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Chapter 7: Tension Lines

The argument started over dinner, which was appropriate, because arguments in a triad that had been together as long as this one always seemed to start over something mundane, something that wasn't the real thing, something that could carry the weight of what was actually wrong without collapsing under it.

They were sitting at a table near the open wall of the resort restaurant, the one that faced the ocean, where the breeze came in and the sound of the waves was loud enough to fill silences but not loud enough to fill this one. Ace had positioned herself with her back to the wall and her eyes on both exits, because she was Ace and that was what Ace did even when she was trying not to. Mai had her tablet angled on the table at precisely 47 degrees, because she was Mai and even when she was eating dinner the data needed to be accessible. And Shammy sat between them, 195 centimeters of storm-elemental folded into a chair that was not designed for someone who was 195 centimeters, her knees visible above the table edge, her hair drifting in a breeze that wasn't blowing, because she was Shammy and even when she was trying to relax she was adjusting the air around them, keeping it at exactly the temperature and humidity that made her partners comfortable.

The something, in this case, was the dinner menu.

"I'm saying," Mai said, "that ordering the fish special is statistically the better choice given the resort's proximity to the ocean, and also given that the chicken has been sitting under a heat lamp for an unspecified duration, and also given that I have a tab in my spreadsheet,"

"You deleted your spreadsheet," Ace said.

"I deleted the anomalous analysis spreadsheet. I still have the meal planning spreadsheet. They're different tabs. They were always different tabs. The meal planning spreadsheet is organized and sensible and does not feed into anomalous manifestations, unlike certain other tabs I could mention."

"The meal planning spreadsheet is organized and sensible," Ace repeated, and her voice was flat, but it was the kind of flat that had edges, the kind that came from someone who was not upset about the spreadsheet but was upset about something else and had chosen the spreadsheet as the landing site for her frustration.

"Yes." Mai set down her menu. "Would you like to see it? It has a color-coded risk assessment for every item on the menu."

"I would not like to see it."

"Then don't criticize my organizational system."

"I'm not criticizing your organizational system. I'm saying you can't let go of controlling things even when you told me you were going to try."

The silence that followed was the kind of silence that happens when someone has said the thing that was supposed to stay unsaid.

Mai's eyes went flat. Not cold, flat, the way data goes flat when it's been compressed, when all the structure has been removed and what's left is the raw thing underneath. "I'm not controlling things."

"You deleted one spreadsheet and kept three others."

"I need structure to function, Ace. That's not the same as control."

"It's the same pattern. You organize when you're scared. You categorize when you can't feel. You,"

"And what do you do?" Mai's voice sharpened. Not loud. Sharp, the way her eyes went sharp when she'd identified a pattern she didn't like, the way her analysis cut when she turned it on something that wasn't an anomaly. "You reach for your katanas. Every five minutes. Every single five minutes, your hand goes to the hilt and you pull it back. You do the same thing over and over and you tell me to stop, you tell me to stop analyzing, you tell me to let go, and meanwhile you're gripping a weapon you don't need in a resort where the biggest threat is a breakfast buffet that folds itself into cranes!"

"I'm not,"

"You are. You're doing exactly what I'm doing. We're both doing exactly what we always do, which is cling to the thing that makes us feel safe even when the thing is making us less safe, and the difference is that you're allowed to have your coping mechanism and I'm supposed to delete mine!"

The restaurant had gone quiet. Not completely, there were other guests, there was the sound of the ocean, there was Carlos at the front desk doing whatever Carlos did when guests were having emotional confrontations in his restaurant, but quiet enough. Quiet enough for Ace to hear the blood in her own ears. Quiet enough for Shammy, who had been sitting between them, to feel the air pressure drop and then rise and then drop again, the way it did when she was trying not to adjust it and failing. Shammy's hands were flat on the table, palms down, the way she held things when she was trying to keep them from flying apart, and the wine glasses were vibrating, not from the argument, from Shammy, from the weather inside her that was trying to get out.

"Ace," Shammy said softly. "Mai. Let's take a breath."

