

[← Chapter 10](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 12 →](#)

Chapter Eleven: The Arrangement Discussion

The meeting room smelled like recycled air and new carpet. That off-gassing chemical sweetness that never quite fades. Mai noticed it before anything else. The Foundation's maintenance protocols called for seventy-two hours of ventilation before occupying new spaces, but the carpet here still had that faintly toxic warmth. Someone had rushed this room into service.

Three certifications hung on the wall in matching brushed-metal frames: Foundation Psychological Services Division, Anomalous Personnel Integration Unit, and something called the Interpersonal Dynamics Assessment Board. The last one had a typo in its second line. "Assesment." Someone had hung it anyway.

The chairs were arranged in a semicircle facing a long table. Equidistant. Each seat the same distance from the others, from the door, from the woman sitting behind the table with her tablet already lit and stylus in hand. Mai catalogued the sightlines automatically. Ace's shadow had already pooled at her feet, dense and watchful. Shammy ducked through the doorframe, automatic, the way she always did, and the fluorescents above stuttered for a half-second before steadying.

"Please, take your seats." Director Chen didn't look up from her tablet. She was older than the evaluators they'd had before. Silver hair cut short, practical. The kind of cut you get when you stop caring whether it flatters you. Her nameplate sat on the table: DIRECTOR CHEN, PERSONNEL CLASSIFICATION. "We appreciate you making time."

"You scheduled us during protected recovery." Mai heard the edge in her own voice and didn't smooth it. "Forty-eight-hour protocol between high-intensity ops. We're in that window."

"Your observation is noted." The stylus moved. Chen's handwriting was small and fast. "The Foundation considers this discussion essential to ongoing personnel management. Your circumstances require—"

"Our circumstances are the same circumstances they were last month." Ace hadn't moved toward the chairs. Standing just inside the door, shadow pressing outward like something that wanted a fight. "What changed?"

"The classification system." Chen finally looked up. Her eyes were tired. Not the theatrical kind of tired. The real kind, the kind that comes from doing this same meeting eight times today with eight different sets of people who don't want to be here. "The Foundation updated its personnel framework three weeks ago. All non-standard interpersonal arrangements require re-documentation. This isn't personal. You're not being singled out."

"Then why does it feel like we are?" Shammy asked it quietly, but the air pressure in the room shifted when she spoke. Just enough that Chen's papers stirred.

Chen's mouth thinned. "Because everyone who sits in those chairs feels like they're being singled out. I understand. I'm not your enemy."

"You're the one with the forms."

"I'm the one who has to file them. There's a difference." She gestured toward the table. Three folders. Thick. Bound. Printed on paper that was still warm from the copier. Mai could smell the toner. "Please. Let's get through this."

They sat. Not because they wanted to.

The chairs were designed for standard body types, which meant Ace's feet left the floor if she sat back properly. She didn't sit back. She perched on the edge, knees forward, weight distributed for movement. Shammy's knees were too high. The chair wasn't built for someone 195 centimeters tall. She folded herself into it like origami. Mai fit the furniture. Her posture didn't.

"Full names for all three individuals in the arrangement." Chen's stylus hovered.

"Mai."

"Ace."

"Shammy."

Chen waited. The stylus didn't move.

"Those are our full names for Foundation records," Mai said.

"Your legal names. Pre-service identities." Chen's voice stayed level. Professional. But there was something under it. Not hostility, not even impatience. More like exhaustion. "The forms require them for next-of-kin documentation."

"Next-of-kin." Ace's shadow thickened. "You mean for when we die."

"For emergency contacts. All personnel are required to—"

"We designate each other." Shammy shifted in the too-small chair. "For everything. That's what being a triad means."

"I understand. But the forms have a specific field for—"

"Protocol 7.3." Mai cut in. Sharper than she needed to be. "Anomalous integration above Class 3 entitles us to identity protection. We're Class 7, 8, and 9. The protocol applies."

"Protocol 7.3 is for personnel with active threat conditions." Chen set down her stylus. Not in the way people do to make a point. In the way people do when they need both hands to navigate something messy. "I don't see active threat designations in your files."

"Integration above Class 3 is defined as a perpetual threat condition. Per the Foundation's own classification. The protocol applies by default."

"You're using the Foundation's rules to avoid answering the Foundation's questions."

"I'm following the Foundation's rules correctly. If the rules are contradictory, that's not something I can fix for you."

The lights flickered. Shammy's doing. Not intentional, just the sterile air pressing against her. She was holding it in, but holding took effort, and the effort had side effects.

Chen's eyes tracked to the ceiling, then back. She didn't comment on the flicker. She'd read the files. She knew what she was dealing with.

