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Chapter Fifteen: The Real Crisis

Shammy noticed it first.

Not through sight or sound. Through pressure. The air in their apartment had changed sometime between Mai's coffee and Ace's morning meditation. Shifted into something that wasn't threat but wasn't peace either. It pressed against the walls differently. The light came through the windows at angles that didn't match the hour.

She stood in the kitchen, ducking the doorframe, and tried to name what she was feeling. Not an anomaly. Not containment. Something else. Something she couldn't quite—

“Something's different.” She said it without turning from the window. “The atmosphere isn't right.”

Ace looked up from her corner. Shadow-pressure coiled at her feet. “Threat?”

“No.” Shammy reached for the source. “Not threat. Change.”

Mai's fingers stopped on the terminal. Change was harder than threat. Change could be anything.

“What kind of change?”

“I don't know yet.” Shammy pressed her palm flat against the window glass. Cool. Solid. Real. “Something's coming. Not here. But the atmosphere knows. It's holding space for something.”

The morning light moved across the floor.

By noon, Shammy had stopped trying to adjust the apartment's atmosphere. The air wasn't responding. Not resistant. Waiting. Like the whole space was bracing.

“You're drifting.” Mai didn't look up from her terminal. “Your variance is up eighteen percent from baseline.”

“I know.” Shammy moved to the window again. The city outside looked ordinary. People walking to lunch appointments, checking their phones. “Something's pressing. I can't find the source.”

“Anomaly?”

“Not anomaly.” Her hair shifted slightly, responding to pressure that wasn't visible. “Anomalies feel different. External. This is... internal. Coming from someone in this room.”

Ace's shadow-pressure stirred.

“From one of us?”

"From one of us." Shammy turned. Her eyes moved across the room. Ace in her corner, Mai at her terminal, the distance between them. "Someone's carrying something they haven't let go of."

The silence that followed wasn't peaceful. Charged. Waiting. Uncomfortable the way air feels before lightning.

"Who?" Ace cut through. Flat. Direct.

Shammy reached outward with her atmospheric sense. Not searching. Just feeling. The weight had a direction. A shape.

"Mai."

The word landed hard. Mai's fingers stopped moving. Her eyes shifted focus. Away from calculations, toward something the framework couldn't process.

"What about me?"

"You're holding something." Shammy moved closer. Not crowding. Just offering. "It's been building for weeks. I thought it was the investigation. The stress. But that's over now, and you're still—"

"The investigation—"

"Is over." Shammy's presence wrapped around the space. "So why is your pressure still climbing?"

Mai's jaw tightened. Disclosure strategies, emotional management protocols, structural approaches to difficult conversations. She ran through all of them and found them useless.

"I've been..." She stopped. Started again. "There's something. Something I've been putting off."

"Something personal."

"Something personal."

Ace rose from her corner. Shadow-pressure moved with her. She crossed to Mai. The pace of someone who moved when movement was needed.

"Tell us."

Not a command. Just presence. The kind that said: whatever it is, we face it.

Mai's fingers pressed harder against the terminal's edge. All the frameworks, all the protocols, and none of them right.

"My phone." She said it precise despite the pressure. "My personal phone. The one I don't use for Foundation work. The one I've been ignoring."

"The one that rang twice yesterday." Ace's voice carried observation, not accusation.

"The one that's been ringing for three weeks." The framework finally released. The numbers couldn't help. "I haven't answered."

"Why?"

Mai closed her eyes.

“Because answering would mean facing something I've been avoiding.”

“What?”

A breath. Then:

“My family.”

The words hung. Shammy felt the shift. The pressure that had been building finally finding a crack to move through. Not resolution. Just acknowledgment.

“Family.” Ace's voice carried no judgment.

“I have a sister. Younger. We used to be close.” Mai's hands pressed together. “Before the Foundation. Before all of this.”

“She doesn't know?”

“She doesn't know.” The framework tried to restart, tried to find structure. “About the Foundation. About what I do. About—” Her eyes opened. Silver-blue meeting violet. “About us.”

The personal phone sat on Mai's terminal desk. Small. Unremarkable. A civilian device for a civilian life that didn't exist anymore. It had been silent since Mai's admission, but the silence wasn't peace. It was the silence of something waiting.

“Your sister.” Shammy's voice stayed warm despite the weight. “Tell us about her.”

Mai's fingers pressed together. Even in chaos, she needed framework.

“Her name is Lin. Three years younger. We grew up together. Same schools, same bedroom, same everything until I left.” Her voice caught on the word *left*. “She has a normal life. A career. A husband. The kind of life that makes sense to people who don't contain anomalies for a living.”

“She doesn't know about the Foundation.”

