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Chapter 1: Where Nothing Happens

Two exits from the lobby. Service corridor past the kitchen, left turn, emergency exit with a crash bar that hasn't been tested in, she counted the dust lines, four years, maybe five. Front entrance, obvious, glass doors, two staff between reception and the street. There was a ceiling fan over the check-in desk that wasn't turning. Ace clocked it for three seconds before she remembered she was counting exits. Stairwell on the east wall, no camera coverage for the first landing. Elevator bank, center, three cars, one of them making a sound like a cat being slowly introduced to the concept of elevators.

Ace's shadow pressed flat against the marble floor. A shadow. Nothing tactical about it. Nothing that said *I mapped this room in twelve seconds flat because I don't know how not to.*

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Mai's voice. Silver-cool, precise, a little softer at the edges than usual. Vacation Mai. Ace had been looking forward to meeting her.

"Three exits," Ace said. Then caught herself. "I mean, yeah. It's nice."

Mai looked at her. That look. The one that said *I heard what you actually said and I'm choosing not to address it because we're on vacation and you asked for this.* The look had a whole paragraph behind it. Mai could fit a paragraph into a look the way other people fit a paragraph into, well, a paragraph.

"It has a pool," Mai said. "Heated. And a beach. And a spa menu that includes something called 'dimensional alignment massage,' which I'm choosing to interpret as a marketing decision rather than a warning label."

"Dimen, "

"I know."

Shammy ducked through the doorframe. She always ducked. Every doorframe. The resort's architects had clearly designed for people who topped out at Mai's height, which meant Shammy moved through the building like someone who was apologizing in advance to the ceiling. Her hair, storm-gradient silver-white shifting into electric blue at the tips, caught the lobby light and for a moment it looked like the chandelier was paying attention to her instead of the other way around.

"The air smells like hibiscus and structural compromise," Shammy said, which was her way of saying *something's not quite right but I'm not going to worry about it yet because we arrived and you both look like you need a vacation.*

"Structural compromise?" Mai tilted her head. Started to reach for her phone, the one with the spreadsheet, and stopped herself. "No. We're not doing that. We're on vacation. The building is fine."

"The building is fine," Shammy agreed. "The air is being... opinionated."

Ace watched Shammy's hair shift slightly, even though there was no breeze in the lobby. Shammy was adjusting something. She always was. The humidity, the temperature, the way the air moved around Mai when Mai was thinking too hard. Shammy did it like Ace checked exits, automatically, like breathing, if breathing could also manage atmospheric pressure in a thirty-meter radius.

The concierge materialized. Not in the anomalous way, in the way that concierges do, suddenly at your elbow with a smile that's either warm or professionally obligatory and honestly who can tell the difference.

"Welcome to the *Where Nothing Happens* resort!" The concierge beamed. His name tag said CARLOS. His smile said *I have made this exact greeting four hundred times today and I will make it four hundred more.* "We're so pleased to have you. Checking in under the name... let me check... Mai? Party of three?"

"Party of three," Mai confirmed. Her hand found Ace's. like that. No announcement, no hesitation. Mai's fingers threaded through Ace's and settled there like they'd been doing it for years, which they had, and Ace felt her shadow ease a centimeter off the floor. A centimeter. Not much. Enough to notice.

"And you've booked our Premier Suite," Carlos continued. He glanced at Shammy, then up, then further up. "That's, ah. The doorframes are standard height. We can."

"I'll manage," Shammy said warmly. "I always do."

"The Premier Suite features an unobstructed ocean view, a private balcony, and our signature 'Total Peace' package, which includes."

"Zero recorded anomalies," Ace said. She'd seen it on the booking page. It was the reason Mai had picked this place. Or the reason Mai had given for picking this place, which was different from the reason she'd actually picked it, which was probably something like *Ace needs to be somewhere where nothing abnormal happens and I've quantified that need into a spreadsheet of vacation destinations ranked by anomaly incidence rates.*

Carlos blinked. "That's correct! Zero recorded anomalies in the resort's history. It's one of our proudest features. The surrounding area has an unusually stable reality index, which our founder."

"That's great," Ace said. And meant it. Zero anomalies. Zero. The place had a verified, documented, boring history of nothing happening. This was exactly what she'd asked for.

