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Chapter 3: The Elevator Problem

The ocean was having opinions about the tide.

Shammy could hear it from the beach, the way the water pulled and pushed and rearranged itself, not with the simple rhythm of waves hitting shore but with the particular insistence of something that wanted to be somewhere it wasn't. The tide wanted to come in. The tide had been wanting to come in all morning. And Shammy, who was lying on a beach towel that was slightly too small for her (they were all slightly too small for her, which was a metaphor for something she wasn't going to think about on vacation), was trying very hard not to adjust tide.

She was trying very hard not to adjust a lot of things.

She'd already adjusted the humidity. That was the truth. She'd adjusted it when she woke up and she was going to adjust it again before Ace finished her morning perimeter check of the room because the air had been dry and Ace's shadow got restless in dry air, which was a thing Shammy knew without being asked, which was the problem, which was the entire problem.

But she wasn't going to do it again. The humidity, for instance. It was at 68%, which was fine, which was normal for a coastal resort in this climate zone, which was not a problem that needed Shammy's intervention. She was not going to change the humidity again. She was on vacation. The humidity could manage itself.

The wind direction, for another instance. It was coming from the southwest, carrying salt and hibiscus and the faint electrical charge that meant something under the hotel was still thinking about them. She was not going to suggest to the wind that it might prefer the northwest, where it would bring cooler air and less anomalous residue. The wind had its own preferences. She was on vacation. The wind's preferences were not her responsibility.

And the temperature, the temperature was fine. It was fine. It was 29 degrees and the sun was warm and the air was moving and Shammy was not going to adjust it, she was not, she was going to lie here on this beach towel that was slightly too small and let the sun warm her skin and the salt air move through her hair and not adjust anything because she was on vacation and the whole point of vacation was not adjusting things.

Her fingers twitched.

The humidity dropped by one percent.

"Shammy." Ace's voice from somewhere to the left. Flat. Observant. Ace could always tell. "You just changed the humidity."

"I did not."

"It was 68%. Now it's 67%."

"The weather changes, Ace. It's a natural phenomenon."

"You changed the weather."

"I suggested a direction. The weather made its own choice."

Shammy heard Ace shift on her own beach towel, the one she'd positioned so she could see both the pool and the ocean and the path to the lobby, because Ace positioned herself the way Shammy adjusted the atmosphere: automatically, constantly, and with the firm belief that she was being subtle about it. They were both terrible at vacation. This was why they were perfect for each other.

No, not perfect for each other. They were perfect for each other AND for Mai, who was currently sitting under an umbrella with her tablet, adding another tab to what Shammy had started calling The Spreadsheet, which had grown overnight from a vacation planner into a multi-layered anomalous behavior database, and which Mai was updating with the focus of someone who had found her purpose and her purpose was organized data.

"How many tabs now?" Shammy called over.

"Fourteen," Mai said, without looking up. "I've added a provisional classification system for the buffet behavior, a timing analysis for the napkin-to-crane transformation rate, a spatial mapping of the hotel's geometric anomalies, and a note on the smooth stones."

"The stones," Shammy said, and her hand went to her pocket, where three smooth stones sat warm against her hip. She'd found another one this morning, half-buried in the sand near the waterline, perfectly round, perfectly smooth, with those same concentric circles faintly visible on the surface.

She'd been collecting them since they arrived. She didn't know why. They felt right in her hand, smooth and solid and warm, like the beach was giving her something, and Shammy, who had spent her entire existence holding things together, knew what it felt like to be given something small and real and uncomplicated.

"The stones are interesting," Mai continued. "They have a pattern. Concentric circles, consistent spacing, matching the Fibonacci arrangement from the buffet. Which means, "

"Which means the beach is giving me presents," Shammy said warmly, because that was how she preferred to think about it, and also because it was true, in the way that things were true when you were a storm-elemental who had spent so long modulating the weather that you could feel when the world was trying to tell you something, and right now the world was trying to tell her that the smooth stones were gifts, and she was going to receive them as gifts, and she was not going to analyze their mineral composition or their mathematical properties or their potential relationship to the anomalous organizing intelligence that had reorganized the breakfast buffet, because she was on vacation.

