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Chapter 4: Sunset Through Broken Glass

The sunset was over. The anomaly was handled. Ace sat on the beach with sand in her hair and her katanas across her knees and her shadow stretching long across the water, and she stared at the empty sky and felt the particular kind of anger that comes from being angry at yourself.

The windows had been showing different views. That was the thing. That was what had started it.

Not the wrong view. Not a view of somewhere else. Every window in the hotel, every window, all at once, in that synchronized way that anomalies had, as if they'd been rehearsing, had started showing a different version of what was on the other side. Some showed the sunset from three days ago, when they hadn't arrived yet, when the sky over this beach had been empty and waiting. Some showed a lobby where the furniture was alive, where chairs arranged themselves into patterns and the front desk had grown branches and Carlos was explaining, with evident delight, that the hotel had decided to sprout. Some showed an ocean with different tides, higher, lower, pulling at the shore with a rhythm that didn't match the real ocean at all.

And one window, in their room, the one facing the balcony, the one where Mai had stood with her silver hair catching the light, had shown an ocean that was glowing. Not bioluminescence. Not the soft warmth of the juice carafes. A deep, steady glow that came from underneath the water, from underneath the seafloor, from underneath everything, and Ace had looked at that glow and felt her shadow press down against the floor so hard it almost took root.

That window. That one window.

She'd seen it and thought: projection equipment. The resort had those sunset-ambiance systems in some rooms, fiber-optic panels, programmable views. She'd seen them in Tokyo, in Reykjavik. She'd started looking for the projector housing. She'd crossed the room and pressed her palm flat against the glass.

The glass had been cold. Much colder than glass facing west at that hour should have been.

Then she'd grabbed her katanas. Of course she had. Because when something was wrong, when something was anomalous, when something showed her a view of an ocean glowing from below, she grabbed her weapons and she moved toward it. That was the action. That was the only action she knew.

The anomaly had resolved itself, as these anomalies did, with the gentle precision of something that was trying very hard not to be frightening. The windows had flickered back to normal. The sunset had continued its too-perfect descent. Mai had taken notes. Shammy had felt something in the air and said it was "adjusting." And Ace had stood in the middle of it with her katanas drawn and nothing to fight.

Nothing to fight.

That was the problem. That was always the problem. She was built for fighting. She was built for moving. She was built for the moment when something went wrong and she could draw her blades

and step between the threat and the people she loved and do the only thing she knew how to do, which was act.

But these anomalies weren't threats. They were greetings. They were hellos. They were the hotel, or whatever was under the hotel, reaching out through windows and napkins and elevators, saying *I see you, I know you're here, I want you to see me too.*

And Ace couldn't fight a greeting. She couldn't draw her katanas against a hello. She couldn't protect anyone from something that was trying to be kind.

She sat on the beach and felt the sand cool beneath her and watched the stars come out and heard the ocean doing its ocean thing, pulling and pushing and having opinions, and her hand went to her katana hilt and she pulled it away and it went back and she pulled it away and it went back, like a reflex, like breathing, like the thing she did when she didn't know what else to do.

(An hour earlier, the windows broke reality.)

It started in the afternoon. They'd been at the pool, they were always at the pool, it was where they went when they were on vacation and didn't know what else to do with themselves, which was most of the time. Shammy was in the water, because Shammy was always in the water, because water was the element that understood her best and she understood it right back and their relationship was uncomplicated in a way that nothing else in Shammy's life was. Mai was under the umbrella with her tablet, because Mai's relationship with data was the only relationship that didn't require negotiation. And Ace was sitting at the edge of the pool with her feet in the water and her eyes on the perimeter, because Ace's relationship with threat assessment was the only relationship she knew how to have.

"The windows are different," Shammy said, pulling herself out of the pool with a sound like the ocean giving up something it had been holding onto.

"Different how?" Mai looked up from her tablet.

"The light through them is," Shammy tilted her head. Her hair, wet, hung around her face in silver-white strands that caught the sun and did something to the light that was probably physics and definitely Shammy. "Layered. Like the air. Like everything here. The windows are showing something that isn't out there."

She pointed at the hotel. From the pool, they could see the ground-floor windows facing the garden, a row of six identical panes that should have been showing identical views of trimmed hedges and the stone path to the spa. Instead, each window showed a slightly different shade of light. The first was too warm, amber where it should be white. The second had a greenish tint, like the glass itself was photosynthesizing. The third was normal. The fourth was normal. The fifth was darker than it should be, as if the window had decided it was nighttime in that particular square of reality. And the sixth was pulsing, very slowly, in a rhythm that matched Shammy's breathing.

