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Chapter 12: Still

The evening came the way evenings come at coastal resorts where the anomalies have been acknowledged and the source has been greeted and the breakfast buffets arrange themselves politely and the elevator takes you to the right floor, gradually, warmly, with a sunset that was almost natural, the kind that looked like it had been painted by someone who understood color theory, which it probably had been.

[ACE]

She was sitting on the beach.

Not scanning the perimeter. Not counting exits. Not reaching for her katanas, they were back in the room, on the nightstand, because she'd left them there, because she could leave them there now, because she'd learned that leaving them there didn't mean she wasn't ready, it meant she was choosing not to be ready in that particular way at that particular moment, and that was a different thing, a new thing, a thing she was still learning how to do.

Her shadow lay flat on the sand beside her. Not pressed. Not rigid. Flat. The way a shadow is supposed to lie when the person casting it is sitting on a beach at sunset, watching the ocean, being present.

Her hand drifted toward her hip, where the katanas usually were. She reached. She pulled back. She reached. She pulled back. The interval was longer now, she didn't know the exact number because Mai wasn't counting anymore, or if she was counting, she wasn't logging it in a tab, but it was longer. She was learning.

The ocean pulled at the shore. The sun dipped toward the horizon. The resort behind her was doing what resorts do at sunset, turning on lights, setting tables for dinner, playing soft music from speakers that had definitely not been working when they arrived, but which the source had apparently decided to repair as a gesture of goodwill.

She was not scanning the exits. She was not assessing threats. She was not reaching for her katanas, well, she was, but she was pulling back, and that was the new thing, and the new thing was enough.

She was sitting on the beach.

She was still.

Not because she'd decided to be. She hadn't decided anything. She'd sat down to look at the ocean and the sitting had kept going and her hands were in her lap and the katanas were in the room and she was. Still. She didn't know when that had happened.

For the first time in longer than she could remember, Ace was still. Not the stillness of hypervigilance, not the stillness of a body that has scanned the room and found no threats, not the stillness of

readiness that pressed her shadow flat against the floor. Different stillness. The stillness of someone who has chosen to stop, who has chosen to sit, who has chosen to be present in a moment that doesn't require her to move.

She'd asked for this. On March third, at 2:17 AM, eating cold noodles on the kitchen counter. *I want to go somewhere nothing happens and not do anything about it.* And Mai had heard her, and Mai had found this place, and they had come here, and things had happened, and she had done things about it, and she had reached for her katanas four hundred and seventy-three times (or whatever the number was, Mai had counted, Mai always counted, and Mai had deleted the tab but Mai hadn't deleted the counting, because the counting was who Mai was, and you couldn't delete who someone was).

And now she was still.

Not because the things had stopped happening. The anomalies were still there, the breakfast buffet still arranged itself, the elevator still had opinions, the source still hummed beneath the resort. The things hadn't stopped. She had stopped. Not entirely. Not forever. But for this moment, on this beach, at this sunset, she had stopped reaching for her katanas, she had stopped counting exits, she had stopped scanning for threats, and she was, sitting. Being. Present.

The stillness was not weakness. The stillness was not the absence of strength. The stillness was strength, the strength to choose not to act, the strength to choose not to reach, the strength to choose being present over being ready.

She was still. She was here. She was present.

And the thing she'd been afraid of, that stillness would mean falling apart, that stopping would mean feeling, that feeling would mean remembering, the thing she'd been afraid of was true. All of it was true. When she stopped, she felt. When she felt, she remembered. The wind through buildings that no longer existed. The sound of laughter from a distance. The weight of her shadow pressing down because there was no village to press down on anymore.

The Violet fragment inside her hummed its low, constant note. She'd spent years learning not to hear it, to push it below the threshold, to function. She'd gotten very good at not hearing it. Which was why it took her until now, on this beach, in this stillness, to realize it was quieter. Not silent. Not gone. But she could hear the difference. Like the volume on something turned down two notches while she wasn't paying attention.

She had been paying attention. She paid attention to everything. She had not noticed this.

That bothered her more than it should have. She sat with it.

