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## Chapter 8: The Argument After the Argument

The morning after the argument, the anomalies paused.

Not stopped. Paused. Like the resort itself had taken a breath, the windows showed the real view, the breakfast buffet stayed where it was, the elevator took them to the floor they pressed without commentary. Even the smooth stones in Shammy's pocket went quiet, their hum settling to a low, patient throb that was almost peaceful.

Mai woke up with Ace's shadow pressed against her back and Shammy's arm across her waist. She had, for one confused moment, no idea where she was. Not disoriented — just the air was slightly wrong, 22.5 degrees, and the mattress gave differently than the one at home, and she'd been dreaming about something she couldn't remember that had felt important. Then the weight of Shammy's arm and the pressure of Ace's back and the sound of waves through the balcony door pulled it all back in. The resort. The argument. Right. The triangle they made in the bed was lopsided because Shammy took up 1.5 people's worth of horizontal space and Ace was compact enough to fit in the remaining quarter, but it held, the way it always held, the way it had held through the argument and the confessions and the long night of not-sleeping that had followed.

Shammy's hair was doing the thing where it drifted across Mai's face, silver-white strands that moved on their own, cool and electric. The air temperature was 22.5 degrees, which was Shammy's unconscious adjustment for Mai's comfort. The humidity was 45%, which was Shammy's unconscious adjustment for Ace's shadow, which pressed down harder in dry air. Everything about the room was Shammy, adjusted and modulated and held, and that was the point, that was the thing Shammy couldn't stop doing, and this morning, after the argument, after the confessions, Mai noticed it differently. Not as a problem to solve. As a person who loved them enough to adjust the air while she slept.

"They're giving us space," Shammy said, without opening her eyes. She was awake. She'd been awake, probably, since before Mai, because Shammy's sleep schedule was a suggestion she accepted or rejected based on atmospheric conditions. "The source. It's, it's holding back. Waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Mai asked.

"For us to be ready, I think." Shammy's eyes opened. Bright, storm-charged, the particular blue that meant she was feeling the resonance under the hotel even when she wasn't talking about it. "It's been alone for so long. It can wait a little longer."

"That's," Mai started, and then stopped herself. The sentence she'd been building, *that's not scientifically verifiable or we need more data or how do you know what a stabilized reality pocket is feeling*, collapsed under the weight of last night's confessions, which had ended not with a resolution but with a recognition: they couldn't stop being who they were, but they could try to be more than who they were.

"That's kind," Ace said, from behind Mai. Her voice was the morning voice, flat, low, not yet warmed up. She was still pressed against Mai's back, her shadow a dark weight on the sheets, and her hands

were not on her katanas, which were on the nightstand, which was farther away than they'd been at any point during the vacation. This was, by Ace's standards, practically radical vulnerability.

"It is kind," Shammy agreed. She sat up, which was a production, because Shammy sitting up in a bed that was designed for people who were not 195 centimeters involved arranging limbs at angles that shouldn't have been graceful but somehow were, like watching a storm find its shape. "It's been reaching out through napkins and elevators and window views because it's lonely. And now it's giving us space because it can tell we need it. That's, that's the kind of thing I would do. That's the kind of thing I have done. When someone needs space, I give them space. I hold the space around them so it's comfortable, so they can breathe, so they can,"

She stopped. Because holding space was what she did. And she was trying not to do it. Or trying to notice when she was doing it. Or trying to, she didn't know what she was trying to do. That was the problem with trying to change the thing you did automatically. You didn't have a replacement. You had the absence, and the absence felt like falling.

"The air pressure in here is perfect," Mai observed. She hadn't meant to. The words came out before she could stop them, like data points, like observations, like every single thing she noticed, because noticing was her language and she couldn't stop speaking it even when she was trying to learn a new one.