"Let's move to relationship classification." She pulled up a new screen on her tablet. "The Foundation recognizes several categories. Monogamous partnership. Polyamorous primary-secondary structure. Polyamorous egalitarian network. Communal living arrangement. Cohabitation partnership. Extended family structure." She tapped the screen. "Which category applies?"

The triad didn't consult each other. They didn't need to.

"None of them." Mai's jaw was tight.

"The forms require a category. If you don't select one, I can't complete the documentation."

"Then don't complete it."

"If your file stays incomplete, certain benefits can be withheld." Chen said it like she was reading a warning label. Which she probably was. "Insurance for dependents. Housing allocation. Tax filing status. Bereavement leave for partners. Medical decision-making authority. Inheritance rights within Foundation jurisdiction. These all require a category on Form 47-B."

"We already have those benefits." Mai's fingers pressed together. "We negotiated them during initial integration. Eighteen months ago. Personnel division approved our arrangement as a special case."

"Special case status expired under the new framework. All non-standard arrangements require re-categorization." Chen paused. "I'm not trying to take anything away from you. I'm trying to document what you already have so the system recognizes it."

"The system already recognized it."

"The old system did. The new system doesn't speak the same language." Chen picked up her stylus again. "That's not my fault. It's not even really the Foundation's fault. It's what happens when you standardize something that used to be handled case by case. Some things fall through the cracks. I'm trying to keep you from being one of them."

The room was quiet. The fluorescent hum filled the space. Shammy's presence pressed gently against the walls. Not aggressively, just making room for herself in a place that hadn't been built with her in mind.

"Then make a new category." Ace said it flatly. Not a request. A statement of fact, the way she said most things. "If your boxes don't fit, make a different box."

Chen blinked. Actually blinked, like this was a thing that hadn't occurred to her. Which was strange, because it should have been obvious. "I... the classification system allows for custom categories. With Director-level approval."

"So get approval."

"It's not that simple. A custom category requires documentation of the arrangement's structure. Operational protocols. Contingency procedures. I'd need you to explain—"

"We've explained." Ace's shadow flared. "To Vance. To Kessler. To every analyst the Foundation sends to understand us. We explain, they file it, someone new gets assigned, we explain again. We're

done explaining.”

“I’m not asking you to justify yourselves.” Chen’s voice shifted. Not softer, exactly, but less procedural. “I’m asking you to give me enough to work with. The system is what it is. I can’t change it. But I can find you a place in it if you help me.”

Mai studied Chen’s face. The tiredness was real. The woman had probably been doing these meetings all day, every day, for weeks. The new framework had gone live and now she had to re-categorize every non-standard arrangement in the Foundation, and most of those people probably hated her for it too.

“What do you need?” Mai asked.

Chen exhaled. Just slightly. “Structure. How does the arrangement function operationally. Who makes decisions. How conflicts are resolved. What happens if one of you is incapacitated. The kind of thing that standard categories already account for but yours doesn’t.”

Mai was quiet for a moment. Then: “Ace is the depth vector. Shadow-pressure, void resonance, she moves before the situation has time to develop. I’m horizontal. Structural analysis, tactical calculation, threat assessment. I define the parameters that make her movement effective. Shammy is vertical. Atmospheric modulation, environmental stabilization, emotional grounding. She holds the space we operate in.”

“Holds space.” Chen wrote it down. “That phrase comes up a lot in your documentation.”

“It’s how she describes her function.” Mai paused. Shammy’s hand had found the back of her chair. Not touching her, just present. “She modulates the environment. Air pressure, temperature, atmospheric quality. Creates conditions where we can function. But she also modulates emotionally. When Ace’s fragment-pressure destabilizes, Shammy stabilizes her. When I burn out, Shammy grounds me. When Shammy drifts, when she starts to lose herself in the atmospheric, Ace and I anchor her back.”

“That’s mutual dependency.” Chen’s stylus moved across the tablet.

Mai shook her head. “No. Dependency means each person needs the others to function as an individual. Integration means the full function only exists when we’re combined. I’m not dependent on Ace. I’m completed by her. There’s a difference.”

“Completed.” Chen’s stylus stopped. “That’s a strong word.”

“It’s the right word.” Ace’s voice came from the edge of her chair. Quieter than before. Still flat, but flat in a way that covered something else underneath. “Without Mai I don’t know when not to move. I just... go. Until there’s nothing left to move toward. Without Shammy I can’t breathe through the pressure. It just builds.” She didn’t look at Chen when she said it. She looked at her hands.

“And you?” Chen turned to Ace. “What happens to them without you?”

“Without me, Mai runs calculations that never terminate. She spirals. Holds everything by herself until it breaks her.” Ace’s shadow pressed against the floor. “Without me, Shammy holds space for everyone except herself. She drifts. Becomes atmospheric instead of present.”