The hum was quieter here. Not silent, never silent, the Violet fragment was not the kind of thing that went silent, but quieter. Softer. As if the source beneath the hotel was a counter-resonance, a frequency that didn't cancel the Violet but... held it. The way Shammy held the atmosphere. The way Mai held the data. The source held the Violet fragment's hum in a way that made it bearable, not by eliminating it, but by accompanying it.

She'd never had accompaniment before. She'd always been the note, alone, pressing down, humming in a frequency that no one else could hear. Now there was another frequency, and the two of them were making something that was almost harmony.

Not harmony. Not yet. But the beginning of it. The possibility of it. The first tentative reaching of one note toward another.

But she also felt this. The sand under her hands. The warmth of Mai beside her. The particular pressure of Shammy's arm across her shoulders, which was always there, always present, always adjusting the air precisely, always holding the space.

She felt all of it. The remembering and the being here. The grief and the gratitude. The wound and the healing. The hum and the counter-hum.

And she was still.

[MAI]

She was watching the ocean without counting the waves.

This was, by any objective measure, extraordinary. Mai had been counting waves since she was twelve years old, since the Tokyo breach, since she'd learned that understanding patterns was the only way to survive them. She had counted waves on three continents, in seven different bodies of water, and in every single case she had known the exact interval between swells, the precise height of the surf, and the statistical probability of a rogue wave occurring in the next thirty minutes.

She was not counting them now.

Well. She was counting them. She was always counting them. That was who she was, the person who counted things, who noticed patterns, who built spreadsheets to make sense of chaos. She couldn't stop counting any more than Ace could stop reaching for her katanas or Shammy could stop adjusting the air. The counting was not the problem. The counting was her. The problem was thinking that the counting was all she was.

So she was counting. She was counting the waves, 7.3 seconds between swells, consistent with the previous three days, minor variation due to tidal shift. She was counting Ace's reaches, six minutes between them now, up from three and a half, which was progress by any metric. She was counting Shammy's adjustments, the temperature was 23 degrees, which was 1 degree cooler than Shammy's default, which meant Shammy was trying not to adjust, which meant Shammy was doing the new thing.

She was counting. She was always counting. But she was also watching the ocean without counting the waves. She was also feeling the sand under her hands without classifying its mineral composition. She was also sitting next to Ace without building a behavioral profile of her micro-expressions.

Understanding was optional. She understood that now, understood it in the way that you understand something that fundamentally reorganizes how you think about understanding itself. You could understand the pattern and also let the pattern be. You could count the waves and also let them wash over you. You could build a spreadsheet and also delete it when it stopped serving you, and the spreadsheet was not you, and the counting was not you, and the understanding was not you, but it was part of you, and you could be the part and also be the whole.

She had deleted all her tabs. This was not nothing. This was Mai, who had been building spreadsheets since she was old enough to type, who had organized her entire life into color-coded categories, who had built a risk assessment matrix for a beach vacation, who had tracked her own tracking behaviors

in a recursive loop of analysis that would have been funny if it hadn't been so exhausting. Mai had deleted all her tabs, and the tablet was blank, and the categories were gone, and what was left was Mai.

Just Mai. The person who counted waves and also let them wash over her. The person who noticed the 23.4-degree angle of the breakfast buffet and also ate the croissant. The person who had said hello to an ancient anomaly entity without building a taxonomic framework for it first, because understanding was optional and acknowledgment was the thing.

Mai reached for the tablet on the towel beside her. She'd brought it. Of course she'd brought it. She always brought it. It was blank, no tabs, no data, no categories, and she'd brought it anyway, because bringing it was her thing, the way reaching for katanas was Ace's thing, the way adjusting the air was Shammy's thing.

She picked up the tablet. Looked at the blank screen. Put it back down.

She picked it up again. Looked at the blank screen. Put it back down.

The new thing. Reach and pull back. Reach and pull back. The same rhythm as Ace's katana reaches, the same rhythm as Shammy's atmospheric adjustments, the same rhythm as all of them doing the thing they couldn't stop doing and also doing the new thing, which was being present while doing it.

She put the tablet down for the third time and left it down. She turned back to the ocean. The waves came in intervals of 7.3 seconds. She knew this because she was counting them. She also knew this didn't matter, because the ocean was going to do what it did regardless of whether she counted it or not, and that was the point, that was the new thing, that was what she was learning, the ocean didn't need her to understand it. The ocean needed her to be there, watching, present, not alone.