Which was why she was already suspicious.

The elevator had opinions.

This was not, technically, an anomaly. This was how elevators in old coastal resorts operated, slowly, with a sense of grievance, as if the elevator had been planning a quiet day and you'd interrupted it by wanting to go to the third floor. The three of them fit inside, which was a generous description of the situation. Shammy occupied the physical space of two people who hadn't met each other's boundaries yet. Mai stood ramrod straight with her phone in her hand, thumb hovering over the home screen like a gunslinger who'd promised herself she wouldn't draw first. Ace pressed herself against Mai's side, partly because there was nowhere else to go, partly because that was where she wanted to be, and partly because the elevator's mirror showed her three exits on this floor alone and she

didn't want to count them.

"The HVAC in this elevator is operating at roughly seventy-three percent efficiency," Mai said. She'd said she wasn't going to analyze anything on vacation. She'd lasted approximately forty-five seconds.

"Higher than our apartment," Ace said.

"Our apartment has an anomalous HVAC. This elevator has no excuse."

"Maybe it's tired," Shammy offered. "Long day. Carrying people up and down. It's allowed to be a little inefficient."

The elevator dinged. The doors opened. They were on the third floor, which was correct. Nothing strange. Nothing anomalous. A well-lit hallway with carpet that had seen better decades and wall sconces that were trying very hard to be elegant.

"The air's different up here," Shammy said. Not a complaint. An observation. She did that, read the atmosphere the way Ace read exit routes and Mai read structural integrity reports. Shammy read the air itself. The pressure, the humidity, the way it moved. "Sweeter. Like the ocean's trying to get in through the walls."

"We're thirty meters from the beach," Mai said. "The ocean is trying to get in through the walls. It's called humidity."

Shammy smiled. It was the kind of smile that took up more space than her height already did, warm and wide and verging on mischievous. "Sure. Humidity. That's definitely what I meant."

The room had one bed.

This was not an accident. This was, in fact, the exact configuration Mai had selected when she'd booked the suite, using a color-coded booking matrix that ranked potential rooms on seventeen criteria including "proximity to emergency exits" (for Ace), "natural light index" (for Shammy's atmospheric sensitivity), and "distance from elevator" (for everyone's sanity, because that elevator was going to be a topic of conversation whether they liked it or not).

One bed. King-sized. Which was generous for two people and an act of architectural optimism for three, given that one of them was one hundred and ninety-five centimeters of storm-elemental who slept like a weather system consolidating over the Pacific.

"I call the edge near the window," Shammy said, dropping her bag on the bed with the casual confidence of someone who knew she'd end up taking up most of the mattress regardless of where she started. "The air's better there. It moves."

"The air moves everywhere," Mai said. "That's what air does."

"Not like this." Shammy's eyes, bright charged blue, the color of lightning held behind glass, caught the window light. "This air has layers. Like cake. Ocean layer, hotel layer, something-else layer."

"Something else," Ace repeated.

"Something else," Shammy confirmed, and then, before Ace could ask what that meant, Shammy was

at the window, pressing her palm flat against the glass, and the air in the room shifted, slightly, enough, like the whole atmosphere had taken a breath and held it.

“What did you just do?” Mai asked.

“Nothing.” Shammy pulled her hand back. “Checking.”

Checking what, Ace didn't ask. She'd learned that Shammy's atmospheric readings were like Ace's exit counts, automatic, constant, and not always worth interrogating. They both had their defaults. Ace counted exits. Shammy read the air. Mai built spreadsheets. They were who they were, even on vacation.

Especially on vacation.

Ace sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress gave under her weight. Her shadow pressed against the floor and stayed there, dark and steady. Her katanas, sheathed, emerald glow dimmed to a faint pulse, rested against her hip where they always did. She'd brought them. Of course she'd brought them. You didn't leave your weapons at home because you were going somewhere that had zero recorded anomalies.

Zero recorded anomalies.

That was the thing. That was what kept tapping at the back of her skull like an impatient finger. Zero. Not “low” or “negligible” or “within acceptable parameters.” Zero. As in none. As in this place had never, in its entire documented history, had a single anomalous event.