Chen made a note. Then another. Her handwriting had slowed. Less efficient, more deliberate. Like

she was writing down things that mattered instead of things that checked boxes.

"That's detailed." She said it carefully. "You've analyzed each other's failure modes."

"We know each other's architecture." Shammy spoke for the first time in a while. Her voice was warm but tired. The air pressure had stabilized. She'd been working at it through the whole conversation, Mai realized. Holding the room steady while they talked. "The Foundation teaches us to understand systems. We are a system. Understanding ourselves is maintenance."

"Maintenance." Chen looked at the word she'd written. "You maintain yourselves like equipment."

"Like a functional unit." Shammy shifted in the chair. "But also like people. People who chose each other. Who have dinner reservations and have to reschedule them because buildings eat people. Who come home to an apartment that breathes with us and try to put the day behind them."

Chen set down the stylus again. This time it stayed down.

"Recovery." She said the word like she was testing it. "How do you recover?"

"Together." All three of them. Same word, same moment. Not planned. Just the answer.

The silence after was different from the silences that had come before. Those had been procedural. Pauses between bureaucratic exchanges. This one had weight.

"Alright." Chen's voice was quiet for a beat. Then it came back, businesslike. "Triad classification. Custom category. I'll create a Z-99 subcategory. Triad Integration. Three-vector system, mutual completion, chosen family with romantic and non-romantic bonds, joint recovery protocol. I'll reference your existing special-case approval and formalize it under the new framework."

"That's it?" Shammy's voice lifted. Not much. Just enough.

"That's it for the classification." Chen picked up the stylus again. Typed something. Swiped. The tablet made a soft chime. "Form 47-B, Section 3, Category Z-99. Custom Classification. Subcategory: Triad Integration. Files 7741-A through C. Special accommodation approved."

She looked up. "You're documented. Your benefits are preserved. Your arrangement is recognized under the new system."

"And you can do that?" Mai asked. "Just create a category?"

"I can if it's supported by documentation. Which I now have." Chen's mouth did something that wasn't quite a smile. "The Foundation's systems are rigid. But the people in them aren't always. You're not the first arrangement I've had to get creative for. Bonded sibling pairs, integration partnerships, teams that function as family units. The system doesn't know what to do with any of you. My job is to find a way to make it work anyway."

"Make it work." Ace's shadow hadn't released. "We're a problem to be solved."

"You're a file to be closed." Chen met her eyes. "Same thing, in my department. The highest compliment the Foundation's bureaucracy can pay you is making the paperwork fit. It means someone decided you were worth the effort."

Ace didn't respond to that. She sat with it instead. The way she sat with most things.

"There is one more matter." Chen's voice shifted back to procedural. The warmth, such as it was, retreated. "The Foundation has received inquiries about your arrangement."

Mai's spine straightened. A fraction of a degree, but Shammy felt it through the chair.

"Inquiries." Not a question.

"From Integration Assessment Division. Personnel review. Classification oversight." Chen's stylus hovered. "Not formal investigations. Not yet. But questions. About whether your integration is stable. Whether your mutual... your mutual completion... creates operational vulnerabilities. Whether your value outweighs the... unusualness."

"Someone's building a case." Mai said it before Chen could soften it further.

"Someone is asking questions." Chen's stylus made a mark on her tablet. "The custom classification helps. It documents your structure, your effectiveness. It gives you something to point to. But documentation doesn't stop someone who's already decided what they want to find."

"Who?" Ace's voice was low. Flat. Dangerous-flat.

"I can't give you names. Personnel review is confidential." Chen closed her tablet. The screen went dark. "Integration Assessment Division specializes in anomalous personnel management. They believe high-integration operatives should be monitored more closely. Controlled more strictly. Separated if necessary."

The word hung in the room. Separated.

"They believe your mutual dependence is a vulnerability." Chen's voice was level. Almost gentle. "They believe separating you would make each of you more effective individually. More controllable. Less unpredictable."

"That's what this is about." Shammy's presence contracted. Concentrated. The air in the room grew heavier. Not from Shammy losing control, but from her pulling everything inward. "Control."

"The Foundation wants to understand what it can't predict." Chen gathered the folders. Stacked them. Aligned the edges with a tap. "You can't be predicted. That makes people uncomfortable. Uncomfortable people ask questions. Questions lead to reviews. Reviews lead to... recommendations."

"But you're helping us." Mai's voice was careful. Calculating. "Creating the category. Documenting our value."

"I'm doing my job." Chen stood. The meeting was clearly over. "My job is classification. You needed classification. I provided it. What happens after that is a different department."

"Someone is still watching." Ace rose from the chair. Her shadow came with her, pooling and shifting. "After the documentation. After the approval. Someone still wants to separate us."

