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Chapter 6: Where Nothing Happens (Midpoint)

The anomalies found them on the beach.

Not one anomaly. Not a breakfast buffet or an opinionated elevator or windows showing impossible views. All of them. At once. Every anomaly that had manifested since they'd arrived, and several new ones that hadn't shown themselves before, all converging on the same patch of sand where three women were sitting and trying to have a vacation.

Or trying to. Mai had been making a tab. Shammy had been worrying about the tide. Ace had reached for her katana eighteen seconds ago and pulled back and was going to reach again in about three minutes.

The sand rearranged itself into a Fibonacci spiral.

The ocean glowed.

The wind whispered words that weren't words.

And the smooth stones in Shammy's pocket, all seven of them now, seven stones collected over three days, began to hum.

The Fibonacci spiral was large. Larger than the one in the breakfast buffet, larger than the napkin arrangements, larger than anything the source had done so far. It stretched from the waterline to the dune grass, twelve meters of sand reorganizing itself into mathematical precision while Mai watched and tried not to watch and watched anyway because she was Mai and watching was what she did.

The glow in the ocean was not bioluminescence. Mai had categorized bioluminescence on the second day. This was different. The light came from below the surface, from deep, as if the ocean floor itself was a lamp and someone had turned it on. The color was wrong too: not the green-blue of plankton but a warm amber, the color of candlelight, the color of something that had been in the dark for a long time and was reaching toward the only warmth it could find.

The wind carried sound. Not words. Not exactly. Frequencies that brushed against Mai's ears the way Shammy's atmospheric adjustments brushed against her skin, present but not quite graspable, the way someone speaks when they're trying to speak your language and they almost can.

And the stones. Seven smooth stones in Shammy's pocket, humming in unison, seven different pitches that harmonized into something almost musical, almost speech, almost a voice.

[ACE]

Her hand was on her katanas before the sand finished moving.

Her first thought was structural. The sand is moving, look for the mechanism, look for the source, grid the area. She started gridding the area. She was three steps into the grid before she realized there was nothing to grid for. It wasn't an attack pattern. It wasn't a threat pattern. It was something else. She didn't have the category.

Not drawing. There. The way her hand was always there, the way her shadow was always pressed flat, the way she was always ready, because ready was the only posture she knew and everything else felt like falling.

But this wasn't a threat. She could see it now, the way she could see exits, the way she could see the shape of a problem before she understood what the problem was. A pattern. The sand, the ocean, the wind, the stones. All of them doing the same thing. All of them pointing the same direction. All of them reaching toward the same point.

Not toward the hotel. Not toward the beach. Not toward the exit she'd mapped or the corridor she'd counted.

Toward them.

The spiral in the sand curled inward, toward where she was sitting. The glow in the ocean was brightest at the point closest to where she was sitting. The wind carried sound at the frequency that made her shadow press down, which was the frequency of things that were alive and paying attention.

The anomalies weren't happening around them. They were happening because of them.

"No," Ace said. Out loud. To no one, because the words came out before she could stop them, the way her hand went to her katanas before she could stop it. "No. That's not,"

But it was. She could feel it now, the way her shadow had been pressing harder since they arrived, the way the Violet fragment inside her had been stirring, restless, like it was resonating with something under the foundation. She was a walking anomaly attractor. Her shadow was an anomaly signal. Every time she counted exits, every time she reached for her katanas, every time her body went rigid with the hypervigilance she couldn't turn off, she was broadcasting.

And the thing under the hotel was receiving.

Ace's hand tightened on the hilt. She felt the emerald glow through the leather, the way she always felt it, the hum of the blades that matched the hum of the stones, the frequency of violence that she'd been carrying since the village. She was a weapon. That's what she was. A weapon that had learned to walk and talk and love two people who were also weapons, and together the three of them had walked into a zero-anomaly zone and turned it into a battlefield.

No. Not a battlefield. Something else. Something that didn't have a category in Ace's vocabulary because Ace's vocabulary was threat assessment and exit strategies and the mathematics of not dying. This wasn't a threat. This was,

She didn't have the word.