"The sixth one is matching you," Mai said, having followed Shammy's sightline with the precision of someone who could read a room in three seconds and a partner in zero.

"They all are, a little. But the sixth one is being obvious about it." Shammy wrung water from her hair. "It wants my attention. The something-else layer. It's being, I don't know, *flirty.*"

"The anomaly is flirting with you," Ace said from the pool's edge, where she'd been doing her version

of relaxing, which was sitting very still with her eyes moving in seven-second intervals across every visible surface.

"The anomaly is being *friendly*," Shammy corrected. "Flirting would be inappropriate. We just met."

"You gave it stones."

"Stones are a polite gift. Not flirting. Friendship."

"Shammy, you flirt by being friendly. That's your whole thing."

Shammy considered this. Her hair, still wet, shifted in a breeze that wasn't blowing. "That's... not inaccurate. But the something-else layer isn't me. It's older. And lonelier. And I think it's been waiting for someone who could feel it for a very long time."

The words hung in the air. Literally, Shammy was holding them there, the humidity and the temperature and the subtle pressure of her attention keeping the moment suspended, and then she let it go, and the words fell into the pool water with a soft sound that was not physics.

"I'm going inside," Ace said, standing up.

Ace was on her feet before she made the decision to stand. Her shadow snapped up from the pool deck, suddenly vertical, suddenly dark, and she was moving toward the hotel with the particular efficiency of someone who had identified a potential threat and was going to position herself between it and the people she loved.

"Ace," Mai said, in the tone that meant *wait, I need more data*, which was Mai's version of *hold on*, which was Mai's version of *I love you but please don't run toward the thing without knowing what the thing is*.

But Ace was already moving, because moving was what she did, because her body had been in motion before her brain had caught up, because that was the wound and the lie and the truth of her: if she stopped, everything fell apart. If she stopped, she had to feel. If she felt, she had to feel all of it, the weight of her shadow, the pressure of the Violet fragment inside her, the memory of wind through buildings that no longer existed, the sound of laughter from a village that was gone because she was the reason it was gone. So she moved. She moved toward the thing because moving toward the thing meant she didn't have to sit still with any of that.

The lobby was fine. The hallways were fine. Carlos was at the front desk, beaming at nothing with the focused dedication of a man whose smile was contractually obligated. He nodded at Ace as she passed, and his eyes flickered to her katana, the one her hand was resting on, the one she was trying to pretend she wasn't resting on.

"Everything alright, Ms. Ace?" His voice was warm. His eyes were warm. Everything about Carlos was warm, which was either genuine kindness or excellent training or something else, and Ace still couldn't decide which.

"Fine," she said. "Where's the stairwell?"

"East wall, past the ferns. But the elevator is, "

"I'll take the stairs."

Carlos smiled. His smile said *I understand completely and I am not going to ask why a guest would prefer stairs to a perfectly functional elevator*. His smile said a lot of things, actually. Most of them were probably genuine. Some of them were definitely not. Ace filed his reaction under *Carlos behaviors to revisit later* and moved on.

The elevator, which had been making its opinionated feelings known for two days now, opened its doors when she passed, as if inviting her in. She ignored it. It closed its doors with a ding that sounded almost offended.

Their room was not fine.

Their room was the opposite of fine.

Every window showed a different view. Not the view outside, not the ocean, not the sunset, not the beach that was too perfect. The window by the bed showed the lobby, except the lobby was different: the furniture was alive, chairs shifting and tables growing branches and Carlos behind the front desk explaining to a guest that the hotel had decided to sprout, and the guest was nodding as if this made perfect sense, and Ace's shadow pressed against the floor hard enough to feel the foundation underneath.

The window by the balcony showed the sunset from three days ago. She knew it was three days ago because the sky had been different then, clearer, emptier, waiting. This sunset was the same one she'd seen from the balcony on the first night, the one that had felt like a promise, the one where nothing had happened yet.

The window by the bathroom showed a corridor that didn't exist in the hotel, long and dark and humming with something that made Ace's shadow flatten against the wall like it was trying to escape.

And the window facing the ocean, the big one, the one that had been showing them the real ocean since they arrived, showed water that was glowing from below.

Not the soft warmth of the juice carafes. Not the gentle pattern of the breakfast buffet. A deep, steady light that came from underneath the seafloor, from underneath the hotel, from underneath everything, and Ace looked at it and knew, the way she knew exits, the way she knew threats, the way she knew the difference between a shadow that was a shadow and a shadow that was pressing down because something underneath it was alive.