"I need to go inside," Ace announced, standing up. Her shadow snapped to attention beside her, darker than the shadow of a person her size had any right to be. "I need, water. I'm getting water."

"You're scanning the perimeter," Mai said.

"I'm hydrating. Hydration is important."

"Your hydration route takes you past the front desk, the service corridor, and the emergency exit."

"I'm a very thorough hydrater."

Shammy watched Ace walk toward the hotel with her compact shadow at her heels and her hand

resting on her katana hilt and her eyes moving in that quick, efficient pattern that counted everything and let nothing go, and she felt the air around Ace shift, tighten, press down, release, and she realized she was adjusting Ace's personal microclimate to keep her cooler on the walk, and she made herself stop.

She made herself stop.

The wind returned to southwest. The humidity stayed at 67%, then crept back to 68%, because the weather had its own ideas and Shammy was on vacation and the weather was allowed to have ideas.

The ocean, still having opinions about the tide, pulled back from the shore in a long, reluctant exhale. And Shammy, lying on her too-small towel with her warm stones in her pocket, closed her eyes and felt what she'd been feeling since they arrived.

Underneath the hotel. Underneath the foundation and the marble floors and the carpet that had seen better decades and the elevator that had opinions. Underneath all of it. Something.

Old. Patient. Listening.

It had been there for a long time. Longer than the hotel, longer than the resort, longer than the coastline had been called anything at all. It had been there, in the space between the rock and the water, doing what Shammy did, holding the space, modulating the pressure, keeping things balanced, but alone. Without anyone to hold the space with.

It had noticed them arrive. Shammy had felt it notice, a shift in the deep pressure, a change in the long frequency, the way a heartbeat changes when someone walks into a room you've been sitting in alone for a very long time.

And it had reached out. The breakfast buffet. The napkins. The juice carafes. The smooth stones. These were not anomalies, not really. These were attempts at communication. These were hellos.

Shammy hadn't said anything about this yet.

She hadn't said anything because saying it would make it real, and making it real would mean that their vacation was about something other than vacation, and they had all, all three of them, asked for this. Ace had asked for nothing to happen. Mai had asked for a structured restorative experience. Shammy had asked for a place where she could be.

And now there was something under the hotel that was like her, and it was reaching out, and Shammy was going to have to deal with it eventually, and she was on vacation.

She was on vacation.

The smooth stone in her pocket pulsed warm.

"Shammy?" Mai, from under the umbrella. "The temperature dropped two degrees in a radius around you. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Shammy said, and smiled, and the temperature stabilized, and she kept her eyes closed, and she did not say what she was thinking, which was: *I know what's under this hotel. And I think it knows me.*

The elevator was the problem.

Specifically, the elevator was Shammy's problem, because the elevator had decided, at some point in the last twenty-four hours, to develop a personality, and that personality did not care for tall people.

"It's not personal," Shammy said, ducking through the elevator door while Ace and Mai entered at a normal height, which was something Shammy had never been able to do. Normal height. Everything was built for normal height. Doorframes, beds, airplane seats, restaurant booths, the entire built environment was a negotiation between Shammy and the assumptions of architects who had never considered that a storm-elemental might want to ride an elevator without folding herself in half.

The doors closed.

The elevator did not move.

The elevator was small. This was a fact Shammy had already encountered, because most elevators were small relative to Shammy, but this one was small in a particular way, the way that the built world was sometimes small not because of the architect's intentions but because the world itself had decided that Shammy should have to fold herself into a specific shape to participate. Her shoulders touched both walls. Her hair brushed the ceiling panel, which was a dropped acoustic tile that wobbled slightly when her head moved. She stood with her knees slightly bent, not because she couldn't stand straight, but because standing straight in this elevator meant pressing her crown against the ceiling, and the ceiling had feelings about that.