"The air pressure in here is perfect because I've been adjusting it since we woke up," Shammy said, and there was no accusation in it, the quiet admission of someone who was doing the thing she was trying not to do and couldn't help it. "I set it to 72% relative humidity and 23 degrees, which is the combination that makes Ace's shadow relax and your posture loosen by approximately three degrees, and I know those numbers because I've been tracking them since we arrived, and I can't stop tracking them any more than Ace can stop counting exits or you can stop making spreadsheets."

"I deleted three spreadsheets last night," Mai said. "After the argument. I deleted the anomalous analysis one, the spatial mapping one, and the one that tracked Ace's katana-reach frequency. I kept the meal planning one and the vacation itinerary one because, because,"

"Because you need them," Ace said. Not a judgment. Not an accusation. A statement, the way Ace made statements, flat and direct and true. "You need them the way I need to know where the exits are. The way Shammy needs to know that the air pressure is right. We need these things. They're not problems to fix. They're how we function."

"I'm trying to function differently," Mai said. "I'm trying to, to be here. To not categorize everything. To watch the ocean without mapping the wave intervals."

"How's that going?"

"Terribly. I've mapped the wave intervals fourteen times this morning."

Ace's mouth did the thing. The almost-thing. The thing that was almost a smile but wasn't quite, because Ace didn't smile at jokes, she smiled at people, and only when she thought they weren't looking, and Mai was always looking, and right now she was looking, and Ace's mouth was doing the thing.

"Fourteen times is an improvement over yesterday," Ace said.

"I'll add it to the spreadsheet I'm not making."

They went to the beach.

Not because they'd planned it. Not because Mai's itinerary (which she'd promised she wasn't following but had definitely memorized) said beach time at 10:00 AM. Because Ace walked toward the beach and Mai followed and Shammy went where they went, which was where she always went, which was beside them, which was the only place she wanted to be.

The beach was empty in the way that beaches are empty in the early morning, when the sand is still cool and the sun is still low and the only footprints are from people who are walking not because they're going somewhere but because they need to move.

Ace walked. She didn't count her steps. She didn't count the exits from the beach (two, plus the service path behind the cabanas, plus the rocky outcropping that could be scaled in an emergency). She didn't, she was counting the exits. She was. Four exits from the beach, and she'd counted them in the first thirty seconds, and she couldn't stop, and that was okay, that was who she was, that was the thing she did, and she was going to try to also do something else, which was walk on a beach with the people she loved and not treat it like a threat assessment.

"You're counting the exits," Mai said.

"Four. Plus the service path and the outcropping."

"I know. I've memorized them too."

"Of course you have."

"Three of them are in my beach exit contingency tab."

"I thought you deleted that one."

"I deleted the original. I made a new one. It's more streamlined."

Ace looked at her. Mai looked back. And something passed between them, not an argument, not a judgment, the recognition that they were both doing their things and they were both here, on the beach, in the morning, with the anomalies paused and the source waiting and the vacation that wasn't a vacation still technically ongoing.

Shammy walked behind them for a stretch, her long stride covering the distance in half the steps, and then she moved between them, and then she drifted ahead, and then she came back, because Shammy's position in any group was the position that made the most room for everyone else. She was a weather system that way, always shifting to fill the gaps, always adjusting to make the space comfortable.

"I'm doing it again," Shammy said. "The temperature. I'm, the air is 0.7 degrees warmer than it should be and 3% drier because I'm adjusting it for your comfort levels, and I can't stop, and I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Ace said.

"I'm doing the thing I said I was going to try not to do."

"You're doing the thing you do. And you're telling us about it. That's different. That's the new thing. You're not only doing it, you're also being honest about doing it."

"The new thing is honesty?" Shammy asked, and there was a brightness in her voice that was almost humor, almost warmth, almost the Shammy who teased and meandered and made weather metaphors, the Shammy who hadn't fully surfaced since the argument, the Shammy who was in there somewhere, behind the holding and the modulating and the not-saying-things.

"The new thing is being here," Mai said. "Being present. Not only doing the thing, being aware that you're doing the thing. Not only analyzing, noticing that you're analyzing. Not only scanning, acknowledging that you're scanning. We can't stop. But we can notice. And we can tell each other. And that's something. That's not nothing."