"Someone is always watching." Chen didn't look up from straightening her folders. "The Foundation isn't one thing. It's thousands of people with thousands of opinions. Some of them support you. Some of them don't. The classification I've created gives you documentation to defend yourselves with. But documentation doesn't stop questions. It just gives you answers."

"Answers they might not accept."

"Answers they might not accept." Chen looked at her then. Actually looked. Steady, tired, human. "I've done what I can. The accommodation is approved. Your file is complete. Your benefits are preserved. That's what this room can do for you. What happens next happens somewhere else."

The triad left. Ace first, shadow distributed for movement, hand near the blade she wasn't drawing. Mai next, running the numbers in her head. Probability calculations, threat assessments, the shape of a fight that hadn't started yet. Shammy last, ducking through the door, the room's air finally releasing as she moved away from it.

The hallway was sterile. Long. Fluorescent lights every ten meters, exactly. Foundation-standard. Nothing personal, nothing human, nothing that breathed.

"They want to separate us." Shammy said it quietly. Her presence had pulled tight. Not drifting, not expansive. Concentrated. Focused. "They actually want to."

"We have documentation now." Mai's voice was steady in a way that meant she was working to keep it that way. "Classification. Approved accommodation. They can ask questions, but they can't act without cause."

"They'll find cause." Ace hadn't relaxed. Not once since they'd entered the building. "They'll keep looking until they do."

"Then we don't give them anything to find."

"And if they manufacture it?" Ace stopped walking. Turned. Her violet eyes were hard. "If they decide the answer first and find the question after? What then?"

Mai didn't answer immediately. The hallway's hum filled the pause.

"Then we fight it." Mai's jaw was tight. "With documentation. With results. With every record that shows we work better together than apart. That's all we can do."

Ace held her gaze. Then turned and kept walking.

The apartment didn't smell like new carpet. It smelled like the tea Mai had made yesterday and never finished, and the particular warmth of Shammy's atmospheric presence settling into a space, and something else that was harder to name. The accumulated evidence of three people who had built something that worked.

Ace went to her corner. The meditation corner. She didn't meditate. She sat with her back to the wall and her blade across her knees and didn't say anything for a long time.

Mai went to her terminal. Pulled up files. Stared at them without processing the data.

Shammy stood in the center of the room. Ducking was automatic. The apartment's doorways had been adjusted, but her body still remembered standard architecture. The atmosphere here was theirs. The sterile pressure of the Foundation's meeting room had no place in it. Shammy felt the release in her own chest.

"They're watching us." Ace's voice came from the corner. Not flat. Something else underneath, something that scraped. "Someone in Integration Assessment. Someone who thinks we shouldn't exist like this."

"They'll look for evidence." Mai's fingers moved across keys without conviction. "Operational failures. Moments where integration created problems. They'll compile everything that supports their case and ignore everything that doesn't."

"They won't find failures." Shammy's presence was warm. Deliberately warm. "We don't—"

"We do." Mai cut her off. "Every operation carries risk. Every integration has failure modes. The question isn't whether they'll find evidence. It's whether they'll find evidence that convinces whoever has the authority to act on it."

"Who has that authority?"

"Integration Assessment Division reports to the Personnel Review Board. The Board reports to the Site Director. The Site Director reports up." Mai pressed her fingers together. "At any level, someone could decide our arrangement is an unacceptable risk. The documentation Chen created gives us a defense. But a defense only matters if someone's willing to hear it."

"So we're an accommodation now." Ace's blade glowed faintly in her lap. The emerald light pulsed once, twice. "A special case. Something the Foundation tolerates because we're useful."

"We've always been a special case." Shammy moved closer to Ace's corner. Not too close. Close enough. "The Foundation has never had a category that fit us. Being documented doesn't change what we are."

"It changes how they see us." Mai didn't look up from the terminal. "Being an accommodation means being subject to accommodation review. Every system that accepts us as an exception is a system that could decide the exception isn't worth the cost."

"Then we make it worth the cost." Ace's voice was iron. "We stay effective. We stay integrated. We stay exactly what we are. They want to prove separation makes us stronger? We prove it doesn't."

"And if they don't believe the proof?"

No one answered that one. The apartment settled around them. The familiar sounds. Shammy's atmospheric drift, the faint hum of Mai's terminal, the almost-silence of Ace's shadow-pressure. Filling the space where words weren't enough.

They'd been documented. Classified. Warned.

Someone was watching. Someone who believed control was more valuable than integration, who thought three vectors could be pulled apart and made to point in separate directions.

But they weren't components. They weren't separable.

They'd chosen.

[Chapter Eleven End]

← [Chapter 10](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 12](#) →

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