The glow was layered. Like everything in this hotel, it had structure. At the bottom, furthest down, a cold blue, the color of pressure, the color of water that hadn't seen sunlight in a thousand years. Above that, a warmer tone, teal shifting toward green, the color of things growing in darkness. And at the top, closest to the surface, a pale gold, almost white, the color of the juice carafes, the color of the napkin cranes, the color of everything this hotel's hidden resident had made when it was trying to be beautiful.

It was beautiful. That was the worst part. It was gorgeous, this impossible view of an ocean lit from below, and Ace's hand was on her katana hilt and her shadow was pressing down against the floor and every instinct she had was screaming *threat, threat, threat* while her eyes were saying *this is the most beautiful thing you've ever seen*, and the contradiction was making her teeth hurt.

She drew her katanas.

The emerald glow illuminated the room. The blades hummed at the frequency that meant *ready*, which was the frequency they always hummed at, because Ace was always ready, because being

ready was the only way she knew how to be.

"Ace." Mai's voice, from the doorway. Controlled. Analytical even now. "The windows are showing anomalous projections. The light sources are consistent with localized reality distortion, not physical intrusion. The room is structurally sound. You don't need, "

"I know." Ace's voice was flat. Short. The voice she used when she was already two steps ahead of the person talking to her and three steps behind herself. "I know what it is."

"Then why are your katanas out?"

Because I don't know how to put them down, she didn't say. Because I drew them before I thought about it. Because when I see something wrong, my body moves and my mind catches up later and by the time I've caught up, my katanas are already drawn and my shadow is already flat against the floor and I'm already standing between the thing and the people I love and that's the only position I know how to hold.

"Force of habit," she said instead.

Shammy appeared behind Mai. Her hair was still wet from the pool and the air around her shifted, adjusted, settled. She looked at the windows, all of them, each different view, each impossible perspective, and her eyes did the thing they did when she was listening to something no one else could hear.

"It's showing us things," Shammy said quietly. "It's not trying to scare us. It's trying to show us."

"Show us what?" Ace demanded, and her voice came out sharper than she meant it to, because she was standing in a room full of impossible windows with her katanas drawn and nothing to fight, and the frustration was building in her chest like a pressure system, like a storm, like the thing inside her that was always pressing down and never letting go.

Shammy had her hand pressed flat against her own sternum. Ace hadn't noticed that until now. Not adjusting the air. Not adjusting anything. Just holding her own chest, like she was checking whether something inside it was still there.

"Its home," Shammy said, and her voice was soft the way it got when she was talking about something fragile, something old, something that had been alone for too long. "It's showing us where it lives. Look, " She pointed to the glowing ocean. "That's what's under the hotel. That's what I've been feeling. It's showing us because it wants us to see."

The windows flickered. All at once, like a blink, like a heartbeat, they shifted, and then settled back to their impossible views, each one a different perspective on the same thing: something underneath. Something alive. Something that had been waiting.

And Ace, standing in the middle of the room with her katanas drawn and her shadow pressing down and nothing to fight, felt the anger, no, not anger, something worse than anger, rise up in her chest.

She was angry at herself. She was angry because she'd asked for this. She'd asked for a vacation. She'd asked for a place where nothing happened. And now things were happening, and she couldn't fight them, because they weren't threats, they were greetings, and she couldn't draw her katanas against a hello.

But she'd drawn her katanas anyway. Because that was what she did. Because she didn't know how

to not do it. Because the only language she had was the language of action, and when action wasn't needed, she didn't have words.

She put the katanas away. Slowly. Deliberately. Made herself slide them back into their sheaths, made herself release the hilts, made herself let go.

The windows, as if they'd been waiting for this, flickered back to normal. All of them. At once. The lobby, the corridor, the glowing ocean, gone. The real sunset, the real ocean, the real view. Back to normal. As if nothing had happened.

As if nothing ever happened here.

(Back on the beach. Sand in her hair. Stars coming out. The ocean doing its thing.)

Ace sat on the sand and stared at the water and felt her hand drift to her hip, to the katana hilts, and she pulled it away, and it went back, and she pulled it away, and it went back, and this was the rhythm of her, the drumbeat she marched to, the thing she did when there was nothing else to do.

Her shadow lay flat against the sand. Darker than it should be. Stillier than it should be. The shadow of someone who was always ready, always braced, always pressed against the ground like it was looking for threats underneath the foundation.