[MAI]

The correlation coefficient was not 0.94.

It was higher.

Mai had left her tablet in the room. She'd promised herself she wouldn't analyze. She'd spent the entire morning not analyzing, which had felt like drowning slowly in a sea of uncategorized data, and she'd been proud of herself, genuinely proud, in the way that people are proud of themselves when they do something that goes against every instinct they have.

But she could see the pattern without the tablet. She could see it the way she saw everything, clearly, structurally, with the mathematical precision of a mind that had been trained to read chaos and find the architecture underneath.

The Fibonacci spiral in the sand pointed at them.

The ocean glow centered on them.

The wind patterns, she could map them, even without the tablet, because she'd been mapping wind patterns since she was twelve years old, since the Tokyo breach, since she'd learned that understanding the air meant understanding what was in it, the wind patterns were circulating around their position like a weather system that had decided they were the eye.

They were the eye.

They were the center.

The anomalies weren't attracted to the location. They were attracted to the triad.

Specifically, and this was the part that made Mai's carefully constructed composure crack at the edges, specifically, the intersection of shadow-pressure (Ace), stabilizing field (Mai), and atmospheric resonance (Shammy). Three anomalous presences, each with their own field, each with their own frequency, and when they came together, when they stood in the same place at the same time, the combined field was,

Was an anomaly attractor.

They had come to a zero-anomaly zone, and their very presence had turned it into an anomaly hotspot.

The *Where Nothing Happens* resort was chosen because it had zero recorded anomalies. And now it had them, because of the three people who most needed a break from anomalies.

"We did this," Mai said. Her voice was level. Barely. The levelness was a structure she was building in real time, the way she built all her structures, with precision and effort and the desperate hope that if she made the frame strong enough, whatever was inside it wouldn't break through. "The anomalies aren't random. They're not attracted to the location. They're attracted to us. Our combined presence, Ace's shadow field, my stabilizing field, Shammy's atmospheric resonance, the intersection creates a localized anomaly attractor."

"Say that again," Ace said. "In words that aren't a technical report."

"We're the problem," Mai said. "We came to a zero-anomaly resort and turned it into an anomaly hotspot. The thing under the hotel isn't sending anomalies at us. It's responding to us. We're the

signal. It's the receiver."

The spiral in the sand pulsed. The glow in the ocean brightened. As if confirming Mai's analysis, as if nodding in agreement, as if the source itself was saying *yes, that's right, you've understood, finally, the thing I've been trying to show you.*

And Mai wished, for one sharp and terrible moment, that she hadn't understood. Because understanding meant feeding it. Understanding meant the correlation would go up. Understanding meant she was making it worse again, right now, by standing here and naming the pattern.

But she couldn't stop naming it. She was Mai. Naming patterns was what she was.

She looked at her hands. They were shaking. Not visibly, not the way Ace's hands shook when the Violet fragment surged, but at the micro level, the tremor that Mai could feel in her own bones, the frequency of someone whose operating system was throwing errors faster than it could process them. Her stabilizing field, the thing that made anomalies readable, that turned chaos into data, was active, fully deployed, and it was reading everything: the sand, the ocean, the air pressure, the resonance under the foundation, the hum of the stones, the frequency of Ace's breathing, the atmospheric shift around Shammy. All of it. All at once. More data than any twenty-three tabs could hold.

And the source was reading her back. She could feel it now, the way you feel someone watching you from across a room, the weight of attention that wasn't threatening but was definitely there. The glow in the ocean pulsed in time with her pulse. The spiral in the sand contracted when she inhaled and expanded when she exhaled. The source was synchronized with her. It had been synchronized with her since the beginning. She was the receiver and it was the signal and it was the other way around too, two patterns that had found each other and couldn't stop resonating.

Mai pressed her hands flat against her thighs. Grounding. The way Ace grounded when the hypervigilance peaked. Physical contact with something solid. The sand was solid. Her legs were solid. She was here.