"It's not nothing," Ace agreed. "It's like reaching for my katanas. I'm going to reach for them. That's what I do. But I can reach for them and also be here. I can count the exits and also walk on the beach. I can be who I am and also try to be something else."

"What else?" Shammy asked.

"Present," Ace said. "I want to be present. Not scanning. Not protecting. Present. Here. With both of you. Even if I'm also counting exits. I want to count exits AND be here."

The ocean did its thing. The sand was cool. The sun was climbing. The anomalies had paused, and the source was waiting, and the three of them walked on the beach and did their things, Ace counted exits, Mai measured wave intervals, Shammy adjusted the air, and they also did the new thing, which was telling each other about it, which was being present about it, which was being who they were and also trying to be more.

"Let's go in the water," Mai said.

Ace stopped walking. "What?"

"The ocean. Let's go in it. We've been at a beach resort for three days and none of us has been in the ocean. That seems like a data point worth acknowledging."

"You want to swim," Ace said. The way Ace said it, flat and suspicious, the way she said anything that wasn't a threat assessment or an exit count, as if swimming were a tactical decision that needed evaluation.

"I want to try being present in water," Mai said. "I want to feel the ocean without categorizing its mineral composition. I want to stand in the waves and not build a tab for wave dynamics. And I want both of you to come with me, because the last three days have been about what we can't do, and I want to try something we can."

Ace looked at the ocean. Looked at the waterline, where the waves were pulling and pushing in their 7.3-second intervals. Looked at Mai.

"The water line is approximately 30 meters from here," Ace said. "The depth increases gradually. There's a sandbar at about 15 meters. The current is running parallel to the shore at approximately 0.2 meters per second."

"You just analyzed the ocean."

"I know. I'm also going to go in it. That's the new thing."

Shammy was already walking toward the water. Her hair lifted in a breeze that wasn't blowing, reaching toward the ocean like it was coming home, and the air around her shimmered, warmer than ambient, because the water was cold and Shammy was already adjusting for that, already making sure the transition wouldn't be a shock, already holding the space, and she caught herself, and the shimmer faded, and the air returned to ambient temperature, and Shammy shivered.

"The water's cold," she said. "I'm not adjusting for it. That's, that's what cold feels like."

"Roughly 18 degrees," Mai said. "Based on the air temperature differential and the,"

"Mai."

"Right. Not analyzing. The water is cold. I'm going in it."

They went in.

The water was cold. Mai felt it first on her ankles, sharp and bright, the kind of cold that was a data point and also a sensation, and she was feeling both at the same time, the number and the feeling, and that was the new thing, the ability to hold both without choosing one. The sand shifted under her feet. A wave pushed against her calves. The salt stung a small cut on her knee she hadn't noticed.

Ace waded in beside her, compact and dark and watchful, her shadow pressing against the water in a way that made the surface darken around her. She was counting something, Mai could tell by the way her jaw was set, but she was also in the ocean, which was not a threat assessment, which was not an exit strategy, which was a woman standing in water because someone she loved had asked her to.

Shammy went in up to her waist, which meant the water was only at Mai's hips, the height differential doing what it always did, making the three of them occupy different strata of the same experience. Shammy's hair floated on the surface, silver-white strands spreading like a halo, and she laughed, the warm, meandering kind of laugh, the kind that had been missing for days.

"The current's pulling south," Shammy said. "And I'm not adjusting it. I'm letting it pull."

"That's terrifying," Ace said.

Shammy laughed, but it came out sounding like a question somehow, uncertain at the edges, the laugh of someone who wasn't sure if this was actually a funny thing or a terrifying thing or both.

"It is! And I'm doing it anyway! I think." She looked down at the water around her waist. "Yes. Still pulling. Still not adjusting."

A wave hit them. The current pulled south. Nobody fell.