Places like that didn't exist. Not really. Not in Ace's experience. Every place had something. A low hum, a residual echo, a fracture line too small for anyone but someone like Shammy to feel. Zero was a number that belonged in math textbooks and marketing brochures, not in reality.

But she'd asked for this. She'd specifically asked for this. *I want to go somewhere nothing happens.* And Mai, who heard *nothing happens* and immediately constructed a vacation plan that accounted for seventeen different types of nothing, had found this place.

Ace looked at the resort brochure on the nightstand. *Where Nothing Happens.* The motto was printed in cheerful font across a photo of an empty beach at sunset. It was either a promise or a dare.

She picked it up. Flicked through it. The photos were uniformly beautiful, uniformly empty. A white sand beach with no footprints. A pool with no splashes. A dining room with place settings but no diners. Every image showed the resort in a state of perfect, undisturbed waiting. Like a stage before the actors arrived. Like a trap that hadn't been set yet.

Ace put the brochure down. She was reading too much into stock photography. This was what vacation brain did. It took the absence of input and filled it with patterns. Mai called it apophenia. Ace called it staying alive.

The room smelled like vanilla and ocean. Someone had placed small sachets of dried flowers in the drawer beside the bed. There were complimentary slippers, white and plush, arranged side by side. A fruit bowl on the dresser held a single perfect mango, a single perfect papaya, and three bananas that were, somehow, all the exact same shade of yellow. Mai would call that quality control. Ace looked at those bananas and thought *nothing varies here.* Nothing. Not even the fruit.

She was definitely reading too much into bananas.

"Hey." Mai sat beside her. The bed dipped. Mai's shoulder pressed against Ace's shoulder, and Ace felt herself lean into it without deciding to. "You're counting exits again."

"I'm not."

"Your eyes went to the window, then the door, then the ceiling corner. That's your counting pattern. I've logged it approximately four hundred times."

"You logged my exit-counting pattern?"

"I have a whole tab." Mai's voice was dry, but her hand found Ace's and squeezed. "It's color-coded."

Ace wanted to be annoyed. She should be annoyed. Her partner had admitted to cataloging her coping mechanisms in a spreadsheet. But Mai's hand was warm and Mai's shoulder was warm and Mai was here, next to her, instead of in another city dealing with another anomaly, and they were on vacation, and the resort had zero recorded anomalies, and Ace was going to relax even if it killed her.

Which, given her track record, was a genuine possibility.

"I'm going to relax," Ace said.

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know you do." Mai leaned over and kissed her temple. Light. Quick. The kind of kiss that was less about the kiss and more about saying *I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. The spreadsheet will still be there when you need it.* "The beach has lounge chairs. I checked. They're positioned at optimal sun exposure angles and there's a bar within thirty meters."

"Optimal sun exposure angles."

"I may have also mapped the resort's shadow patterns based on time of day. For planning purposes."

"You're not going to relax either, are you?"

Mai considered this. "I'm going to relax in a structured, methodical way that maximizes rest efficiency while maintaining readiness for unexpected variables."

"That's not relaxing."

"It's how I relax."

From across the room, Shammy laughed. It was the kind of laugh that filled a space, not loud, but resonant, like the air itself decided to carry it. "You two are going to be terrible at this. I love you both. You're going to be absolutely terrible at relaxing and I'm going to watch and it's going to be wonderful."

"Shammy." Ace looked over. "You're going to adjust humidity every time Mai gets stressed, aren't you?"

Shammy was studying the window. The balcony view. The light through the glass, which was perfectly ordinary afternoon light by any reasonable standard. "This room gets good natural light."

“Shammy.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“And you're going to change the wind direction every time I start counting exits.”

“I don't control the wind.” Shammy's hair drifted sideways. She had the decency to look slightly guilty. “I suggest to it.”

“And you're going to spend the entire vacation making sure we're comfortable instead of letting yourself be comfortable.”

Shammy's smile flickered. For a moment. A millimeter at the corner of her mouth. Then it came back, full and warm, and she crossed the room in three long strides and dropped onto the bed next to both of them, and the mattress protested, and Shammy's arm went around Ace's shoulders, and Mai leaned into Shammy's side, and for a moment, a moment, they were all three on a bed in a room overlooking an ocean in a place where nothing had ever happened.

