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Chapter 12: The Shadow

The coffee went cold too fast.

Mai noticed it first. The way the steam changed angle in her cup, shifting toward the window instead of rising straight. The refrigerator's hum had moved to a lower register sometime in the last hour. The apartment's usual atmospheric equilibrium, the one Shammy maintained without thinking, had been disturbed. Not broken. Just wrong. Like someone had been in the room who wasn't supposed to be there.

She didn't say anything. She checked her terminal.

The search history had been accessed at 5:47 AM. Not by her. The timestamp sat there on the screen, clean and authorized and wrong. Fourteen queries, each building on the last. Personnel files. Their personnel files. Incident reports. Team assignments. Operational efficiency metrics. And something at the bottom of the list: *Projective Coherence Analysis—Preliminary Findings*.

A pattern. A surveillance net pulling tighter.

Ace's meditation ended at 6:22. Seven minutes early. Mai registered this without comment. Ace's internal clock ran on pressure, not minutes, and when it shortened something was wrong. The shadow-pressure in Ace's corner had pooled strangely, collecting in the wrong places, like water finding a new drain. Her violet eyes opened too sharp for post-meditation.

"You're up early." Mai kept her voice even.

Ace's shoulders dropped. Her hand moved to her blade. Not drawing, just touching. Grounding. "Something."

The word hung. Mai let it hang. Ace would elaborate if she needed to.

Shammy drifted into the kitchen at 7:03. Late even for her. The air pressure adjusted as she came through the doorway, the way it always did, but today the adjustment felt different. Assessed. Like the room itself was being measured against something.

She stopped in the threshold. Her storm-blue eyes tracked across the space. Not looking, reading. The kitchen's atmosphere was dense. Compressed in a way that had nothing to do with her.

"Someone's been in our space." Not a question. She folded herself into the chair beside Mai, knees too high, body negotiating furniture that had never been built for her frame. "Not physically. But the air's wrong. Someone was *looking* at us."

Mai turned her terminal around. The search history. The file access logs. The 5:47 timestamp. The cascade of queries that built a picture Mai didn't want to see.

"Internal audit." Her voice was clipped. "Classified clearance. Someone's building a case."

Ace moved to the window. Not looking out. Reading the glass. Her shadow pressed against the frame, spreading like ink dropped in water. "Case for what?"

The question landed wrong in the room's atmosphere. Shammy felt it. Cold, dense, a shape that didn't fit.

"I don't know yet." Mai's fingers moved across the terminal. Running queries against queries. Building a counter-pattern. "The clearance level suggests O4 involvement. The search parameters suggest personnel evaluation. The cross-referencing suggests they're looking for patterns in our operational history."

"What patterns?" Ace's voice came from the window. Low. Ready.

"Dependency correlations. Effectiveness under separation scenarios. Psych-profile divergence rates." Mai listed each one like a diagnosis. Each word precise. Each one heavier than the last. "Someone's measuring us. Deciding whether we're stronger together or compromised by each other."

Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder without looking. The touch was deliberate. Grounding, not automatic. The air pressure in the room steadied around them both.

"They don't understand." Shammy's voice was soft. "They're looking at us like we're variables in an equation. Not vectors in a system. They think we're adding to each other when we're constituting each other."

"They're Foundation." Mai's jaw tightened. "They think in risk matrices. Three anomalous operatives in a relationship, that's a vulnerability calculation. That's their job."

"That's not what this is." Ace's shadow spread further. The emerald glow of her blade pulsed. "This is someone who's already decided what they want to find. They're just looking for the evidence to support it."

Mai's terminal refreshed. A new data point. The O4 observer's file access had continued. The queries were running in real-time.

Someone was watching them right now.

The notification arrived at 8:17.

Not a containment. Not a mission. An appointment. It appeared on all three terminals simultaneously. Synchronized, deliberate, the Foundation's way of signaling that this was not a suggestion.

"Personnel Review Board. 1400 hours. Conference Room 7-C. Attendance mandatory for all registered members of domestic partnership designation Alpha-Nine."

Mai read it twice. Her face didn't change. Her breathing did. A fractional shift that Ace caught and Shammy felt in the room's density.

"They gave us a designation." Ace's voice was stripped of inflection. The shadow in her corner

deepened. "Alpha-Nine. Like a containment class."