[SHAMMY]

She felt it before they said it. Of course she did. She'd been feeling it since they arrived. The deep resonance under the foundation, the way the air shifted when they walked into a room, the way the hotel's entire atmosphere had reorganized itself around their presence like a weather system finding a new center of low pressure.

They were the center. She was the center, the vertical vector, the atmospheric resonance, the one who could feel the pressure changes in a room before anything visible happened. And she'd known. She'd known since the first day, since she'd pressed her palm against the window and felt something reach back, and she hadn't said anything, because she'd wanted so badly for this to be a vacation.

"I knew," she said. And then, because the sentence felt insufficient, didn't carry what she meant, she said it again: "I knew." Which was still not enough. She reached for the stone in her pocket. That wasn't what she'd meant to do. She put it back. "I felt it when we arrived. The resonance. The way the air changed around us."

Ace said nothing.

"The way the hotel's atmosphere reorganized itself to accommodate our fields," Shammy clarified,

which Ace probably knew, which was why she was still saying it, which was the problem. "I knew our presence was doing something to this place. And I didn't say anything because,"

"Because you wanted it to be a vacation," Ace said. Not angry. Flat. The way Ace said everything that mattered, flat and direct and without inflection, because inflection was a kind of vulnerability and Ace didn't do vulnerability unless she couldn't avoid it.

"Because I wanted it to be a vacation," Shammy agreed. "Because you both asked for this. Because we needed this. Because I thought, I thought if I didn't say it, maybe it wouldn't be real. Maybe we could be three people on a beach without, without being what we are."

"And what are we?" Mai asked. Her voice was careful. The way Mai's voice got when she was about to classify something, when she was about to put it in a category, when she was about to name it and thereby make it manageable.

"We're anomalies," Shammy said. "All three of us. We're walking anomalies who came to a place where nothing happens and made things happen. The resort's motto is *Where Nothing Happens* and we turned it into *Where Everything Happens Because We Showed Up*." She laughed, but it came out wrong, too bright, too brittle, the laugh she used when she was worried and trying not to show it. The air around her shivered, one degree down, two degrees up, a gust that came from nowhere and ruffled Mai's silver hair and pressed Ace's shadow flat. "We're vacation disasters. We're the people who can't go anywhere without making it anomalous. We can't even relax without,"

"Shammy." Ace's hand on her wrist. Not holding. There. The way Ace touched, present, direct, without words, because words were Ace's second language and her first was action, and right now the action was *I'm here, I'm not going anywhere, you don't have to hold this alone*.

Shammy's breath caught. The air temperature dropped one degree and rose two. The wind shifted. And for a moment, a moment, she let it happen. She let the air do what it wanted. She stopped modulating. The pressure around them shifted, and the anomaly manifestations on the beach pulsed in response, the spiral tightened, the glow brightened, the wind picked up, and Shammy pulled herself back, pulled the air back, stabilized, modulated, held the space like she always did.

The spiral loosened. The glow dimmed. The wind settled. Cause and effect, feedback and response, Shammy and the source, two atmospheric systems that could feel each other across the distance.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to, I'm supposed to be trying not to,"

The wind died. For one second, one full second, there was no wind at all. The beach was still. The ocean was still. The spiral in the sand stopped moving. And Shammy felt the source hold its breath, the way she was holding hers, two atmospheric systems pausing at the same moment, in the same silence, as if the world had decided to give them room to feel whatever they were feeling.

Then the wind came back, and the glow returned, and the spiral started moving again, and Shammy exhaled, and the air temperature settled at 23 degrees, which was the temperature she always chose, the temperature that made bodies comfortable, the temperature of someone who was holding the space whether she wanted to or not.

"You're supposed to be on vacation," Mai said. "We're all supposed to be on vacation. And instead we're standing on an anomalous beach that's responding to our combined field like a tuning fork responding to a sound it was built for."

[ACE]

Ace went still.

Not the stillness of composure. Not the stillness of readiness. A different kind of stillness, one she didn't recognize, one that didn't have a name, one that felt like standing on the edge of a cliff and realizing that the cliff wasn't a cliff, it was a door, and the door was open, and on the other side was something she'd been avoiding for as long as she could remember.

