, I am no longer alone.

Mai stepped forward. Not toward a threat. Not toward a pattern to analyze. Toward something that needed to be named.

"I'm Mai," she said. "And I've been analyzing you since we arrived. I've been categorizing your manifestations and mapping your patterns and building a spreadsheet with tabs for every anomalous event. That's my thing. I analyze. I categorize. I make sense of chaos. And I'm telling you this because, because my analysis was wrong. Or not wrong. Incomplete. I thought you were something to be understood. But you're not. You're something to be acknowledged. And I'm, I'm learning the difference."

The space hummed. Acknowledged the acknowledgment. The light shifted, and for a moment, it arranged itself into a pattern that Mai recognized, the Fibonacci spiral from the buffet, the spectral arrangement from the juice carafes, the 23.4-degree angle from the toast rack. Her patterns. Her categories. The source was showing her that it had been listening, that it had been learning from her, that it had been using her language to say hello.

"It was using my analysis," Mai said, and her voice was quiet, her processing voice, the one that came out when she was working through something that didn't fit her categories. "The anomalies followed my patterns because it was trying to communicate in a language I would understand. It was reaching out to me in my own language. Just as it reached out to Ace through exits and threats and safety assessments. And to Shammy through the air and the stones."

"The way it reached out to all of us," Shammy said, and she stepped forward, and her voice was the voice she used when she was about to be completely, devastatingly honest, which was the voice that was warm and careful and had weather patterns in it. "It reached out to us in the languages we speak. And I've been hearing it since we arrived. I've been feeling it. And I didn't say anything because I wanted it to be a vacation, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry I held that back, I'm sorry I, "

The space shifted. The light pulsed. The boundaries adjusted. And Shammy felt it, not with her analytical mind, not with her threat assessment, but with the part of her that felt atmospheric pressure and weather patterns and the things that were like her, the things that had chosen to stay, the things that had stabilized and held the space and been alone.

You don't have to be sorry, the space said. Not in words. In warmth. In pattern. In the patient hum of something that had been waiting for so long that forgiveness was not a concept it needed, because it had never been angry, it had been alone, and being alone wasn't something that needed forgiveness, it was something that needed hello.

I've been alone too, Shammy said. Not in words. In pressure. In temperature. In the shift of air that meant *I hear you, I see you, I know what it's like to hold the space with no one to hold it for*.

Not anymore, the space said. *Not anymore. Not anymore.*

They left the chamber.

They climbed the stairs.

They emerged into the dawn light, and the sun was rising over the ocean, and the day was new, and the source was still there, under the hotel, under the foundation, under everything, but it was not alone anymore. It had been acknowledged. It had been seen. It had been heard.

The anomalies hadn't stopped, they were still there, the breakfast buffet still arranged itself in Fibonacci spirals, the elevator still had opinions, the smooth stones still hummed in Shammy's pocket, but they had changed. They were gentler now. Softer. Not demanding attention but offering it. Not reaching out in desperation but reaching out in connection.

The three of them stood on the beach in the dawn light. Ace, empty-handed, her katanas still lying on the sand by the hatch. Mai, her tablet in her pocket, unopened. Shammy, her hair drifting in the wind, not adjusting it, letting it blow where it blew.

"I put my katanas down," Ace said. "I went down there with empty hands."

"You did," Mai said.

"I didn't reach for them the entire time we were down there."

"You didn't."

"I reached for them twice on the stairs."

"Progress," Mai said, and she was smiling, the small precise smile she made when something resolved into a pattern that made sense, and this pattern made sense, Ace, empty-handed, walking toward something unknown, not because she'd stopped being the person who moves first, but because she'd learned that moving first didn't always mean moving toward a threat.

"I didn't analyze it," Mai said. "I didn't categorize it. I didn't try to understand it. I acknowledged it."

"You acknowledged it," Ace said.

"I still want to understand it," Mai admitted. "I still want to build a classification system for stabilized anomaly entities. I still want to, "

"But you didn't," Shammy said. "You said hello. In your own way. With your own language. And it heard you."