“Maybe,” Shammy said softly, and her voice was the voice she used when she was being honest, which was the voice where the wind metaphors fell away and she said the thing. “Maybe I'll try. This time. To be.”

Ace felt Shammy's warmth along her back. Felt Mai's hand still in hers. Felt her own shadow, pressed flat and dark against the hotel carpet, holding still for once.

“Yeah,” Ace said. “Maybe we all will.”

The resort was beautiful.

Ace hated that she noticed this the way she noticed everything, clinically, strategically, with the part of her brain that catalogued shadows and sight lines and the part of her brain that was supposed to be on vacation standing uselessly to the side saying *yes, but look at the light, that's nice light, you could appreciate the light*.

The pool was heated. This she knew because Mai had already checked the temperature (twenty-eight degrees, precise, maintained by a system that was only two percent inefficient, which Mai called “acceptable” in the tone that meant “barely tolerable”). The pool was also, at this particular moment, occupied by Shammy, who had changed into something that could loosely be called swimwear and more accurately be called “fabric's optimistic attempt at containing weather,” and was doing that thing where she floated on the water's surface and the water, inexplicably, supported her like it was trying to be helpful.

“It's not anomalous,” Shammy called from the pool. “The water likes me.”

“The water is a liquid,” Mai said from the lounge chair beside Ace's. She had her tablet out. The spreadsheet was, predictably, open. “It doesn't have preferences.”

“Everything has preferences.” Shammy rolled onto her back. The water held her. Of course it did. “The water prefers to be warm and move in circles. The air prefers to go where I'm thinking about going. The hotel prefers, ”

"Please don't tell me the hotel has preferences."

"The hotel is very opinionated. But it's trying its best. I can tell."

Ace, flat on a lounge chair, one arm over her eyes, tried to relax. She'd positioned the chair so she could see both the pool entrance and the path to the beach without moving her head. This was not relaxing. This was surveillance masquerading as sunbathing.

Her shadow lay on the concrete beside her, dark and still. In bright sunlight, it was almost indistinguishable from a normal shadow. Almost. The edges had a slight emerald tint if you knew what to look for, and the shape didn't always match her movements with the exact precision shadows were supposed to have. Right now, though, it was behaving. Lying flat. Being shadow-shaped.

Good shadow. Very relaxed shadow. Shadow on vacation.

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

"Doing what."

"Scanning. Your eyes went to the pool gate, then the beach path, then the bar, that one's new, you added the bar, then back to the pool gate. Loop time: approximately seven seconds."

"I was looking at Shammy."

"You were assessing sight lines to Shammy. Different thing."

Ace pulled her arm off her eyes. The sun was bright. The sky was that particular shade of coastal blue that looked like it had been painted by someone who'd never seen the sky but had had it described to them in great detail. Gulls. A warm wind carrying salt and hibiscus and that sweetness Shammy had mentioned.

"Is it wrong that I want us to be safe?"

Mai set down her tablet. She turned in the lounge chair to face Ace directly, and her silver-blue eyes were doing that thing where they softened at the edges, which meant Mai was about to say something sincere and was annoyed at herself for it.

"No," Mai said. "It's not wrong. It's who you are. And I love who you are."

"But."

"But you asked for this. You said, and I'm quoting your exact words because I wrote them down in the notes section of the vacation spreadsheet under 'Ace's Directives', 'I want to go somewhere nothing happens and not do anything about it.'"

"I said that?"

"On March third, at 2:17 AM, after the Detroit thing. You were sitting on the kitchen counter eating cold noodles and you said, and I quote, 'I want to go somewhere nothing happens and not do anything about it.' Then you fell asleep on my shoulder and I carried you to bed, which is relevant only because you're lighter than you think you should be and it makes carrying you very efficient."

Ace stared at her. "You wrote that down?"

"I write everything down. It's how I show love. Don't change the subject." Mai's hand found Ace's again. Intertwined. Easy. "You asked for this. You can be here and be alert. You can be here and count exits. But at some point, and I'm not saying when, I'm not giving you a deadline because I know that would make it worse, at some point, you might let yourself be here. Just here. With us. Without mapping the perimeter every seven seconds."