She could feel it now. Not the anomaly. Not the thing under the hotel. Not the sand rearranging itself or the ocean glowing or the wind carrying words that weren't words.

She could feel her own stillness.

For the first time since they'd arrived, maybe for the first time in years, her body wasn't moving. Her hand wasn't on her katanas. Her shadow wasn't pressing against the ground. Her eyes weren't scanning the perimeter. She was, standing. On a beach. With the two people she loved. While the world around her rearranged itself in patterns she couldn't fight.

And it terrified her.

Not the anomalies. Not the thing under the hotel. Not the fact that she was a walking anomaly attractor who had turned a zero-anomaly resort into a hotspot. That was manageable. That was a problem. Problems could be assessed and addressed and solved.

The stillness was not a problem. The stillness was a void. The space where her body was supposed to be moving and wasn't, and in that space, she could feel everything she'd been running from: the weight of her shadow, the pressure of the Violet fragment, the sound of wind through buildings that no longer existed, the memory of a village that had been destroyed because she was the reason it was destroyed, and if she stayed still, if she let herself feel all of that, she would,

What? Break? Shatter? Fall apart?

She didn't know. She'd never stayed still long enough to find out.

The sand was warm under her feet. The glow from the ocean lit her shadow from below, and the shadow was flat, not pressing, not reaching, lying on the sand like something that had decided to rest. The Fibonacci spiral curled around her position, and the stones in Shabby's pocket hummed, and the wind whispered, and Ace did not move.

Her hand was not on her katanas. It was at her side. The fingers were loose. Not gripping. Not counting. Not reaching. Loose.

This was wrong. This was the wrongest thing that had ever happened to her, wronger than anomalies, wronger than the Tokyo breach, wronger than the destruction of everything she'd loved, because in all of those moments she'd been moving, she'd been fighting, she'd been doing the thing that made her Ace. And now she was standing still, and the stillness was a language she didn't speak, and she was drowning in it.

"Ace." Mai's voice. Close. Mai's hand on her arm, the analytical anchor, the horizontal vector, the person who named things and made them manageable. "Your shadow went flat. Not pressing, flat.

I've never seen it do that."

"Neither have I," Ace said, and her voice came out strange. Quiet. Not flat. Not hard. Something else. Something she didn't have a name for because she'd never been still long enough to name it.

"What does it mean?" Mai asked.

"I don't know." And that was the truth of it. The simple, terrifying truth. Ace didn't know what her own stillness meant, because she'd never allowed it to exist long enough to find out. She'd spent her entire post-village life in motion, and motion was her language, and stillness was a language she'd never learned, and now she was standing on an anomalous beach being still, and she had no idea what to do with it.

[MAI]

The spreadsheet was useless.

This was not a revelation. Mai had known the spreadsheet was useless since she'd discovered the 0.94 correlation coefficient. But knowing it was useless and feeling it were different things, the way knowing you can't control something and standing in the middle of it while it happens around you were different things.

The pattern was them. They were the pattern. Mai couldn't analyze her way out of this because she WAS the thing she was trying to analyze. The observer was the observed. The classifier was the classified. Every tab in her spreadsheet was a mirror, and the reflection was her own face, and she couldn't categorize herself into a solution.

"I can't fix this," she said. She had started making a new tab for this, in her head, while she was saying it. *Triad Attractor Resonance, Unresolvable*. She had the column headers already. She was the problem and she was making tabs about being the problem.

The words came out wrong anyway. Not level, not precise, not structured. Wobbly. Uncertain. The voice of someone whose most reliable tool had become useless. "I can't analyze the anomaly because we ARE the anomaly. I can't find a solution because we're the cause. My entire methodology, everything I know how to do,"

"Is exactly what Ace does with her katanas," Shammy said. "And what I do with the air. We're all doing the same thing, Mai. We're all trying to control something that can't be controlled. And we can't. And that's, that's not failure. That's the truth."

"The truth," Ace said. Still in that strange quiet voice. Still in the stillness. "We're the problem. We can't fix us. We are us."