She could feel the elevator's feelings.

This was new. Normally, elevators did not have feelings. Normally, elevators were machines with pulleys and cables and a distressing tendency to shudder between floors, and Shammy rode them with the patient discomfort of someone who had never fit in a box designed for average humans. But this elevator had feelings. Or, more precisely, the something-else layer that permeated the hotel had extended into the elevator, and the elevator had acquired a personality, and that personality was currently considering Shammy with what felt like the structural equivalent of raising an eyebrow.

"You're tall," the elevator seemed to be saying. Or not saying. Suggesting. The way Shammy suggested things to the wind.

"I'm aware," Shammy murmured.

Ace glanced up at her. From Ace's position, pressed against Mai's side in the corner of the elevator, the height difference was especially visible. Ace came up to approximately Shammy's hip. Her dark eyes tracked upward, past Shammy's waist, past her ribs, past her shoulder, all the way up to Shammy's face, which was currently being intimate with the ceiling panel.

"You're talking to the elevator," Ace observed.

"I'm acknowledging its observations."

"The elevator made observations."

"The elevator has opinions about my height." Shammy smiled down at Ace. "It thinks I should take the stairs."

"The elevator is not wrong about that."

Shammy looked at the ceiling panel. The acoustic tile had a small water stain in the shape of nothing in particular. She'd been staring at it for approximately four seconds. She didn't know why.

"Ace. Support your tall partner."

"I support my tall partner. My tall partner does not fit in elevators. These are separate facts."

"Third floor," Mai said, pressing the button. Because Mai pressed buttons. Mai pressed buttons the way Ace counted exits and Shammy read the atmosphere, automatically, with the confidence of someone who believed that pressing a button was the first step in a logical sequence of events that would lead to the desired outcome.

The elevator hummed. Considered. And then began to ascend.

To the second floor.

"We wanted the third floor," Mai said, pressing the button again.

The elevator hummed again. A light flickered. And the doors opened on the second floor with the cheerful ding of an elevator that had delivered its passengers to a destination it had selected for them.

"We're on the wrong floor," Ace said.

"We're on the elevator's floor," Shammy said, and she smiled at the elevator panel the way she smiled at things that were behaving unexpectedly, which was with warmth and curiosity and the particular respect she reserved for anything that had opinions.

The doors closed. The elevator ascended again. This time it stopped at the pool level, opened its doors, and waited.

"This is the pool," Ace said, in the tone she used for threats.

"The elevator likes the pool," Shammy suggested.

"The elevator has a destination algorithm that is not functioning correctly," Mai said, pulling out her tablet. "The floor selection is unresponsive. The routing is randomized. And, this is interesting, the door timing has changed. It's holding the doors open longer when you're near them."

The elevator doors, as if to demonstrate, remained open and seemed to wait for Shammy to exit.

"It wants me to get out," Shammy said.

"It wants you to get out at the pool," Ace said. "Which is where you were this morning. Where you spent two hours. The elevator is taking you to the place it thinks you want to go."

"The elevator is being considerate," Shammy said, and she meant it, because she could feel what the elevator was doing, the same way she could feel what the buffet had done, the same way she could feel the smooth stones and the listening presence and the atmosphere of a hotel that had decided, for reasons of its own, that Shammy belonged near water.

"The elevator is malfunctioning," Mai corrected, and her fingers were flying over her tablet, and

Shammy could see a new tab forming: *Anomaly 2, Elevator Behavior*, and she loved Mai, she loved Mai so much, she loved the way Mai's mind worked, the way it built structures out of chaos and turned confusion into data, and she loved that Mai was currently classifying an elevator that had decided it knew where Shammy wanted to go.

"Can we just ride it?" Shammy asked. "Maybe it'll take us where we need to go."

"It's taking us to the pool," Ace said. "We don't need to go to the pool."

"Maybe the elevator thinks we do."

"The elevator does not think."