Ace's throat tightened. Not in the bad way. In that specific, awful, beautiful way where someone has said exactly the thing you needed to hear and you don't have words for it so your body does the talking instead. Her shadow rippled. Once. A small, dark wave against the concrete.

"Okay," she said. Which wasn't yes and wasn't no and wasn't a promise. It was the most she could offer.

Mai squeezed her hand. "Okay."

From the pool, Shammy made a sound that was half-splash, half-contented sigh. "The water says you're both being very sweet and also that the bar serves something with mangoes that I want to try."

"The water didn't tell you that," Mai called back.

"The water implied it."

Ace closed her eyes. The warmth was genuine. The salt air was genuine. The sound of Shammy doing something absurd in the pool was genuine. She tried to hold onto that. The realness of it. The concrete under her back, the heat on her skin, Mai's presence a meter to her left, close enough that Ace could hear her breathing.

A child ran past the pool area. Chased by another child. Normal. Their mother followed, carrying towels — the resort's monogram on them, two letters, an R and an H, which struck Ace as excessive branding for a pool towel, which was a thought she was having instead of monitoring the exits. A hotel staff member in a crisp white uniform crossed the far end of the pool deck carrying a tray of drinks. The drinks were all the same color, a uniform coral pink, and the ice in each glass caught the sun at the same angle, which was either a coincidence or an improbable level of bartending precision.

Ace was still thinking about the monogram. RH. Stood for something. The resort name had an H in it. Or maybe it didn't.

Ace opened her eyes. The staff member was gone. The children were gone. Their mother was gone. The pool deck was empty except for the three of them.

She hadn't heard anyone leave. She'd been thinking about towel monograms.

"Shammy," she said. Not loud. She didn't need to be loud. Shammy heard everything, the way water heard the moon.

"Mm?"

"How long have we been at the pool?"

Shammy floated. Considered. "About forty minutes. Maybe forty-five. Why?"

"The pool deck was full. Kids. Staff. Now it's empty."

Shammy's eyes opened. Blue as the sky, which was itself a little too blue, a little too even, like someone had ironed it smooth. She rolled upright in the water without using her arms, her core alone, which shouldn't have been possible but was how Shamshir-e Sham did most things, quietly and without apparent effort.

"They walked away," Shammy said. But her voice had shifted. Subtly. The playfulness was still there, but underneath it, the part of her that read the weather was paying attention. "I felt them leave. The air moved around them."

"Did you feel where they went?"

"No." A pause. "That's strange. I usually feel where things go. The air remembers, for a second. Like a wake in water. But these... the wake closed immediately. Like they were never here."

Mai set down her tablet. She'd heard. Of course she'd heard. Mai heard everything too, in a different register. She heard patterns. She heard inconsistencies. She heard the gap between what should be there and what was.

"Possible explanations," Mai said, and her voice was calm and analytical and absolutely did not sound like someone who was about to start investigating instead of relaxing. "One, normal foot traffic in a resort that operates on a schedule. Pool time ended. People left. Two, the resort has structured social hours and we missed the transition. Three..."

She didn't say three. Ace watched her not say three. The silence where three should go was, in Mai's vocabulary, the loudest thing she could say.

"Three is the one we're not investigating on vacation," Ace said.

"Three is the one we're not investigating on vacation," Mai agreed.

They looked at each other. The look said *three is the one we're both going to be thinking about for the rest of the afternoon*.

Evening came like the resort had scheduled it.

They walked the beach before dinner. Mai had calculated that the sand temperature would be optimal for barefoot walking between 5:47 and 6:23 PM, and she was right, because Mai was always right about things she'd calculated, which was most things. The sand was warm and soft and pale, the kind of white sand that made you feel like you were walking on powdered sugar, which was a thought Ace would never say out loud because it sounded like something from a travel brochure, and she had standards.

Shammy walked closest to the water. Every wave that came in curled around her feet like it was saying hello. The ocean had opinions about Shammy, and they were all positive. It was almost embarrassing to watch. A body of salt water with a crush.