"Don't tell me to breathe," Ace said, and it came out harder than she meant, harder than she wanted, harder than anything she'd ever said to Shammy, and she saw Shammy's expression flicker, not hurt, Shammy didn't do hurt visibly, but something else, something that was trying to be okay and wasn't quite managing it.

"Okay," Shammy said. "I won't." She reached for her water glass. It was empty. She'd drunk it already without noticing. She set it back down with a small click that was the loudest sound at the table for a moment.

"You, that's not what I meant." Ace pressed her hands flat on the table. Felt her shadow press flat too, pressing down, pressing hard, cornered-shadow, the response she couldn't suppress. "I meant, I'm not, I'm not trying to,"

"You're not trying to what?" Mai asked. "Tell me what you're not trying to do, Ace. Because from where I'm sitting, you're trying to tell me that my coping mechanism is wrong while yours is fine, and that's, that's not fair. That's not how this works."

"I'm not saying yours is wrong. I'm saying,"

"You're saying I should stop. You said it this morning. You said I should stop analyzing. You compared

my spreadsheet to your katanas. And then you spent the entire afternoon reaching for your katanas every four minutes,”

“Three and a half,” Shammy murmured, because she'd been counting, she always counted, she counted the things she loved the way she counted smooth stones, with care and attention and the hope that the counting itself would keep them safe.

“, and you didn't see the problem with that.” Mai finished. Her voice was not loud. It was worse than loud. It was quiet and precise and cut like her analysis always cut, when it was turned on something real instead of something anomalous. “You're asking me to give up the thing that makes me feel safe, and you're not giving up yours.”

“Because I can't,” Ace said. And it came out raw. Stripped of the flatness. Stripped of the hard edge. The truth, which was that she couldn't, she couldn't stop reaching for the katanas, she'd tried, she'd been trying all vacation, and her hand still went to the hilt every five minutes and every five minutes she pulled it back and every five minutes she reached again because that was who she was and she didn't know how to be anyone else.

“I can't,” she said again. “I don't know how to stop.”

The silence that followed was different. Not the silence of a restaurant where people were trying not to listen. The silence of three people who had been together long enough to know when something real had been said.

Mai's face shifted. The sharp precision went out of it. Underneath was something else, recognition, the kind that costs something to acknowledge. Her hands were on the table, and her fingers had stopped moving, and that was unusual, because Mai's fingers were always moving, always scrolling, always counting. They were still now.

“I know,” Mai said. Quiet. The way she said things that cost her something. “I know you can't. I can't either. That's, that's the point. That's what we're both doing. We're both holding on to the things that make us feel safe.”

“And I'm holding the space,” Shammy said, and her voice was the quiet voice, the careful voice, the voice she used when she was about to say something she'd been holding back, and Ace felt the air around Shammy shift, drop, rise, stabilize, and then shift again, and this time Shammy didn't pull it back, didn't modulate, didn't hold. “And I can't stop either. I've been adjusting the humidity and the temperature and the wind direction since we arrived. I've been making sure the air pressure is comfortable and the ocean breeze is going the right way and the hotel atmosphere is stable. I've been holding the space for both of you because that's what I do, that's who I am, and I can't,”

Her voice cracked.

Not broke. Cracked. The way a storm cracks when it's about to let go of something it's been holding. The air around her shifted again, more dramatically this time, a gust that came from nowhere, a pressure change that made the wine glasses on the table hum, a temperature fluctuation that Ace felt on her skin like a word Shammy was trying to say and couldn't.

“I can't stop holding the space,” Shammy said, and her voice was the raw voice, the honest voice, the voice that didn't use weather metaphors because the weather was doing the talking for her. The air around her shimmered, heat-haze distortion, and the candle on the table flickered in a direction that

had nothing to do with wind. "I've been doing it for both of you all vacation. Making sure everything is comfortable. Making sure the environment is right. Making sure you can relax, you can breathe, you can focus. And I can't, I don't know how to be in the space instead of holding it. I don't know how to let the air be the air without adjusting it. And I thought, I thought if I didn't say anything about the thing under the hotel, if I kept holding, if I kept modulating, then maybe everything would be fine, and we could have our vacation, and,"

"You've been holding the thing under the hotel too," Ace said. Not an accusation. A realization. The kind that lands in the space between understanding and something else.