Shammy looked at the elevator panel. The buttons were glowing softly, not the harsh fluorescent of normal elevator buttons, but a warm, golden light, like the juice carafes, like the napkin cranes, like everything in this hotel that had decided to be helpful.

"Maybe it does," she said softly. "Maybe it thinks about things the way I think about things. The way Mai thinks about patterns. Maybe it's trying to help."

The elevator doors closed. The car hummed. And it began to ascend, not to the third floor, not to the pool, but to the lobby, where it opened its doors with a satisfied ding and waited.

"The lobby," Mai said flatly. "The elevator took us back to the lobby."

"Maybe it thinks we need to go outside," Shammy said. "Maybe it thinks we've been cooped up analyzing data all day."

"I have not been cooped up analyzing data all day. I have been efficiently cataloging anomalous behavior in a systematic manner that, "

"Cooped up," Ace said, and Shammy heard the almost-smile in her voice, the one that was too small to see but Shammy could feel it in the air, the way she could feel everything, the way the atmosphere shifted when Ace was amused and the way it pressed down when Ace was alert and the way it warmed when Ace was happy, and right now the air was warm.

They stepped out into the lobby. Carlos was at the front desk, beaming at a new arrival with the same professional warmth he'd given them. The lobby was bright and clean and normal and absolutely, completely, not anomalous in any visible way, and Shammy could feel, under the marble floors, under the foundation, under everything, something old and patient that was watching them with the attention of someone who had been alone for a very long time and had finally found something worth paying attention to.

"Okay," Mai said, closing her tablet with a decisive click. "We're walking to the third floor. The stairs are, " She looked at the stairwell. Made a note on her tablet. "The stairs are standard width with seventeen steps per flight. Shammy, you'll need to duck at the landing."

"I always duck at landings," Shammy said. "Landings and I have an understanding. I duck, they don't hit me in the head."

"Your understanding with the elevator was less successful."

"The elevator had preferences. I respect preferences."

The stairwell was narrow. This was Shammy's life. The built world was not built for her, not her height, not her presence, not the way the air moved differently around her like it was trying to accommodate something it hadn't been designed to accommodate. She ducked through the doorway. Her hair brushed the ceiling. Her shoulders needed to turn sideways at the landing. Her feet were too big for the steps, which were designed for people who were, statistically, about 25 centimeters shorter than she was.

Behind her, Ace moved up the stairs like water finding the path of least resistance, compact, efficient, her shadow flowing up the wall beside her. Ace on stairs was a different creature than Ace in a hallway. On stairs, her height became an advantage. The risers were designed for someone taller, which meant Ace's stride was quick and efficient, her center of gravity low and stable, her shadow hugging the wall like it was running its own race and winning. She didn't have to duck. She didn't have to turn sideways. The stairwell had been built for people exactly her size, which was a sentence Ace would never say out loud because it would sound like a complaint about every other architectural decision ever made.

Mai followed with precise steps, one hand on the railing, already counting the stairs out loud because that was who she was.

From below, Shammy heard a soft *thunk* as her hair caught the landing overhang. She ducked. Again. Always ducking. Her life was a constant negotiation with the assumption that humans topped out at 175 centimeters, and Shammy had exceeded that assumption by twenty centimeters and had been apologizing to doorframes ever since.

"Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Landing. Seventeen steps per flight, consistent with, "

She paused. She checked the count again. She'd added wrong the first time somehow. Fourteen to the landing, three more to the top. Seventeen total. Which was correct. She'd been correct. She'd still checked it twice because the anomaly was affecting her arithmetic and she — she had not made an error. The building code allowed for seventeen steps per flight. She was fine.

"With the building code," Ace said. "Mai. Stairs."

"I miscounted and then didn't," Mai said, which she hadn't planned to mention.

"I'm observing the stairs."

"You're cataloging the stairs. We're cataloging stairs now. On vacation."

"I'm maintaining environmental awareness." Mai's voice was prim, which meant she was embarrassed, which meant Ace was right and they both knew it. "Environmental awareness is not the same as cataloging."