“She doesn't know about the Foundation. She doesn't know about anomalous entities. She doesn't know about containment protocols.” The framework finally gave up. “She thinks I work in international security consulting. Something boring enough not to ask questions about. She thinks I travel too much. She thinks I'm distant. She thinks I don't call enough.”

“Do you?”

“No.” Precision without evasion. “I don't call enough because calling means lying. Every conversation is a construction. A fiction. Because the truth is classified and the truth would hurt her and the truth would make her part of a world she shouldn't be part of.”

“And now?”

“Now she wants to visit.”

Shammy's atmospheric sense registered the weight of those words. Not threat. Change. The kind that couldn't be calculated, only faced.

"She's been trying to reach me for three weeks." Mai's voice finally cracked. "She wants to see me. She wants to meet my—" Her eyes moved to Ace, then to Shammy. "My life. She wants to know who I've become."

"She doesn't know about you. Either of you." Mai's hands pressed harder together. "She knows a version of me that doesn't exist anymore. The version who was normal. Who could have family dinners without lying. Without hiding. Without explaining why her partners aren't what anyone expects."

"What version is that?"

"The version who had a sister and a future and a life that made sense." Mai's eyes met Ace's. "The version who could have told the truth."

"When does she want to visit?" Ace's voice came from beside Mai.

"This weekend. Four days. She already booked a flight." Calculation returning to Mai's voice. Not because she wanted it, but because it was who she was. "She wanted to surprise me."

"Surprise."

"She said she missed me. She said she wanted to see my apartment. Meet my friends." The framework finally found traction. "She's been trying to call for three weeks. I haven't answered. She decided to stop waiting."

"She's coming here."

"She's coming here. To this apartment. To see what I couldn't tell her."

"You haven't told her."

"I couldn't." The framework ran through explanations, found them all inadequate. "How do you tell your sister you work for a secret organization? How do you tell her you're in a relationship with two people who aren't exactly human? How do you tell her that the version of you she knew, that version is gone?"

"You're not gone." Ace cut through. "You're different. That's not the same."

"Different enough that she won't recognize me. Different enough that the life I show her will be a construction." Mai's hands pressed harder against her thighs. "I've been lying to her for three years. And now she's coming to see through the lies."

"Or you could tell her the truth."

"Which truth?" The weight of someone who'd run all the variables and found them all impossible. "The Foundation truth? The 'I carry a weapon that can disrupt reality' truth? The 'I've seen things that would give you nightmares' truth?"

"The personal truth." Ace stayed flat. "The truth about us."

"She doesn't know about us. She grew up in the same household I did. She expects me to have a boyfriend. One." The framework ran again. "She doesn't expect two partners. She doesn't expect those partners to be what you are. She doesn't expect anything about my life because I've spent three years making sure she wouldn't have to."

"Making sure she wouldn't have to what?"

"Deal with it." Mai's voice finally broke. "Face the fact that her sister isn't who she thinks she is. Adjust her understanding of family, of normal, of what her sister's life is supposed to look like." Her hands pressed together. "I've been protecting her. I've been protecting myself. And now she's coming, and I can't protect either of us anymore."

Shammy's atmospheric presence wrapped around Mai. Not fixing, not solving. Just there.

"You don't have to protect her." Warm despite everything. "You don't have to protect yourself. Not from us."

"What do I do?"

"You face it." Ace's voice came from beside her. "Together. That's how we face everything."

"She doesn't know about together." Mai's framework finally stopped running. The numbers couldn't hold this. Only people could. "She doesn't know anything."

"She'll learn." Shammy's presence expanded. "Or she won't. But you won't face it alone. That's not how we work."

The evening came slowly.

Mai sat at her terminal. The personal phone rested beside her. She'd finally called back. Left a message. Acknowledged that her sister was coming, that she knew, that she was preparing.

Preparing for what, she didn't say.

Ace stood at the window. Not meditating. Not maintaining her blades. Just there. The way she always was when someone in the triad needed presence more than action.

Shammy moved through the apartment, adjusting without conscious thought. Making the air survivable for difficult conversations. Making the space ready.

"She's coming." Mai's voice carried the weight of fact. "In four days. She booked a flight. She wants to have dinner. Here."

"Dinner." Ace's voice came from the window. "In this apartment."

"With us." Mai's eyes moved to Ace, then to Shammy. "She asked about my life. About the people who matter to me. I've been lying about the people who matter to me for three years."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I have friends. A life. That I'm happy." The framework stirred briefly. "All technically true. All completely inadequate."

"You'll tell her the rest."

"Will I?" The uncertainty of someone who'd calculated all the options and found them all terrifying. "What do I say? 'This is Ace, my partner. This is Shammy, also my partner. We share an apartment and a life and a bond the Foundation tried to disassemble and couldn't. Also, I contain anomalous entities for a living. Also, both my partners have abilities that defy physics. Also, this is who I am now.'?"