A wave hit them, larger than the previous ones, and Mai lost her footing for a moment and grabbed Ace's arm, and Ace grabbed Shammy's wrist, and the three of them stood in the ocean, holding each other, while the water pushed and pulled and did what water did, and none of them analyzed it, or if they did they also felt it, and that was the new thing, the thing they were learning, the thing that was harder than any of them had expected but also possible, also real, also happening right now, in the ocean, on a beach, at a resort where nothing was supposed to happen.

"We're swimming," Ace said.

"We're standing in the ocean," Mai corrected. "Swimming would require,"

"We're swimming," Ace said again, and her mouth was doing the thing, the almost-smile, the thing that meant she was present and she knew it and she was not going to say that out loud but her mouth was going to say it for her.

"Fine. We're swimming."

They stayed in the water for twelve minutes. Mai knew it was twelve minutes because she was Mai and she counted things, and she also felt it, the twelve minutes, the way the water moved against her skin and the sand shifted under her feet and Ace's hand found hers and Shammy's hair drifted around them like sea grass, and she was counting and she was feeling, both at the same time, and maybe that was the point, maybe the point was never about stopping the counting, maybe the point was about feeling something else at the same time, something that didn't have a number, something that didn't need a tab.

When they came out of the water, their clothes were wet and their hair was salt-stiff and Shammy's was doing the thing where it moved on its own even when there was no wind, which meant she was adjusting the air around them to speed-dry their clothes, which she then noticed she was doing and stopped doing, and then their clothes were wet again.

"I'm going to let us be wet," Shammy said. "That's the new thing. Being wet."

"Being wet is the new thing," Ace agreed. "Not being dry. Not adjusting the humidity so we dry faster. Being wet."

"Being wet on purpose," Mai said. "In the ocean. Which we went into. On purpose."

"This is progress," Ace said. "For all three of us."

They walked back to the beach towel, wet and sandy and salt-stiff, and the three of them sat down, and the sun was warm, and the smooth stones hummed, and the source waited, patient and old and no longer alone.

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They sat on the beach. Not because they'd planned it. Because they'd walked far enough that the resort was a distant line behind them, and they were tired, and the sand was warm, and there was a piece of driftwood that made a convenient backrest, and they sat down because sitting down was what you did on a beach when you were tired, and they were tired, and the beach was there, and the driftwood was there, and for the first time in days, they were doing something that felt like vacation.

Mai closed her eyes. She could still see the waves. She could still count the intervals between them. She could still map the currents and categorize the shoreline and note that the driftwood was weathered to a Category 3 decomposition level, which was a category she had invented for this specific purpose, which was a new tab in a spreadsheet she wasn't making.

But she could also feel the sand between her toes. And Ace's hand in hers. And Shammy's warmth on her other side, radiating like a personal sun that had decided to sit next to her on the beach and be 195 centimeters of atmospheric comfort.

The sand was warm under Mai's palms. Warm and grainy and the kind of texture that demanded categorization, that whispered for a mineral composition analysis, that practically begged for a tab

labeled *Beach Substrate Characterization, Provisional*. Mai let the whisper come and let it go. The sand was sand. It was warm. She was here.

"The wave interval is approximately 7.3 seconds," Mai said, and then caught herself. "I'm analyzing the waves."

"I know," Ace said. "I'm counting the exits from this section of beach. There are three."

"I'm adjusting the wind so it's blowing from the northwest at approximately 5 knots," Shammy said. "Which is more comfortable for all three of us based on our respective thermoregulatory preferences."

"We're all doing it," Mai said.

"We're all doing it," Ace agreed.

"And we're all here," Shammy said.

"And we're all here."

The ocean pulled at the shore. The sun climbed. The smooth stones hummed softly in Shammy's pocket, patient and warm, like a heartbeat from something that had been waiting a long time.

"I've been thinking," Shammy said. She had a handful of sand. She'd picked it up without noticing. She looked at it. Let it go through her fingers. "About the thing under the hotel," she said.