"It's exactly the same."

"It's a related but distinct, "

"Third floor," Shammy said, ducking through the doorway. "We made it. Without the elevator's input. I'm going to tell the elevator we survived."

"You're going to tell the elevator."

"I'm going to thank it for trying. It meant well."

Ace looked at her. Mai looked at her. They had the same expression on their faces, the one that was equal parts fondness and exasperation, the one that meant *this is who you are and we love you and also you are impossible*.

“What?” Shammy said, spreading her hands wide. “It was being helpful. In its own way. It took us to the pool because I like water. It took us to the lobby because Mai needed to stop cataloging data and go outside. It was looking out for us. That’s sweet.”

“It’s an elevator,” Ace said.

“It’s an elevator with opinions,” Shammy corrected, and she walked down the hallway to their room, ducking under the doorframe, and she felt, under her feet, through the floor, through the foundation, through the stone and the earth and the years of nothing happening, the deep pulse of something that had been waiting and was still waiting and was listening to her footsteps, and she put her hand in her pocket and felt the smooth stones warm against her fingers, and she did not say anything about it, not yet, because she was on vacation, and the thing under the hotel could wait, and she could wait, and the waiting itself was a kind of holding, and Shammy was very, very good at holding.

She wasn’t very good at letting go.

That was the thing nobody talked about. Everyone noticed that Shammy held the weather, that she adjusted the atmosphere, that she kept the pressure stable and the wind gentle and the humidity comfortable for the people around her. What nobody noticed, because Shammy was very good at making sure nobody noticed, was that holding the weather meant holding everything else too. The mood of a room. The temperature of an argument. The space between Ace’s hypervigilance and Mai’s analytical loop. Shammy held all of it, all the time, and it was as automatic as breathing, and as necessary, and as exhausting, and nobody asked her to do it, which was the worst part, because it meant nobody knew to tell her to stop.

Ace counted exits because the world had taught her that exits were the difference between safety and danger. Mai built spreadsheets because the world had taught her that data was the difference between understanding and chaos. Shammy held the weather because the world had taught her that comfort was something she had to make, not something she could find.

They were all, Shammy thought, still learning that they were allowed to find it.

She opened the door to their room. The bed was huge. The window was open. The air was layered and warm and something underneath it was listening, and Shammy sat on the edge of the bed and let the stones warm in her palm, and she did not adjust the temperature, and she did not change the wind, and she did not say anything about the thing under the hotel, and that was the bravest thing she’d done all day.

The evening was warm and golden and smelled like the ocean, which was having fewer opinions about the tide now, as if it had said its piece and was content to let things settle.

They sat on the balcony. All three of them. Shammy in the middle because she was the largest and also because the middle meant she could feel both of them, Ace on her left, compact and coiled and pressing her shadow flat against the tile; Mai on her right, precise and structured and absently tapping her tablet screen even though she’d promised she was done for the day.

The sunset was doing something extraordinary. It was the kind of sunset that only happened at

coastal resorts, where the sky turned every possible shade of orange and pink and gold all at once, as if the atmosphere had decided to show off, and Shammy, who could feel the atmosphere's moods the way other people could feel temperature, knew that the sunset was not entirely natural. The colors were too precise. The gradient was too smooth. The way the light fell across the water was too beautiful to be random.

It was being composed. Someone, something, was painting this sunset note by note, like a musician who had been practicing alone for years and had finally found an audience.

The light hit Shammy's hair and it caught fire. Not real fire. But the silver-white strands drank the sunset and turned it into something that shouldn't have been possible, a gradient of copper and rose and deep violet running from her roots to the electric-blue tips, and for a moment she looked like she was wearing the sky itself, like the sunset had decided to climb onto her and stay there.

Ace was staring. Not at the sunset. At Shammy. The way she sometimes stared when Shammy was doing something that reminded Ace why she'd chosen this life, this triad, this impossible configuration of three people who each held the world together in different registers.