"You'll say what feels true." Shammy's presence wrapped around the space. "Not a script. Just truth."

"Truth." The weight of someone who'd built her life around calculations finding the calculations useless. "I don't know how to do truth with her. I only know how to do management."

"Management ends when she walks through that door." Ace's voice came from the window. "You can't manage someone who's in the room."

"Then what do I do?"

"You be there." Ace's shadow-pressure shifted. Not threat. Just presence. "You be you. We'll be us. She sees what she sees."

"And if what she sees isn't what she wants?"

"Then she chooses." Shammy's voice carried warmth. "You can't choose for her. You can only be there when she chooses."

The personal phone sat silent. The message had been sent. The countdown had begun.

Four days.

The night deepened.

Mai stood in the kitchen. The sacred space. The place where their morning ritual happened. Eggs cracked, rice measured, three people sharing the choreography of ordinary life. But tonight, the ritual wasn't happening. The kitchen was just a kitchen. A space that in four days would hold something else entirely.

"What do I cook?" She stood at the open refrigerator. The framework had found something it could calculate. "For the dinner. What do I make?"

"Make what you always make." Ace's voice came from the doorway. "The ritual. The thing we eat together."

"She won't expect the ritual. She'll expect normal dinner. Normal food. Normal—"

"Our life is normal. To us." Ace moved into the kitchen. "She doesn't get to decide what normal means for you."

"She'll have expectations."

"Expectations built from three years of lies." No heat. Just observation. "You can't meet those. They're not about you. They're about who she thinks you are."

"Then what do I do?"

"Show her who you actually are. Including the food. Including us. Including everything."

"Including the Foundation?"

"Including what you can. She's a civilian. Some things are classified." Ace's violet eyes held steady. "But you don't have to lie about what matters. You don't have to hide us."

"Hide you." Mai's voice carried the weight of admission. "I've been hiding you. For three years. From everyone outside the Foundation."

"You were protecting us."

"I was protecting myself." The framework ran briefly. "I didn't want to explain. I didn't want to justify. I didn't want to face the possibility that people I loved wouldn't understand."

"And now?"

"Now I have to face it." Mai's hands pressed against the refrigerator door. "Four days. One dinner. My sister, who I've been lying to, in an apartment she won't expect, with people she doesn't know."

"We'll be there."

"You'll be there. She'll see you. She'll see—" Mai's voice caught. "She'll see what we are. Together. The thing I couldn't fit into a conversation."

"You don't explain." Shammy's voice came from the kitchen doorway. "You show. You be there. You let her see."

"See what?"

"You. Happy. With us." Shammy's presence wrapped around the kitchen. "Sisters notice happiness. Even when they don't understand the structure."

"I am happy." Mai said it like she was surprising herself. "I'm better than okay. I'm... complete. In a way I couldn't explain to someone who doesn't know what completion feels like."

"She'll see it." Shammy moved into the kitchen, making the space feel smaller but warmer. "She'll see you with us. She'll see how we move. She'll see that whatever you are, you're not alone."

"Not alone." The framework ran again. "I haven't been alone in three years. I've had you. I've had this. A life that makes sense to me even if it doesn't make sense to anyone else."

"That's what I want her to see." Mai pressed her palms against the counter. "Not the details. She doesn't need the Foundation, she doesn't need classification levels. But she needs to see that I'm not the stranger she's afraid I've become."

"Sisters don't stop being sisters because lives change."

“What if she decides I have?”

“Then she decides that.” Shammy's presence tightened. “But you won't know until she's here. And we'll be here too.”

The morning came. Three days left.

Mai's phone sat on the terminal. She'd received a response. Not a call, just text. Her sister confirming the flight time, expressing excitement, asking if there was anything she should bring.

Bring wine? Something Japanese? I want to support your life there.

Your life there.

The words carried weight Mai hadn't expected. Her sister was coming to support her life. A life that had been built on lies.

“Three days.” Mai's voice came from the terminal. Her coffee sat untouched. “She lands at 4 PM. Dinner at 7. She wants to see the apartment. She wants to meet 'my people.'”

“Your people.” Ace's voice came from her meditation corner. Blade across her lap. “That's what she called us.”

“That's how she referred to my friends. The people in my life.” The framework ran. “She doesn't know that 'my people' means something different to me than it does to her.”

“What does it mean to you?”

“You. Both of you.” Precision despite the weight. “The triad. The architecture we've built. Everything she doesn't know about.”

“Then show her.” Ace's violet eyes held steady. “When she says 'your people,' show her exactly who they are.”

“She won't expect you.” The calculation of someone running every scenario. “She won't expect someone Shammy's height. She won't expect Ace's... presence. She'll walk through that door and see things she has no categories for.”