"I've been feeling it," Shammy said. "Since we arrived. I've been, it's been reaching out, and I've been holding the space between us and it, modulating the resonance so it doesn't overwhelm the resort, keeping the boundary stable so the anomalies stay small and manageable and don't escalate into something dangerous. That's why the buffet reorganized instead of, instead of something worse. That's why the elevator had opinions instead of, instead of something that could hurt someone. I've been holding the space this whole time. And I didn't say anything because,"

"Because you wanted us to have a vacation," Mai said. The same words Ace had used earlier. The same words that had started the argument. But they meant something different now. Not an accusation. A recognition.

"Because I wanted us to have a vacation," Shammy agreed. "And I thought if I held it, if I modulated, if I kept everything balanced, then maybe we could have our vacation, and the thing under the hotel would wait, and we could be three people on a beach instead of three anomalies on a mission."

The restaurant had gone quiet around them. The other guests had found other tables, other conversations, other places to look. Carlos was at the front desk with the studied focus of a man who had seen many things at this resort and had chosen not to see this one.

"So what do we do?" Ace asked. And it wasn't the flat voice. It wasn't the hard voice. It was the voice she used when she was asking a question she didn't know the answer to, which was the most vulnerable voice she had, which was the voice that said *I don't know, I need help, I can't do this alone*.

Nobody answered. The wine glasses hummed faintly, residual vibration from Shammy's emotional weather. The ocean was audible through the restaurant's open wall, constant, indifferent, pulling and pushing in rhythms that Mai was absolutely still counting in her head even though no one was asking her to.

"We should go back to the room," Mai said. Not a solution. A triage. The kind of thing you say when the wound is still bleeding and you need to get it somewhere you can see it clearly.

"Okay," Ace said.

"Okay," Shammy said.

They left the restaurant. Carlos caught Ace's eye as they passed the front desk. His expression was something other than the professional smile — something she couldn't immediately classify. She thought for a moment he was going to say something: maybe ask if the dinner had been satisfactory, maybe offer to move their reservation. He just nodded. Small, once. Then looked back at his desk.

She nodded back. She didn't know what they had agreed to. She didn't trust Carlos's smile. But that hadn't been his smile.

They walked back to the room. The elevator, which had been opinionated all week, opened its doors without complaint and took them to the third floor without stopping at the pool or the lobby or anywhere else, as if it had sensed that they'd had enough for one night and decided to behave.

The hallway was quiet. Their footsteps sounded different at night, more deliberate, as if the hotel was paying attention and wanted them to know it was listening. Shammy paused at their door. Her hand went to the keycard, then stopped.

"It's humming differently tonight," she said. "The source. Underneath. It's not reaching anymore. It's just, waiting. Being there."

"Is that good or bad?" Ace asked.

"It's good." Shammy's voice was soft. "It's being patient. It's giving us space. It's, I think it understands that we're having a hard night and it doesn't want to make things harder."

"The anomaly under the hotel is giving us emotional space," Mai said.

"It's very considerate," Shammy said. "It's been alone for a long time. It knows what a hard night feels like."

The room was quiet. The windows showed the real view, the ocean at night, the stars, the gentle glow that might have been bioluminescence and might have been something else. The smooth stones in Shammy's pocket hummed softly, patient and warm, like a heartbeat that wasn't hers. Shammy sat on the floor with her back against the bed, her knees drawn up, taking up space the way she always did even when she was trying not to, 195 centimeters of storm-elemental compressed into a corner because the room wasn't built for someone her size and she'd learned to make herself small even when she wasn't.

Ace sat on the edge of the bed. Her hands were in her lap. Her katanas were on the nightstand, which was as far from her hands as they'd been all vacation. Her shadow pressed flat on the carpet, not reaching, not scanning, pressed the way it pressed when she'd run out of places to go.