Mai looked at Ace. At the stillness she was wearing like a new coat that didn't quite fit. At the shadow that was flat on the sand, not pressing, not reaching, there. At the hands that were not on her katanas, that were hanging at her sides, that were doing nothing, which was the most frightening thing Mai had ever seen Ace do.

"Are you okay?" Mai asked.

"No," Ace said. "I'm still. I'm being still. And I don't, I've never,"

"You're doing it," Shammy said softly. "You're being still. Right now. And you're okay. You're here. We're here. Nothing is falling apart."

Ace's shadow flickered. Pressed down, released, pressed down. Like a heartbeat. Like the thing she couldn't control but was learning to ride.

"I don't know how to do this," Ace said.

"Neither do I," Mai said. "I don't know how to not analyze. I don't know who I am without categories."

"Neither do I," Shammy said. "I don't know how to not hold the space. I don't know how to be in it instead of managing it."

The three of them stood on the beach. The anomaly manifestations continued around them, the spiral, the glow, the wind, the humming stones, but they had faded, somehow, as if the hotel, or whatever was under it, had sensed the shift in the triad's field and was waiting to see what happened next.

"Maybe we don't have to know how," Ace said. And it was the quietest thing she'd ever said, the softest thing, the thing that came from the space where her body was still and her shadow was flat and her hands were not on her katanas. "Maybe we have to be here. And not know. And be here anyway."

Mai's hand found Ace's. Shammy's arm went around both of them. The triangle held.

The ocean pulsed. The spiral in the sand pulsed in response. The source was echoing them. The three of them held each other, and the anomaly held its breath, and for a long moment the beach was still, the way Ace was still, the way Mai was wordless, the way Shammy was not adjusting anything.

Ace's shadow pressed against the sand. Not flat anymore. Pressing, the way it always did when she was in contact with both of them, the protective instinct she couldn't turn off. But the pressure was different. Softer. Not the press of someone bracing for impact. The press of someone leaning against something solid.

Mai's stabilizing field was active. She could feel it humming around her, the analytical field that made anomalies legible, that turned chaos into structure. But the structure wasn't categorizing right now. It was holding. The way a frame holds a picture. The way a hand holds another hand.

Shammy's atmospheric resonance was everywhere. The air around them was 23 degrees and 45% humidity and the wind was from the northwest at 4 knots, and all of those numbers were the numbers Shammy chose when she wanted people to feel safe and comfortable and held, and she was choosing them now, automatically, the way she chose everything, by feeling what the air needed and providing it.

But she was also here. In the space. Not holding it from above. In it. With them. Her cheek against Mai's hair, her hand on Ace's back, her long legs folded at angles that should have been awkward but looked like rest.

Then the wind picked up, and the moment broke, and they were three anomalies again, standing on an anomalous beach that responded to their every breath. But the moment had happened. It was real. It was something none of them would categorize, and that was the point.

[ALL]

They walked to the edge of the resort.

Not because they'd decided to. Because the pattern led them there, the spiral in the sand, the glow in the water, the wind that whispered in frequencies only Shammy could parse, the stones that hummed and pointed like compass needles finding north.

Shammy walked between them. Not because she needed to be between them, but because that was where the air was most stable, where the three fields intersected, where the resonance was strongest. She could feel the source pulling at her, the way the moon pulls at the tide, not a force but an influence, not a demand but an invitation. The stones in her pocket hummed louder as they walked, and Shammy's hair lifted and shifted in a breeze that wasn't blowing, reaching toward something under the ground, and she let it. She didn't adjust it. She didn't pull it back. Her hair could reach if it wanted to. That was allowed.

Ace walked on Shammy's right, her stride shorter but no less certain, her shadow a dark line on the sand that pulsed in time with the ocean glow. Her hand was not on her katanas. She was counting her steps instead. One foot, then the other. Not a threat assessment. A walk.

Mai walked on Shammy's left, her analytical mind mapping every centimeter of the path without her permission, the distance from the beach towel to the dune grass (forty-seven meters), the angle of the sun (38 degrees above the horizon), the direction of the pull (south-southwest, toward the hotel's foundation). She let the numbers come. She didn't try to stop them. She didn't build a tab for them either.