"Procedural categorization." Mai's fingers moved across the terminal, pulling projections. "The Foundation files everything. Our relationship was always going to get a designation eventually."

"That's not what this is." Shammy stood. Not drifting, not settling. Grounded. Protective. Her presence moved between her partners and the door without her consciously choosing to. "Review boards aren't for categorization. They're for evaluation."

"Of what?"

"Of whether we're still useful. Whether we're still stable." Shammy's storm-blue eyes moved between them. "Whether we should still be allowed to exist the way we do."

Ace's blade hummed. Low frequency, barely audible. The emerald glow flickered.

"I could move." Ace's voice was quiet. Controlled in the way that meant the opposite of calm. "Before they decide. Get ahead of it. Find out what they—"

"No." Mai cut her off. Sharp. "Running confirms suspicion. We go in. We answer their questions. We show them we're not compromised."

"And if they've already decided?" Shammy's hand was still on Mai's shoulder. "What if this isn't an evaluation? What if it's a conclusion that's looking for justification?"

Mai didn't answer. Her terminal showed three personnel files side by side. Each one flagged with the same review marker.

"Then we show them what they'd be losing."

The hours before the review board stretched.

Ace moved through the apartment in tactical patterns. Not pacing. Mapping. Checking corners, testing sightlines, cataloging every angle of approach like the apartment might turn into a battlefield. Her shadow-pressure spread through the rooms ahead of her, an advance scout in a space that should have been safe.

Shammy extended her atmospheric sense outward. Not to control, but to read. The floors above. The floors below. The street outside. The building's weather patterns. The Foundation's surveillance wasn't physical, but it had a presence. A weight in the data streams that pressed against her awareness like a bruise.

Mai worked.

Her terminal displayed personnel files, operational logs, Foundation org charts. She traced the authorization chain that had enabled the file access. Someone at O4 level had authorized the Alpha-Nine designation. Someone at O4 level had ordered the review board.

The name was redacted. The clearance pattern told a story anyway.

At 11:34, Mai found the cross-reference.

Dr. Helena Cross. Personnel Evaluation Division. Eighteen months of research on “anomalous emotional bonds as operational vectors.” Her preliminary findings had been submitted to O4 Command three weeks ago. The submission date aligned with the first unauthorized file access.

“She's been studying us.” Mai's voice cut through the apartment's quiet. “Not as personnel. As phenomena. She's been treating our bond as something that needs to be measured and assessed.”

Ace materialized from the shadow she'd been occupying. “Is it? An anomaly?”

“No.” Mai's voice was firm. “It's a structure. Three vectors designed to work together. She's reading it as emergent behavior when it's actually intentional architecture.”

Shammy moved to stand beside Mai. Her hand found the back of the chair. “Can you prove that? To someone who's never felt it?”

Mai's jaw worked. That was the problem, wasn't it. The Foundation measured what it could quantify. It filed what it could categorize. It contained what it could define.

“I can show them data.” Mai's fingers moved across the terminal. “Combined efficiency metrics. Performance degradation under separation. I can prove that separation makes us worse. What I can't do is make them understand why we work.”

“Because understanding requires feeling.” Ace's violet eyes caught the terminal's glow. “And they've never felt what we are.”

Conference Room 7-C was white.

White walls. White lights. White noise generators hidden in the ceiling. Mai spotted the panels immediately. The room was designed to make everything inside it feel temporary. Contingent. The furniture was standard Foundation issue, which meant it was built for sitting and leaving, not for staying.

Ace entered first. Her shadow-pressure moved through the room ahead of her. Mapping corners, testing sightlines, cataloging exits. The sterile environment pushed against her nature. Shadow didn't belong in white rooms. She took the seat closest to the door.

Shammy followed. The ceiling was too low. She ducked without thinking, her hair brushing the panels. The air in the room shifted as she settled. Sterile stillness disrupted by something that couldn't help but affect the atmosphere around it. She sat beside Ace.

Mai entered last. Terminal under her arm. Expression precise. She took the seat across from Ace. The position that gave her sightlines on both partners and the door.

The review board had three people. Mai recognized none of them.