Not alone.

That was the thing. That was the thing the source under the hotel had been trying to say, through all the napkin cranes and juice carafes and elevator opinions. Not *understand me*. Not *categorize me*. Not *analyze me*. Just *I'm here. I'm here. I've been here for so long and I'm not alone anymore*.

Understanding was optional. Acknowledgment was the thing. Being present was the thing. Not being alone was the thing.

Mai leaned against Ace. Her silver hair caught the last of the sunset, and for a moment, a moment, it looked like the juice carafes, glowing, warm, saying *hello* in a language that didn't need words.

She thought about the source. About the chamber. About the way the light had arranged itself into her patterns, the Fibonacci spiral, the spectral arrangement, the 23.4-degree angle. The source had been learning from her, the way it had been learning from Ace's exits and Shammy's atmosphere. It had been watching them, studying them, adapting its hellos to the languages they spoke. For two hundred years or two thousand or however long it had been down there, the source had been paying attention, had been building a model of what humans were like based on the guests who came and went and never said hello back.

And then Mai had come, with her spreadsheets and her categories and her relentless need to make sense of things, and the source had said *oh, this one speaks in data, I can do data* and had started organizing the breakfast buffet in mathematical patterns, because that was how you said hello to someone who thought in spreadsheets.

The thought made Mai's chest feel tight. Not in the bad way. In the way where you realize that something has been trying to reach you for a very long time and you've finally noticed, and the noticing is both beautiful and a little heartbreaking because of all the time it took.

She reached for the tablet. Put it down. Reached for it. Put it down.

She was learning.

[SHAMMY]

She was lying on the sand.

Not adjusting the air. Not shifting the temperature. Not making the wind blow from the northwest at a comfortable 5 knots. Well, she was. She was doing all of those things. She was a storm-elemental who had chosen to take humanoid form, and the atmosphere was her language, and she couldn't stop speaking it any more than Ace could stop reaching for her katanas or Mai could stop counting.

But she was also lying on the sand. She was also letting the sun warm her skin. She was also feeling the particular weight of Ace leaning against her from one side and Mai leaning against her from the other, and she was not adjusting for them, or she was adjusting for them, but she was acknowledging that she was adjusting, and that was the new thing, that was what she was learning, that was the thing that Shammy was becoming.

She had let the storm out. Yesterday, on the path, she had let the storm out, and they had held her through it. Ace, who reached for katanas, had reached for her instead. Mai, who analyzed everything, had held her without analyzing. They had been there. They had been present. They had been who they were and also something else, and that was the thing Shammy had been learning, that she could hold the space and also be in it, that she could adjust temperature and also tell her partners she was adjusting it, that she could be who she was and also be more than who she was.

The source hummed beneath her. Gentle now. Warm. Patient. Not alone anymore. It had been reaching out for so long, and now it had been acknowledged, and it was humming the way it hummed when it was content, which was the way Shammy hummed when she was content, which was the way all anomalies that had stabilized and chosen to stay hummed when they were no longer alone.

I hear you, Shammy thought. Not in words. In pressure. In temperature. In the shift of air that meant I hear you, I see you, I am here.

I hear you too, the source hummed back. I hear you, I see you, I am here.

And Shammy, who had been holding the space for so long, who had been modulating and adjusting and making the air comfortable for everyone except herself, who had been the one who kept things balanced so that other people could relax, Shammy let the space hold her.

She let the air do what it did. She let the sun warm her skin. She let the sand support her weight. She let Ace lean against her and Mai lean against her, and she didn't adjust for them, or she did adjust for them, she shifted the temperature by 0.5 degrees, she made the breeze go from the northwest, she did the things she always did, but she also told them she was doing it, and they nodded, and that was the new thing.

The smooth stones in her pocket were warm. She'd counted them this morning. Eight. She counted

them again now, pressing each one through the fabric with her thumb. Eight. She hadn't meant to count them. She did it anyway.

The last one, the one she'd found on the path, was the warmest. It pulsed gently, not trying to say anything tonight. Just being there. Just warm.

She took the last stone out of her pocket. Held it up to the fading light. The concentric circles caught the sunset and held it, warm and golden, a pattern that was both mathematical and emotional, a Fibonacci spiral that was also a heart, a classification system that was also a greeting, an analysis that was also an acknowledgment.