"Your hair," Ace said.

"It does that at sunset," Shammy said. "The light likes me."

"The light does not like you. The light is a photon emission."

"The light *likes* me, Ace. It always has. It bends around me. You've seen it."

Ace had seen it. She'd seen the way dawn seemed to arrive earlier when Shammy was awake, the way streetlights brightened when she passed under them, the way shadows softened at her edges as if they, too, wanted to be gentler around her. She'd filed it under *Shammy things* alongside *elevators with opinions* and *water that was reluctant to let go* and *the apparently reciprocal affection between a storm-elemental and the entire natural world*.

"Another anomaly?" Ace asked, turning back to the sunset with the expression she wore when she was enjoying something but refused to admit it.

"Or a really good sunset," Shammy said. "Sometimes beautiful things are beautiful."

"Nothing here is simple," Mai said, but she said it softly, and she was watching the sunset too, and her hand had found Ace's and their fingers were interlaced, and Shammy could feel the air between them shift and warm and settle, and she knew, she knew, she was adjusting it again, she was making the temperature perfect and the wind gentle and the humidity perfect, and she made herself stop.

She made herself stop.

The wind came back from the southwest, carrying salt and hibiscus and that faint electrical charge from below. The temperature settled to wherever it naturally was. The humidity went back to 68%.

It was fine. It was all fine. The sunset was beautiful, anomalously, impossibly, too-precisely beautiful, and they were on the balcony and the smooth stones were warm in her pocket and under her feet the thing was listening, and Shammy did not say anything about it because saying it would make it real and making it real would mean dealing with it and she was not dealing with it, she was holding the space, she was modulating, she was keeping everything balanced the way she always did.

She leaned her head against Ace's shoulder. Felt Mai's hand reach across and rest on her knee. Let her hair drift in the not-quite-natural wind.

"How are you doing?" Ace asked, and the question was short and direct, which was Ace's way, and it meant more than the words because Ace didn't ask how you were doing unless she really wanted to know.

Shammy started to say *fine*, the word already formed in her chest, ready. Then the sunset did something with the light — caught the water at an angle that was too copper, too specific, too much like the warmth the source made when it was paying attention — and she forgot what she'd been about to say.

"Good," she said, a beat too late.

Ace glanced at her. The almost-question behind it. Neither of them said anything. The sunset continued its too-precise gradient.

"Good," Shammy repeated, which wasn't better the second time.

"Good," Ace said, and leaned into her, and her shadow lay flat and still across the balcony.

Shammy let the evening hold them. Let the air do what it did. Let the sunset be too precise and the stones be too warm and the thing underneath be too old and too patient and too much like something she didn't want to think about yet.

The elevator had taken them to the pool because it thought Shammy liked water. The breakfast had organized itself because it thought Mai liked patterns. The sunset was too precise because, because something underneath thought they'd like the view.

Something underneath was trying to make them feel at home.

Shammy closed her eyes. Felt the deep pulse under the foundation. Put her hand in her pocket and felt the smooth stones. Did not say what she was thinking, which was: *I know you. I know what you are. And I know why you're reaching out, because I would reach out too, if I'd been alone that long.*

Instead, she said, "The sunset is perfect," which was true, and also not, and also the closest she could come to the truth, which was that the sunset was perfect because something wanted it to be perfect, and Shammy understood that kind of wanting, because she spent every day making things perfect for the people she loved, and she knew what it cost, and she knew what it meant.

The sun went down. The stars came out. The three of them sat on the balcony and did not talk about the thing under the hotel, because they were on vacation, and the thing under the hotel could wait.

It had been waiting for a long time. It could wait a little longer.

And Shammy, who had been holding the space all day, who had been modulating the atmosphere and not adjusting the humidity and not changing the wind and not talking about what she could feel, let herself lean into both of them, and for one moment, one moment, she did not hold the space. She let the space hold her.

It was fine.

It was almost enough.

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