The center chair held a woman in her fifties. Grey-streaked hair pulled back tight. The kind of posture that came from decades of sitting in rooms like this, asking questions she'd already decided the answers to. Her nameplate read DR. HELENA CROSS—PERSONNEL EVALUATION DIVISION.

The left chair held a younger man in tactical assessment uniform. Coiled posture. Someone who'd

been in the field. His nameplate was covered.

The right chair held someone Mai couldn't read at all. Neutral posture. Neutral expression. Neutral presence. A professional absence.

"Alpha-Nine designation." Dr. Cross opened a folder. Paper, not digital. Deliberate. The room's white noise generators would interfere with electronic recording, but paper was immune. "Registered domestic partnership between anomalous operatives Mai, Ace, and Shammy. Duration: three years, seven months. Operational record: exemplary. Incident rate: below baseline. Efficiency correlation: above baseline."

She looked up. Her eyes moved between them like she was counting.

"By the numbers, you're an asset. That's not why we're here."

The room's temperature felt off. Shammy noticed it before anyone spoke. The sterile stillness pressing against her atmospheric sense, trying to contain what she naturally held. She concentrated on keeping the air stable.

"Why are we here?" Mai kept her voice level. It took effort.

"Because numbers don't tell the whole story." Dr. Cross turned a page. The paper made a sound in the quiet room. "And someone has noticed that your efficiency doesn't just improve when you're together. It degrades when you're apart."

The tactical officer spoke. Flat voice. Professional. "Your separation metrics are concerning. Operative Mai, on independent deployments, your performance drops thirty-four percent. Operative Ace, forty-one percent. Operative Shammy, fifty-two percent."

"Those numbers are from isolated incidents." Mai's fingers moved across her terminal. Pulling data. Building the counter-analysis she'd prepared. "The sample size is insufficient for reliable correlation. Mission context, anomaly classification, environmental variables, none of these are controlled."

"The sample size is growing." Dr. Cross closed the folder. Her eyes settled on Mai with a weight that suggested she'd walked into this room knowing exactly how it would end. "We've been authorized to conduct a controlled separation evaluation. Three simultaneous operations. Three different locations. Three independent performance assessments."

The air pressure in the room shifted. Not Shammy. Something else. The sterile room was designed to be neutral, but Mai felt the change in density anyway.

"A test." Ace's voice was low. "To prove we're weaker apart."

"A test to determine if your partnership is an operational asset or an operational dependency." Dr. Cross's tone stayed administrative. "The distinction matters. Assets can be leveraged. Dependencies can be exploited. The Foundation does not field operatives with exploitable weaknesses."

Shammy's presence shifted. Not a storm. A current. Deliberate. Controlled. "We're not dependent. We're complete. There's a difference."

"That's what we're here to determine." Dr. Cross didn't look at Shammy. She looked at Mai. "You're the architect, operative Mai. You understand frameworks. Explain to me, in your professional assessment, what happens if one of you is killed in the field."

The question hit like a fist.

Mai's fingers stopped moving. Her terminal reflected in her silver-blue eyes. The numbers were there. The projections, the scenarios she'd run at three in the morning when she couldn't sleep, the cold calculations she'd never said out loud.

"The system fails." Her voice didn't waver. It should have. "The triad operates as a three-vector architecture. Depth, horizontal, vertical. If one vector is removed, the field destabilizes. Combat effectiveness drops below mission-viable thresholds. Survival probability falls below acceptable parameters."

"Unacceptable vulnerability." The tactical officer made a note. "Recommend separation protocol for risk mitigation."

"No." Mai's voice sharpened. "That's not what the data shows. The vulnerability isn't caused by our connection. It's covered by it. Separately, each of us has weaknesses. Together, those weaknesses are compensated. You're reading stability as fragility."

"I'm reading dependency as risk." Dr. Cross stood. In the white room, her grey hair looked like a fault line running through her skull. "The review board will deliver its recommendation to O4 command within seventy-two hours. Until then, you're restricted to non-operational status. No field deployments. No team exercises. No contact with MTF Theta-24."

Shammy felt Ace's shadow-pressure compress. A tight coil. Dense.

"And if we refuse the separation test?" Ace's voice was barely above a whisper.

Dr. Cross looked at her. Her expression didn't change. "The board will note non-cooperation in its assessment. The recommendation will reflect that."