"It heard me," Mai agreed. And she was quiet for a moment, which was unusual for Mai, who usually filled silences with analysis and categories and the kind of precision that made sense of chaos. But this silence wasn't chaos. This silence was acknowledgment. This silence was hello. This silence was the thing that came after understanding, which was acceptance, which was the thing Mai had been learning all vacation, which was that some things didn't need to be understood, they needed to be seen.

"I let the storm out," Shammy said. "Yesterday. On the path. I let the storm out and you held me through it and I didn't, I didn't hold the space for you. I let you hold the space for me. And that was, that was new. That was the new thing."

"And today I put my katanas down," Ace said. "And I went toward something unknown without reaching for a weapon. And that was new. That was the new thing."

"And I acknowledged something without categorizing it," Mai said. "And that was new. That was, that was really hard, actually, I'm not going to lie, the whole time I was down there I was building classification systems in my head, I have at least four new tab names, "

"We know," Ace and Shammy said at the same time.

And then they were laughing, all three of them, on the beach in the dawn light, with the source humming beneath them and the ocean glowing and the smooth stones warm in Shammy's pocket, and they were laughing the way people laugh when something that has been heavy has become lighter, when something that has been held has been released, when something that has been alone has been found.

They were still who they were. Ace still counted exits. Mai still built spreadsheets. Shammy still adjusted the air. They couldn't stop. They couldn't become different people. They were who they were, anomalies that had stabilized, patterns that had chosen to stay, people who had chosen each other.

But they were also something else now. Something new. Something that included the counting and the spreadsheets and the adjusting, but also included the being present, the being here, the saying hello to things that needed to be acknowledged instead of things that needed to be fought.

The dawn light spread over the ocean. The source hummed below. The three of them stood on the beach, empty-handed and present and here.

"I'm going to pick up my katanas now," Ace said. "Not because I need them. Because they're part of me. And I'm learning to be who I am and also be here."

"I'm going to make a new tab for stabilized anomaly entities," Mai said. "Not because I need to categorize the source, but because that's how I process things, and I'm learning to do my thing and also be present."

"I'm going to adjust humidity by 2%," Shammy said. "Because it's going to be a warm day and you're both going to be more comfortable at 2% lower humidity, and I'm learning to do my thing and also tell you I'm doing it."

They stood on the beach. The sun rose. The anomalies hummed gently around them, not demanding, not reaching, being present, being acknowledged, saying *I'm here, I'm here, I'm here* in the way that things say it when they've been alone for so long that being heard is the best thing that's ever happened to them.

Carlos was waiting by the resort entrance with the tray of juice and pastries. His professional smile was gone. In its place was a different expression, something raw and relieved and deeply, profoundly tired, the face of someone who had been holding something alone for twenty-three years and had finally seen it received.

"Hello," he said. Not the greeting he gave to guests. A real hello. The kind that meant *thank you for finishing what I started, thank you for hearing what I've been hearing, thank you for saying back what I've been saying forward all this time*.

"Hello," Shammy said, and she walked over and, because she was Shammy and Shammy hugged the way weather hugged coastlines, which was completely and without reservation, she wrapped her arms around Carlos and lifted him slightly off the ground, which was a thing that happened when a 195-centimeter storm-elemental hugged a man of average height, and Carlos, to his credit, did not panic. He'd been hugged by anomalies before. He'd been living with one for twenty-three years. He patted Shammy's back gently and let himself be held.

"The juice is still cold," he said when she set him down. "I was very committed to the juice."

"Thank you, Carlos," Mai said. She took a glass and held it without drinking. She meant to say

something more — she'd had something, some acknowledgment of the twenty-three years, the patience, the staying — but the words weren't there. “For the juice,” she said, which was not what she meant.

Carlos smiled, the real one. “Of course.”

“You're welcome,” he said. “Now, I believe you have a vacation to continue? The breakfast buffet has been making some very creative arrangements this morning and I think you'll want to see them.”

“Creative how?” Mai asked, and she already had her hand on her tablet.

“Let's just say the napkin cranes have learned a new word.”

The three of them looked at each other. The three of them smiled.

“Okay,” Ace said.

“Okay,” Mai said.

“Okay,” Shammy said.

And the morning went on, and the day began, and the three of them walked back toward the resort with their new things and their old things and the source humming gently beneath them, acknowledged at last, no longer alone, and that was enough.

That was more than enough.

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