"I know," Mai said.

"About the stones." She pulled out one of the smooth stones. Turned it over in her palm. The concentric circles caught the light. "About the stones. Mai, you noticed the pattern."

"I noticed," Mai confirmed. "Concentric circles. Fibonacci-adjacent. Matching the buffet arrangement and the window views."

"I think the stones are from it," Shammy said. "I think the source has been leaving them for me. On the beach. In the tide pools. Every morning. Like, like gifts. Like it's been trying to connect with me specifically, because I can feel it the way it can feel me, because we're the same kind of thing, because,"

"Because you're both anomalies that stabilized," Ace said. "You're both anomalies that chose to stay."

Shammy looked at her. And for a moment, her expression shifted, from the warm open face she showed the world to something rawer underneath, something that was less weather-pattern and more actual weather, the kind that comes before a storm, the kind that holds everything in balance until it can't anymore. Her hair lifted, strands reaching toward the ocean, toward the hotel, toward something she could feel even from this distance.

"Yes," she said. "I think it's been alone for a very long time. I think it stabilized the way I did, but without, without anyone. Without Ace and you. Without anyone to hold it. And it's been reaching out because it's been alone, and I've been feeling it because I'm like it, and I didn't say anything because I wanted,"

"You wanted it to be a vacation," Ace said. "We know."

"I wanted it to be a vacation," Shammy agreed. "But it's not. It's never been a vacation. And the thing under the hotel is, it's not a threat, Ace. It's not something that needs to be fought. It's something that needs to be acknowledged. It's been saying hello for days, and I've been holding the space between us and it, and I think, I think it's time to say hello back."

Mai looked at the stone in Shammy's palm. The concentric circles. The pattern that matched everything else, the Fibonacci spiral, the juice carafes, the napkin cranes, the windows that showed the truth. A pattern that was reaching out, not to threaten, but to connect.

"You're saying we should acknowledge it," Mai said. "Not analyze it. Not fight it. Not,"

"Not categorize it," Shammy said gently. "Not contain it. Not modulate it. Acknowledge it. Say hello. Let it know that we hear it."

"That's not going to fix anything," Mai said. "Acknowledging an anomaly doesn't neutralize it. It doesn't give us data we can use to,"

"Mai." Ace's hand squeezed hers. "That's the spreadsheet talking."

Mai was quiet. The ocean did its thing. The waves came in intervals of approximately 7.3 seconds, and she could still count them, and she would probably always be able to count them, and that was okay, that was who she was, but maybe it wasn't the only thing she was.

"Okay," Mai said. "What does acknowledging it look like?"

"I don't know yet," Shammy said. "But I think, I think we have to be honest first. With each other. And then with it. I think it's been waiting for us to stop pretending we're on vacation and start being who we actually are."

"And who are we?" Ace asked. The question from the night before. The question they hadn't answered.

"We're three anomalies who came to a place where nothing happens and made things happen," Shammy said. "We're three people who can't stop doing the things we do. We're a triad that holds each other, even when we can't stop holding ourselves. And we're the only people who can hear what that thing under the hotel has been trying to say."

"Which is?" Mai asked.

"Hello," Shammy said. "I think it's been saying hello. And I think it's time we said it back."

The sun climbed. The waves came in. The smooth stone hummed in Shammy's palm. And for a long moment, none of them said anything, because sometimes the most important thing you can do is sit in the silence and let the truth of what you've said settle into the space between you.

Then Mai reached for Shammy's hand. And Ace put her head on Mai's shoulder. And Shammy, who had been holding the space all day, who had been adjusting the temperature and the humidity and the wind direction, let the air do what it did. She didn't adjust it. She didn't modulate it.

The wind went a little wrong. Two degrees too warm, then a gust from the southeast that carried more salt than it should have. Shammy noticed and made herself not fix it.

She sat in it, and it was warm, and it was cool, and it was a little wrong, and that was exactly what it

was, and that was enough.

That was enough.

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