Footsteps behind her. Two sets. Mai's, precise, measured, the footsteps of someone who knew exactly how far she'd come and how far she had left to go. Shammy's, long, slightly off-rhythm, the footsteps of someone who was trying not to adjust sand beneath her feet and not quite succeeding.

A crab was moving sideways along the waterline, carrying a scrap of something orange — bright, synthetic, the kind of thing you'd find on a florist's ribbon or a birthday balloon. It crossed Ace's field of vision and disappeared into the dark. She did not evaluate this tactically. She noticed it and it was gone and then there was nothing to evaluate.

Mai sat down on her left. Shammy sat down on her right. They didn't say anything. They sat, one on each side, and let her be.

That was the thing about them. Mai, who analyzed everything, didn't analyze this. Shammy, who adjusted everything, didn't adjust air or the temperature or the way the night was pressing in around them. They sat. One on each side. Close enough to touch. Far enough to give her space.

Ace's hand drifted to her hip again. Touched the katana hilt. Let go.

"You've reached for them four times in the last hour," Mai said.

"Five," Ace corrected. "You missed the one in the hallway."

"I counted five. I gave you four."

Ace looked at her. "Why?"

"I don't know," Mai said, which came out sounding like something else entirely — some admission she hadn't quite meant to make. "You seemed upset enough."

The corner of Ace's mouth moved. Not a smile. The memory of one.

The corner of Ace's mouth moved. Not a smile. The memory of one. The space where a smile would go if she knew how to put it there.

"I don't know how to stop," she said. And it came out flat, the way everything came out, because flat was the only way she knew how to say things that mattered. No inflection. No softening. The words, laid bare, like a wound she was showing them because she couldn't hide it anymore.

"I know," Mai said.

"I asked for this. I asked for a vacation. I picked the place. I said I wanted to go somewhere nothing happens. And now things are happening, and I can't, I don't have the thing. The thing where you sit still and don't reach for your weapons. I don't have that thing."

"You have it," Shammy said, and her voice was the warm voice, the quiet voice, the voice that carried weather patterns in its cadence. "You have it right now. You're sitting still. You're on a beach. Your weapons are sheathed. You're doing it."

"I'm not doing it. I'm failing at it. Every five minutes my hand goes to the hilt and I can't, "

"Ace." Shammy's hand on her shoulder. Warm. Not adjusting. Not shifting the temperature or the wind or the humidity. Warm. There. "You sat on the beach for an hour without drawing them. You put them away when the windows went back to normal. You came out here instead of patrolling the perimeter. That's not failing. That's, "

"That's what?" Ace demanded, and she didn't mean it to come out sharp, but it did, because that was the other thing she couldn't control, the way her voice turned flat and hard when she was feeling something she didn't know how to feel.

"That's learning," Shammy said. "That's what learning looks like. It looks like reaching for the thing and putting it back. Reaching for it again. Putting it back again. Every five minutes. Over and over. That's not failure. That's the work."

The ocean pulled at the shore. The stars were out. The thing under the hotel hummed, distant, patient, listening. And Ace sat on the beach between the two people she loved most in the world and felt the weight of her shadow and the press of her weapons and the pressure of the Violet fragment inside her, and she didn't reach for her katanas.

She didn't reach for them.

For about ninety seconds.

Then her hand drifted to the hilt again, and she pulled it away again, and she said, "I'm going to be doing this all vacation, aren't I?"

"Probably," Mai said.

"And you're going to sit there and count how many times I do it."

"I'm going to sit here and be present while you do it. The counting is incidental."

"And you, " Ace looked at Shammy. "You're going to adjust air so it's warm when I'm frustrated."

Shammy's smile flickered. For a moment. The corner of her mouth, the millimeter that Ace had learned to read, the tell that said *you noticed, you saw me, I was adjusting and you saw me doing it.*

"I'm trying not to," Shammy said. "I'm trying really hard not to."

"I know."

"Because you asked. Because vacation. Because we're all supposed to be, "

"Shammy." Ace leaned against her. Let her weight, compact, pressure-light, the weight of someone who was smaller than her shadow, settle against Shammy's side. "The air's fine. You don't have to fix it."

Shammy's breath caught. A small thing. The kind of catch that meant something big was happening underneath it, like the atmosphere shifting when a storm decided to move.

"Okay," Shammy said softly.

"Okay," Ace said.

Mai's hand found Ace's other hand. Interlaced. Held.