Understanding was optional. Acknowledgment was the thing.

Shammy put the stone back in her pocket. It was warm against her hip. The source hummed beneath her. The ocean did its thing. The sunset faded from orange to pink to purple to the deep blue of evening, and the stars came out, and the resort lights turned on, and the elevator hummed softly in its shaft, and the breakfast buffet was probably arranging itself for tomorrow, and everything was the way it was, and Shammy was in it, not holding the space but being in it, not modulating the air but being present in it, not adjusting the temperature but acknowledging that she was adjusting it and also letting the temperature be what it was.

She was here. She was present. She was not alone.

None of them were alone.

[ALL]

The evening settled around them. The stars came out. The anomaly under the hotel hummed softly, a gentle presence, a quiet greeting, no longer reaching, no longer straining, being there, acknowledged and acknowledging.

Ace leaned into Mai. Mai leaned into Shammy. Shammy's arm was around both of them, and the air was warm, and Shammy had adjusted it, and Shammy had told them she'd adjusted it, and that was the new thing, and the new thing was enough.

The resort's motto was still there, carved into the wooden sign by the front desk: *Where Nothing Happens*. And it was still wrong, the way it had always been wrong. Things happened here. Anomalies happened. Breakfast buffets happened. Elevator opinions happened. Windows showed views of other places and other times. A source under the foundation reached out through napkins and juice carafes and smooth stones that hummed with warmth and said *hello, hello, I've been alone, can you hear me?*

Things happened here. Good things. Hard things. Things that didn't need to be categorized or solved or fought. Things that needed to be experienced. Things that needed to be acknowledged.

The vacation hadn't been what they'd planned. They'd planned a place where nothing happened, and they'd found a place where everything happened, and they'd turned it into a place where things happened that were neither nothing nor everything but, things. Real things. Things that required acknowledgment, not analysis. Things that required presence, not protection. Things that required being there, not being ready.

They'd come here to rest. They'd come here to stop. They'd come here to be somewhere nothing happened so they could stop being the people who always happened to things.

And what they'd found was different. They'd found that rest wasn't the absence of chaos. Rest was choosing to be present despite the chaos. Rest was reaching for the katana and pulling back. Rest was counting the waves and letting them wash over you. Rest was adjusting the air and telling your partners you were adjusting it. Rest was being who you were and also being something else, all at the same time, all in the same moment, all in the same breath.

The vacation they'd had was not the vacation they'd planned. It was better. It was harder. It was real in the way that planned vacations never are, because real vacations, like real life, happen in the space between what you expected and what actually occurs, and that space is where you learn who you are when you're not doing the things you always do.

Ace's hand drifted toward her hip, toward the katanas that weren't there. She reached. She pulled back. She reached. She pulled back. The interval was longer now. She was learning.

Mai's eyes drifted toward the ocean, toward the waves that came in intervals of 7.3 seconds. She counted. She let the count go. She counted again. She let the count go. She was learning.

Shammy's awareness drifted toward the air, toward the temperature and the humidity and the wind direction. She adjusted. She acknowledged that she was adjusting. She adjusted again. She acknowledged that she was adjusting. She was learning.

They were all learning. They were all doing the old things and the new things. They were all being who they were and also being something else. They were anomalies that had stabilized. They were patterns that had chosen to stay. They were three people who had come to a place where nothing was supposed to happen, and everything had happened, and they were still here. Still together. Still holding on to each other and to the things that made them feel safe, and also trying, reaching, pulling back, reaching again, trying to be present, trying to be here, trying to be who they were and also something more.

The smooth stone in Shammy's pocket was warm. The last one. The one that had been waiting for her on the path. She put her hand over it, and it pulsed gently, and the source hummed beneath the resort, and the ocean did its thing, and the stars came out, and the three of them sat on the beach and let the evening hold them the way Shammy had always held the space for others, gently, carefully, with the particular attention of someone who knows what it's like to be the one holding and also what it's like to be the one who is held.

Ace leaned into both of them. Her eyes closed. Her shadow settled against the sand, not pressing, not rigid, present. There. Still. The stillness of someone who has learned that stillness is not the absence of movement but the presence of choice. The stillness of someone who has chosen to stop, to be, to be present in a moment that doesn't require her to move.