"I don't know how to stop," she said. Not the argument anymore. The truth. The raw thing. "I don't know how to stop reaching. I don't know how to stop counting. I've been doing it since the village, since the Violet fragment, since the first time my shadow pressed flat and I realized that stopping meant feeling and feeling meant remembering. I've been running for so long that I don't know what standing still looks like. And I asked for this vacation. I'm the one who said I wanted to go somewhere nothing happens. And I can't. I can't stop making things happen."

Mai sat beside her. Their shoulders touched. Mai's stabilizing field hummed around them, the analytical field that made chaos legible, that turned panic into data, and right now it was holding, the way a frame holds a picture, the way a hand holds another hand.

"I don't know how to stop either," Mai said. "I deleted the spreadsheet and I made three new tabs before dinner. I can't stop categorizing. I'm scared that if I stop understanding things, I won't know who I am."

Shammy sat on the floor in front of them, because the bed wasn't big enough for all three, and she'd chosen the floor. The carpet was the resort's signature beige. There was a small circular stain near the baseboard that might have been wine, might have been salt water. Shammy had been looking at it since they walked in. She didn't know why. Her knees were drawn up, which made her look smaller than she was, which was a trick that 195 centimeters of storm-elemental had to work hard to pull off.

"I don't know how to stop holding the space," Shammy said. "I don't know how to be in it. I've been modulating for so long I don't remember what the air feels like when I'm not adjusting it." Her hair lifted, strands moving toward the window, toward the ocean, toward something below the hotel that she could still feel even through walls and floors and whatever distance separated them from the source.

Three confessions. Three admissions. Three people in a quiet room while the ocean murmured and the stones hummed and the source waited beneath them, and the confessions hung in the air, unresolved, the way real confessions hang when there's no easy answer, when the only thing you can do is say it and let it be said and hope that saying it is enough for now.

The air in the room was Shammy's air, 22 degrees and 45% humidity and the faint charge that meant she was adjusting even when she wasn't trying to, and the shadows were Ace's shadows, pressed flat on the carpet like something that had given up reaching, and the silence was Mai's silence, the silence of a mind that was still running numbers even when the mouth had stopped.

"We're not okay," Ace said. Not a question. A fact. The kind of fact that hurts to say and hurts more to leave unsaid.

"No," Mai said. "We're not."

"But we're here," Shammy said. Her hand found Ace's knee, then Mai's. Warm, careful, the touch of someone who was still holding the space even while she was admitting she couldn't stop holding it. "We're here. We're together. We're not alone."

"We're not alone," Ace repeated.

And that was the thing, wasn't it. The thing that the source had been trying to say all along, through napkins and elevators and windows and stones. *Not alone*. The most important thing. The only thing, really. That you could be broken, you could be scared, you could be reaching for katanas every five minutes and building spreadsheets you'd promised to delete and holding the atmosphere at 22 degrees because you didn't know how to let the air be the air, and you could still be not alone. You could still have someone's hand on your knee. You could still have a shoulder to lean against. You could still have a 195-centimeter storm-elemental sitting on the floor in front of you, making herself small so you could have more room, which was the most Shammy thing Shammy had ever done, and also the saddest, because Shammy was always making herself small so other people could be comfortable, and one day someone was going to need to make the space big enough for her.

That day wasn't today. But maybe it could be soon. Maybe that was what vacation was for. Not rest, not relaxation, but making the space big enough for everyone who was in it. Including the source under the hotel, who was waiting, patiently, in the dark, being considerate, giving them room, because it had been alone for so long that it had learned to be very good at giving people room, which was a kind of love too, maybe, the quiet kind, the kind that doesn't reach out but doesn't leave either.

Outside, the ocean glowed softly. The stones hummed. The source waited.

Inside, three people who couldn't stop being what they were sat in the dark and held each other and didn't try to fix anything, because some things can't be fixed, some things can only be said, and saying them, in the dark, in the quiet, with the people you love, was, for tonight, enough.

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