Mai walked between them. Not because she needed protecting. Mai could protect herself with a well-structured argument and a spreadsheet. She walked between them because that was her vector, horizontal, the one who held the line, who bridged the gap between Ace's depth and Shammy's height. Mai in the middle, holding hands with both of them, her silver-blue eyes scanning the horizon with the focus of someone who was definitely not cataloging wave patterns for later analysis.

The beach was empty. Not just quiet. Empty. A kilometer of white sand in either direction and not a single other footprint. The resort had other guests. Ace had seen them at check-in. A couple from Helsinki. A family with a teenager who'd looked as excited about vacation as Ace felt. But the beach was a blank page.

"The tide's wrong," Shammy said. She was watching the water with her storm-colored eyes, reading it like Ace read a room. "It's coming in when it should be going out. Or, no. It's doing both. It's coming in and going out at the same time, which isn't how tides work."

"Are you sure?" Mai asked. "Tidal patterns can be complex in coastal areas with unusual topography."

"I'm sure. The water wants to be in two places at once. It's confused." Shammy's voice was gentle, the way she talked about things that were struggling. She talked about the weather that way too. About storms that couldn't decide what to be. About wind that kept changing its mind. Shamshir-e Sham, one hundred and ninety-five centimeters of storm-elemental, had more patience for the uncertainties of the natural world than most people had for their own families. "I might be making it worse. The water keeps trying to match me. I think I'm confusing it."

"You're confusing the ocean," Ace said. "That's a new one."

"I confuse weather all the time. The ocean's only wet weather."

Mai laughed. Actually laughed. The sound was bright and startled, like she hadn't expected it, and she covered her mouth with her free hand, and Ace felt her heart do something it did when Mai forgot to be analytical for a second and responded. It did a thing. A warm thing. She'd never name it out loud. Mai had probably already categorized it in the spreadsheet under "Ace's Cardiac Responses, Subsection: Mai-Induced."

They reached the end of the walkable beach where the sand turned to rock and the resort's property line was marked by a low stone wall. Shammy stopped. Her hair lifted, all of it, silver and blue, lifting toward the rocks like it was being pulled.

"Shammy?" Ace said.

"It's fine." Shamshir pressed her palm flat against her own chest. The hair settled. "The something-else layer. It's thicker here. Under the rocks. It's..." She searched for the word. "Patient. Whatever's underneath, it's not in a hurry. It's been here a long time and it's been waiting a long time and it can keep waiting. It's not anxious about it."

Ace looked at the rocks. Black volcanic stone, weathered smooth. Nothing moved behind them. Nothing glowed or hummed or pulsed. Rocks and salt and the sound of waves that couldn't decide which way to go.

"Okay," Ace said. "Dinner."

"Dinner," Mai agreed. "I booked the terrace. East-facing."

"I know you did."

Ace stood on the balcony, her hands on the railing, watching the sky turn the kind of orange that made her think about the wrong things, the color of emerald glow through smoke, the color of a barrier breaking, the color of warnings she'd learned to read before she'd learned to read books.

Behind her, through the open door, she could hear Mai on the phone with room service, confirming their dinner reservation with the precision of someone confirming a tactical insertion. (“Yes, the terrace table. The one facing east. Not south-east, due east. The sunset angles matter. Thank you.”) And Shammy was in the bathroom, doing whatever Shammy did in bathrooms that took twenty minutes and occasionally involved the sound of running water that wasn't coming from the faucet.

Ace was alone on the balcony. Her shadow stretched long across the tile, darker than it should be in the fading light. She pressed her palm flat against the railing. Warm stone. Salt air. The distant sound of waves.

She should be relaxed. This was the moment. Sunset on a balcony in a place where nothing happened. Her partners nearby. No missions. No briefings. No anomalies on the schedule. This.

Her other hand drifted to her hip. To the katanas. She touched the hilt and pulled her hand away like it burned.

You don't need them, she told herself. You're on vacation. You asked for this.

But her hand went back. Not to draw. to check. to confirm they were there, solid and real, emerald hum faint against her palm. to know she could.

The concierge had said *zero recorded anomalies*. Zero. Which was reassuring, which was why she'd agreed to this place, which was why she was standing on a balcony watching a sunset instead of running a perimeter.