The edge of the resort was where the manicured lawn met the wild beach grass, where the hotel's carefully maintained *Where Nothing Happens* atmosphere gave way to something older and less controlled. There was a fence, decorative, not functional, and beyond it, the beach continued, wilder, with driftwood and seaweed and the kind of debris that accumulates on coastlines where no one is paying attention.

And under the fence, half-buried in the sand, was a hatch.

Not a door. Not a trapdoor. A hatch, metal, old, rusted at the edges but still functional, with a handle that had been worn smooth by time and salt air. It looked like it belonged to the hotel's infrastructure. A maintenance access, maybe. A service entrance to whatever mechanical systems kept the resort running.

But when Shammy put her hand on the handle, the metal hummed. Not from vibration. From recognition. The way her stones hummed. The way the air hummed when she entered a room.

The hum traveled up Shammy's arm and through her shoulder and into her chest, and she could feel it, the way she could feel everything, the presence on the other side, patient and old and warm, the way a house is warm when someone's been living in it, the way a room is warm when someone's been sitting in it, the way anything is warm when it's been waiting for you to come home.

Mai could see the change in Shammy's posture. The way her shoulders dropped two centimeters, the way her breathing slowed, the way her hair, which had been lifting toward the hatch, settled against her back. Recognition. The same recognition Mai had seen when Shammy found the first stone. Not surprise. Homecoming.

Ace could see it too. Her hand twitched toward her katanas, a reflex, the protective reflex that fired whenever something new happened, and she caught it, pulled it back, forced her fingers open. She was getting better at catching it. The reflex was still there. The catch was new.

"This is it," Shammy said. "This is where it is. This is, the source. It's down there. Under the hotel. Under everything."

"We're not going down there," Ace said automatically. The words came out before she could think, the protective response, the exit-strategy response, the *I need to assess the threat before we enter the space* response that had kept them alive through more anomalous encounters than Mai could count (and Mai could count everything).

But her hand was not on her katanas. Her shadow was flat on the sand. And when she said "we're not going down there," it sounded like a question, not a command.

"I don't think it wants us to go down there yet," Shammy said. Her hand was still on the hatch. The hum continued. Warm, steady, patient. "I think it wants us to know it's here. I think it's been wanting us to know since we arrived. And I think," She paused. The wind shifted around her, carrying salt and hibiscus and that faint electrical charge. "I think it's been waiting a very long time for someone who could hear it."

"Someone like you," Mai said.

"Someone like us," Shammy corrected. "It's been reaching out through patterns because Mai thinks in patterns. Through organization because Mai understands organization. Through the elevator and the windows because Ace reads spaces and threats. Through the stones and the air because I hear what the atmosphere is saying. It's been talking to us in our own languages."

The hatch hummed. The ocean glowed. The spiral in the sand pointed toward them, and the wind whispered, and the stones pulsed warm in Shammy's pocket.

And the three of them stood at the edge of the resort, looking at something that shouldn't exist under a *zero anomaly* hotel, a hatch that led to a source that had been alone for longer than the hotel had been standing, reaching out through napkin cranes and juice carafes and windows that showed the truth, waiting for someone who could hear it say hello.

Ace reached for Mai's hand. Mai reached for Shammy's. The triangle held, physically this time, three hands linked, three fields intersecting, one resonance that the source could hear.

"We should go back," Ace said.

"We should go back," Mai agreed.

"We should definitely go back," Shammy said.

None of them moved.

The hatch hummed. The source waited. The vacation, such as it was, had become something else entirely.

And the three of them stood at the edge, holding hands, not going back, not going forward, being there, together, in the space between what they'd planned and what was actually happening, which was, Mai thought, the most honest place they'd been all vacation.

Behind them, the Fibonacci spiral in the sand completed one final rotation. Then it held. Patient. The way everything about this place was patient. Waiting for the three anomalies to decide what kind of vacation this was going to be.

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