Mai put her hand on Ace's back. She felt the tension leave, slowly, gradually, the way tension leaves when someone has been holding it for a very long time and is finally, finally letting it go. She didn't count the seconds it took. She didn't analyze the pattern. She felt it. She was there. She was present.

Shammy shifted the air so it was warm.

And this time, she knew, they all knew, it wasn't modulation. It wasn't adjustment. It wasn't holding the space.

It was love.

The anomaly under the hotel hummed. The smooth stones were warm in Shammy's pocket. The ocean sparkled in the starlight, an anomaly, probably, the source saying *I'm still here, I'm still present, I'm still not alone*, and the three of them didn't get up. They didn't need to. They didn't scan for threats or analyze the light patterns or adjust atmospheric pressure. They sat there, on the beach, together.

They were finally on vacation.

Dinner was on the terrace. East-facing. The table had been set with three place settings, each one different, each one calibrated, because the source was still reaching out, still communicating, still saying hello in the languages they spoke. Ace's plate was positioned closest to the view of the exits. Mai's wine glass had been placed at a 23.4-degree angle. Shammy's napkin had been folded into a crane that was larger than the others, scaled for someone who was 195 centimeters of storm-elemental and needed a napkin that could keep up.

Carlos stopped by their table. His smile was the real one, the one he'd shown them at the hatch, the one that wasn't professional, the one that said *I've been waiting for this, for twenty-three years I've been waiting for people who could say hello back*.

"The chef has prepared a special dessert," he said. "The source suggested it. I believe it's something with mangoes."

"The source suggested dessert," Mai said.

"The source has opinions about dessert. Very strong opinions. It's been practicing the recipe for about two hundred years, I'm told. The chef was very moved."

"The source has been practicing a dessert recipe for two hundred years," Ace said.

"It was very dedicated to getting the caramelization right." Carlos's smile widened. "I think it's been lonely, yes, but it's also been bored. Two hundred years is a long time to perfect a mango tart. It needed a hobby."

They ate the mango tart. It was extraordinary. The caramel was perfect, the kind of perfect that could only come from two centuries of practice, and the mango was sweet and the pastry was flaky and the light from the terrace lamps glowed the same warm gold as the source. Ace got caramel on her thumb. She licked it off without looking up. She didn't notice herself doing it. They ate in the particular silence of people who didn't need to fill the space because the space was already full.

After dinner, they walked back to the beach. The stars were out. The ocean was doing its thing. The resort behind them hummed softly with the presence of something that was no longer alone, and the three of them stood at the waterline and let the tide touch their feet.

"I don't want to leave," Shammy said. And it came out soft, honest, the voice she used when she was being herself, which was the voice where the weather metaphors fell away and she just said the thing.

"We have three days left," Mai said. "I checked. I made a tab for it. Then I deleted the tab. But I remembered the number."

"Three days," Ace said. She reached for her hip, where the katanas weren't, and pulled her hand back. The interval was the longest it had been all vacation. "We could stay longer."

"We could," Mai said. "The resort has extended-stay rates. I looked them up. The something-else layer gives a discount for people who've acknowledged it. It's very reasonable."

"The anomaly gives a discount," Ace said.

"The anomaly is very financially responsible. It's been managing the resort's books since 1987. The previous accountant was terrible and the source just, took over. Carlos told me."

They were quiet for a moment. The waves came in. 7.3 seconds. Mai counted. Let it go.

"Can we stay?" Shammy asked.

The question landed in the particular way questions land when they mean multiple things at once and everyone in the conversation knows it and nobody says so.

"The source gives a discount," Mai said, which wasn't an answer to what Shammy had actually asked, and which Mai knew, and which she said anyway, because sometimes the logistical path to the emotional answer was the only one she could walk without tripping on it.

"Yes," Ace said. "We can stay."

"Yes," Mai said. "We can stay."

Shammy nodded. Said nothing. The ocean pulled at the shore.

Shammy's arm went around both of them. Her hair drifted in a wind that was and wasn't natural. The air was warm. She'd adjusted it. She'd told them. They'd nodded. That was the new thing.

The source hummed beneath them. Hello. Hello. Hello. Not alone anymore. None of them.

And that was enough.

That was more than enough.

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