The walk back to their apartment took forty-three minutes.

Nobody spoke until the door closed behind them. The locks engaged. The familiar space wrapped around them. Not neutral, not sterile. Alive. Theirs.

Ace went to the window. The spot where she stood when she couldn't sleep. The glass held the fading evening light. Her shadow pressed against it.

"They're afraid of us." Ace's voice was flat. "Not because of what we can do. Because of what we are."

"Control systems fear what they can't measure." Mai sat at her terminal. Not working. Anchoring. "They see three anomalous operatives whose effectiveness should decrease under emotional attachment. When it doesn't, they need to explain it away."

"They need to prove we're broken." Shammy settled onto the couch. Her presence made the room breathe. "Because if we're not broken, their model is."

Mai pulled up the review board's files. She'd accessed them during the walk. Clearance protocols had some flexibility when the assessment was being conducted against you.

"Dr. Helena Cross. Personnel Evaluation Division. Fifteen years with the Foundation. Specialty: risk assessment for anomalous human assets." Mai read the profile. "She's never worked field operations. Never run containment. Never been within a hundred kilometers of an active anomaly event."

"She's a theorist." Ace's shadow pressed against the window. "She's measuring us from inside a room that's never bled."

"She's the one making the recommendation." Mai pulled another file. "The tactical officer, name redacted, I can't access his service record, but his posture, his assessment language. He's seen field work. He knows operational dynamics."

"And he still recommended separation." Shammy's atmospheric sense read the room. "He knows we're better together. And he still recommended separation."

Mai stopped scrolling. Her silver-blue eyes fixed on a detail in the files.

"Someone's feeding them data." Her voice went precise. Sharper. "The separation metrics they cited, they're not in standard personnel records. Those numbers came from a classified analysis. Someone's been building a case against us for months."

The apartment's temperature dropped. Ace's doing this time. Not Shammy.

"How long?" Ace didn't turn from the window.

"Based on the data range..." Mai calculated. "Since at least the arrangement discussion. The Foundation backed off publicly, but someone kept watching. Someone who didn't accept the accommodation."

"Someone who wanted proof we're a liability." Shammy's presence was cold now. Controlled. "And when the numbers didn't prove it, they manufactured a test that would."

Ace's hand moved to her blade. The emerald glow pulsed.

"I could find them." Ace's voice was quiet. "Whoever's behind this. I could find them before they find us."

"No." Mai's voice was firm. "That proves their case. We don't hunt Foundation personnel. We follow protocol."

"Protocol that's being used to separate us." Ace's shadow pressed harder. "Protocol that calls us Alpha-Nine like we're a containment class. Protocol designed to break what it can't control."

Shammy moved. Two steps across the room. Her hand found Ace's shoulder. Her presence connected the three of them. Depth, horizontal, vertical, the architecture completing itself.

"We don't break." Shammy's voice was soft. Warm. "That's what they don't understand. We don't break under pressure. We *are* pressure."

Ace's hand relaxed on her blade. A fraction.

"They want to prove we're weaker apart." Ace's violet eyes met Shammy's storm-blue. "So we prove them wrong."

Mai worked through the night.

Her terminal illuminated the dark apartment. Data streams, personnel files, operational logs. She built a counter-analysis. Not refuting the review board's claims, but contextualizing them. Showing what they'd left out. The missions where separation had been forced by circumstance, not choice. The operations where individual deployment had been a tactical error from the start, not a fair test of independent capability.

Ace didn't sleep. She moved through the apartment's shadows, checking angles, testing sightlines. Her blade hummed at frequencies below human hearing. The shadow-pressure in the apartment had a restless quality. Expanding and contracting, never settling.

Shammy drifted. Her atmospheric sense extended through the building, reading the city's weather patterns, the pressure systems moving through the urban environment. The Foundation's observation wasn't physical, but it had a presence. A weight in the data streams that pressed against her awareness like a bruise she couldn't stop touching.

At 3:47 AM, Mai's terminal flagged an anomaly.

Someone had opened their personnel files seventeen times in the past six hours. Each access came from a different terminal. Each terminal was assigned to a different department. The access pattern formed a shape. A cross-reference web pointing in one direction.