But here's the thing about zero.

Zero was a pattern.

She'd never thought about it that way before. She should have. Zero meant the resort was either genuinely anomaly-free, which was possible, possible but — or it meant something was keeping the numbers there, holding the line at zero, which was interesting, or it meant the recording system was flawed, which happened, or it meant something was absorbing anomalies before they could be recorded. That was a thing that could happen. She knew of three entities that did something like that. None of them were hotels. None of them were polite about it.

Stop. You're on vacation.

She made herself breathe. Made herself notice the railing. The stone was warm under her hands, actually warm, probably too warm for the amount of shade at this hour. She stored that away. Reached for her katanas instead of for the thought.

Stop.

She made herself take her hand off the katanas. Made herself watch the sunset instead of the exit points. Made herself breathe salt air and feel warm stone and hear her partners moving through the room behind her.

Mai appeared at her shoulder. Not because Ace had heard her, she'd been listening for footsteps, she always did, but because Mai had a talent for moving quietly when she wanted to, which was usually when she was bringing someone something they hadn't asked for but needed.

“Dinner in forty minutes,” Mai said. “Terrace. East-facing. I confirmed the sunset angles.”

"You confirmed the sunset angles."

"The azimuth is optimal for this time of year. The terrace faces 87 degrees east of north, which gives us," She stopped. Looked at Ace. "I'm doing it again."

"A little."

"I'll bring the tablet. For emergencies."

"It's a vacation, Mai."

"It's a vacation that currently has zero recorded anomalies," Mai said, and her voice shifted, a fraction, into the tone she used when she was about to say something she'd been thinking about for a while. "Which is either a selling point or a data point that requires further investigation."

Ace looked at her.

Mai looked back.

They'd been together long enough that the look was a complete sentence. *You noticed it too.*

"Zero is a number," Ace said.

"Zero is an absence of numbers," Mai corrected. "Which is exactly my point."

Shammy emerged from the bathroom. Her hair was damp. She'd changed into something flowing and blue that moved in ways fabric shouldn't, and the air around her carried the faint charge of a storm that was deciding whether to be a storm or a gentle evening breeze.

"Did I miss the conspiracy theorizing?" she asked. "Because I have some thoughts about the air in this place that I think qualify."

"Tell me," Mai said, and she said it in the tone she reserved for anomalies, which was the same tone she reserved for interesting breakfast buffets, which was one of the many things Ace loved about her.

Shammy leaned against the doorframe. Ducking slightly. Always ducking.

"The air has layers," she said. "I told you before. Like cake. Ocean layer, hotel layer, and something underneath. Something that's been here a long time. Something," She paused, considering her words the way she considered the weather, which was to say carefully and with the respect of someone who knew she was talking about something older than her. "Something that's listening."

"Listening," Ace repeated.

"The way I listen. The way Mai reads patterns. The way you count exits." Shammy's eyes met hers. Bright. Steady. "Something underneath this hotel is paying attention. And I think," She stopped again. The breeze picked up. Not because of the ocean. Because of her. "I think it noticed us arrive."

The sunset blazed orange over the water. Zero recorded anomalies. A hotel where nothing happened. A concierge who'd smiled and said the words like they were a promise.

Ace's hand went to her hip again. Found the katana hilt. Steadied there.

"Okay," she said, and this time it wasn't about relaxing. This time it was about the thing she did when

something felt wrong and she couldn't name it yet. "Okay. We'll watch. We'll be careful. But we're still on vacation."

"Absolutely," Mai said, picking up her tablet. "We're on vacation with zero recorded anomalies, which I'm now adding to the spreadsheet as an official data point, highlighted in yellow, because if something in this hotel is listening, then I'd like to know what it's heard."

"I'd like to know what it wants," Shammy said softly.

The sunset faded to purple. The first stars appeared. Somewhere below them, in the lobby, Carlos was probably telling another guest about the resort's proud zero-anomaly record, and somewhere below that, under the foundation and the marble and the years of documented nothing, something old was paying attention.

Ace's shadow pressed against the balcony floor. Dark. Still. Waiting.

This was supposed to be a vacation.

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