For a while, none of them spoke. The beach was dark now, the last orange bleeding out of the sky, replaced by a purple so deep it was almost black, and then by stars. So many stars. More stars than Ace was used to seeing, because cities had light pollution and she'd spent most of her life in places where the threats were close enough to see. Here, the threats were underground, and the sky was clear, and the stars were out in numbers that felt like a different kind of anomaly, like the universe had decided to show off.

Mai shifted closer. Her shoulder pressed against Ace's shoulder, and her silver-blue hair caught the starlight and did that thing where it looked like fiber optic cable, each strand a thin channel of reflected light, and Ace thought *she is the most beautiful spreadsheet I have ever seen* and then thought *I am never saying that out loud* and then thought *she probably already knows.*

Shammy shifted too. Not closer, because she was already close, but lower, folding herself down so her head rested on Ace's other shoulder, which meant Shammy's storm-gradient hair was now draped across Ace's back like a silver-blue cape, and the weight of it was warm and slightly electric, the way Shammy always was, a gentle current that said *I'm here, I'm holding on, the weather can wait.*

They fit together. That was the thing. It had taken them a while to figure out the geometry of it, three bodies that were very different sizes, three people who held the world together in different registers, but they fit. Shammy's arm around both of them, long enough to be a blanket. Mai's hand in Ace's, precise and steady. Ace's weight against Shammy's side, pressure and shadow and the constant low hum of readiness that was her baseline state.

"You know what I keep thinking?" Ace said, into the silence.

"What?" Mai asked.

"I keep thinking that if something happened right now, if something came out of the ocean or the ground or the sky, I could get between it and you in about two and a half seconds. Maybe two if I draw while I'm moving."

"That's not a relaxing thought," Shammy murmured against her shoulder.

"No. It's not. But it's the thought that lets me sit here. It's the thought that makes this," she gestured vaguely at the beach, the stars, the two bodies pressed against hers, "possible. Because if I didn't know I could protect you, I couldn't be here at all."

Mai was quiet for a moment. Processing. The way she processed everything, running it through her analytical framework, sorting it into data and emotion and the particular category she kept for things Ace said that were both heartbreaking and logically sound.

"That's a very sad way to feel safe," Mai said finally.

"It's the only way I have."

Shammy's arm tightened around them both. A fractional increase in pressure, the kind that meant she was feeling something and expressing it physically because words weren't enough. The air around them warmed by a degree, just a degree, Shammy's instinct overriding her intention for a moment, and she caught herself, and the warmth stayed, because it had already happened and the air was already warm and that was fine.

"Then we'll sit here," Shammy said, "until you find another way. And if you don't find another way, we'll sit here anyway. Because you're here. And that's the thing that matters."

The ocean did its thing. The stars came out. The thing under the hotel hummed and waited and reached out through windows that were now showing the real view, the real sunset, the real sky, as if it had decided to give them the truth for a while, as if it understood that sometimes you needed to see things as they actually were before you could deal with things as they actually were.

And Ace, sitting on the beach with her shadow flat against the sand and her hand reaching for her katanas every five minutes and pulling away every five minutes and reaching again and pulling away again, felt something she couldn't name. Not peace. Not relaxation. Not any of the things she was supposed to feel on vacation.

This. The two of them. The space between reaching and letting go.

It wasn't enough. It was more than she'd had yesterday.

She'd take it.

The stars multiplied. The night deepened. And somewhere behind them, the resort hummed with the gentle, present attention of something that had noticed their moment on the beach and was giving them privacy, which was, Shammy would say later, the most polite thing an ancient anomaly had ever done for them. The source was learning. It was learning what they needed, when they needed space, when they needed warmth, when they needed to be left alone to figure out how to be who they were.

"You know what I think?" Shammy said, her voice drowsy against Ace's shoulder. "I think the source is learning to be a good friend. It's watching us and taking notes. Not analytical notes, Mai, emotional notes. It's figuring out that sometimes people need to sit on a beach and not be rescued."

"I wasn't going to rescue anyone," Ace said.

"You were going to try."

“I was going to be available for rescue. That's different.”

Shammy's laugh was a warm vibration against Ace's shoulder, a small weather event, a localized pressure system of affection. The air around them shifted, just slightly, humidity rising by 1%, temperature dropping by half a degree, because even drowsy Shammy couldn't stop modulating, and that was fine, because they were all doing their things, and they were all here, and the night was warm and the stars were out and the thing under the hotel was learning to be a friend.

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:20**