O4 Command. Someone higher up had been watching the assessment in real-time.

"Someone's invested in this." Mai's voice cut through the apartment's quiet. "This isn't just a personnel evaluation. It's an O4-level operation."

Ace materialized from the shadow she'd been occupying. Her presence was heavy. Dense. "How high?"

"High enough that the review board's recommendation might not matter." Mai's fingers moved. "Dr. Cross reports to O4 oversight. But someone above her is watching directly. Not delegating. Observing."

Shammy's atmospheric sense sharpened.

"They want to see how we react." Shammy's voice was quiet. "The test isn't the separation evaluation. The test is us."

Mai's eyes stayed on her screen. "If they're testing our stability under institutional pressure, we pass by being stable. If they're testing our loyalty, we pass by being loyal. If they're testing our bond..."

She stopped. The data point she'd been avoiding was visible now. A single line in the classified analysis:

Projective Coherence Hypothesis: Anomalous bond stability under institutional pressure may indicate cognitohazardous emotional entanglement. Recommend separation evaluation to assess for memetic contamination risk.

"They think we're compromised." Mai's voice stayed clinical. It was the only way she could say it. "Not operationally. Emotionally. They think our bond might be an anomaly itself. A containment breach in human form."

The apartment's atmosphere shifted. Ace's shadow-pressure responded. The violet fragment stirred.

"They want to contain us." Ace's voice was a blade's edge. "Not because we're dangerous. Because we're together."

"No." Mai cut through. "They want to understand us. They're wrong, but they're not malicious. They're afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Shammy's presence was thick.

"Of what they can't control." Mai turned her terminal off. The screen went dark, but the data was already in her head. The projections, the probabilities, the cold mathematics of what happened when institutions decided you were a problem. "The Foundation exists to contain anomalies. We're anomalous operatives who operate better when attached. That breaks their model."

Ace's shadow-pressure compressed. A single point. Dense enough that the air around her seemed to darken.

"So we show them." Ace's violet eyes reflected the terminal's fading light. "We show them we're not a breach. We're an architecture they don't understand yet."

"And if they don't learn?" Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. Found Ace's hand. Connected the three points. "If they decide we're too anomalous to stay together?"

Mai's jaw tightened. Her silver-blue eyes held the calculation. Cold, clear, final.

"Then we remind them why they field us in the first place."

Morning arrived gray and heavy.

The city outside their window held still. Clouds had gathered overnight. Shammy's presence had drawn them without meaning to. The atmospheric pressure was building. Not a storm. Not yet. But the conditions for one.

The Foundation's review board would deliver its recommendation in less than forty-eight hours. The separation evaluation would follow if the recommendation went that way. Three simultaneous operations. Three different locations. Three vectors forced to operate alone.

Shammy felt the atmospheric pressure continuing to build. The air was too still. Too dense.

Ace meditated in her corner. Shadow-pressure coiled tight. Blade across her knees. The emerald glow pulsed slowly.

Mai stood at her terminal. Not working. Watching the cursor blink. The numbers had been calculated. The analysis was complete. The counter-argument was prepared.

They were being measured by people who had never seen them work.

That was the flaw in the Foundation's assessment. It was being conducted by Dr. Helena Cross. A theorist. A file-reader. Someone who had never stood in a containment zone and felt the triad's vectors align. Someone who had never watched Ace's shadow-pressure hold a breach closed while Mai calculated the seal pattern and Shammy stabilized the atmospheric chaos.

She didn't understand what she was trying to break.

Shammy moved to stand between them. Mai's shoulder under one hand. Ace's blade-sheath under the other. The three vectors connecting. Depth, horizontal, vertical. A system completing itself.

"Whatever they decide..." Shammy's voice was soft. A promise in the room's weight. "We don't fracture."

Ace's blade hummed. An agreement in frequencies below words.

Mai's hand found Shammy's. An anchor in the data storm.

"We don't fracture." Mai's silver-blue eyes were steady. "That's not who we are."

The review board's recommendation would arrive in forty-seven hours. The separation evaluation would test their individual limits. The O4 observer would watch their reactions like data points in a graph.

None of them had ever seen the triad work from the outside.

They didn't know what they were measuring.

Some things aren't meant to be contained. They're meant to hold.

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