“She'll see people who love you.” Shammy's voice came from the bedroom doorway. She'd been drifting later than usual. The pressure in the apartment had been affecting her sleep. “That's all she needs to see.”

“She expects a boyfriend. A single boyfriend. Maybe a roommate.” The framework ran again. “She doesn't expect a triad.”

“She doesn't know what to expect. She hasn't seen you in three years.” Shammy's presence wrapped around the kitchen. “She's coming because she wants to understand. Not because she thinks she already does.”

“She wants to understand a version of me that doesn't exist.”

"She wants to understand who you are now." Ace's voice came from her corner. Still. Present. "The version that does exist. The one we know."

That version. The one who fights anomalies and carries a rune-marked weapon and is in love with two people who aren't exactly human.

"The version who's happy." Shammy's voice carried warmth. "The version who has a life that works even if it doesn't fit anyone's categories."

The day passed in preparation.

Not tactical preparation. Personal preparation. The kind that couldn't be calculated, only felt.

She cleaned the apartment. Not because it was dirty. Three people sharing space required a certain baseline order. She cleaned because cleaning gave her hands something to do while her mind ran the calculations she couldn't stop running.

What would Lin see when she walked through the door?

The apartment itself was normal enough. Urban. Comfortable. The kind of space someone in international security consulting might have. But the details would betray the lie. The third chair at the table. The meditation corner with its blade maintenance kit. The terminal that was too advanced for civilian work. The way the air pressure shifted when Shammy moved through a room.

"She'll notice things." Mai was arranging cushions. Unnecessarily, the cushions were fine. "She'll notice that this apartment isn't set up for one person. Or even two."

"She'll notice you're not alone." Ace's voice came from the kitchen. She was helping, or trying to. Her reach limited what she could do, but her presence was the point. "That's not something to hide."

"It's not the having people. It's the having two people. The having..." Mai's voice caught. "The having a relationship structure she won't expect."

"Then she learns to expect it." Shammy's voice came from the window. She was adjusting the curtains. The afternoon light was hitting the space wrong and her atmospheric sense was picking up on the imbalance. "Or she doesn't. But you don't hide it."

"I wasn't planning to hide it. I was planning to..." Mai pressed her hands flat against a cushion. "I don't know what I was planning. I've never done this before."

"Neither have we." Ace's voice came from the kitchen doorway. "We've never had to explain ourselves to someone outside the Foundation. Someone who doesn't know what we are."

"She doesn't know that people like you exist. She doesn't know that the world has diversity she's never seen."

"She doesn't need to know what we are." Shammy's presence wrapped around the living room. "She needs to know who we are. Who we are to you. That's different."

"Who you are to me." Mai's voice carried the weight of truth. "My partners. My family. The people who hold me together when I can't hold myself. The people I come home to."

"Then that's what she sees." Ace's voice carried certainty. "Not what we are. Who we are."

Mai's hands finally stopped moving. The cushions were arranged. The apartment was ready. Or as ready as it could be.

Two days left.

The next morning brought a message.

Lin had sent photos. Her family. Her husband. A life that was everything Mai's life wasn't. Normal, expected, categorizable.

I want to hear about your life, her sister had written. The real one. Not the phone calls. Not the distance. I want to know who you've become.

The real one.

Mai stared at the message. The framework ran. Calculating responses, weighing disclosure options, projecting outcomes. But the framework couldn't hold the weight of what her sister was asking.

"I've been showing her a construction." Mai's voice came from the terminal. Coffee cold beside her. "For three years. And now she's asking for the real one."

"What's the real one?" Ace's voice came from her meditation corner.

"The real one is this." Mai's eyes moved across the apartment. Ace in her corner. Shammy at the window. The space they shared. The life they'd built. "The Foundation. Anomalies. Containment. You. Both of you."

"Then show her this."

"This includes things I can't show her. The Foundation is classified. The work is classified." The framework ran. "I can show her the apartment. I can show her you. I can show her the structure of my life. But I can't show her the whole truth."

"You can show her enough." Shammy's atmospheric presence wrapped around the terminal. "Enough to know who you are. Enough to understand that you're happy."

"Happy." Mai said it like something she'd almost forgotten. "I've been so focused on survival, on protecting the lie, that I forgot to notice."

"You forgot you were happy?"

"I forgot that happiness was the point." Her hands pressed against the terminal. "The thing I've been lying about is the thing that makes my life worth lying about."

"Then you tell her that." Ace's voice came from beside her. "You tell her: I have a life that doesn't fit your categories. I have people who love me. I have a bond that can't be broken. And I'm happy. That's the truth."

"That's the truth." Mai's framework finally stopped running. The numbers couldn't hold this. "You are. Both of you. That's not a lie. That's the only truth that matters."

"Then that's what you show her." Shammy's voice carried warmth. "You show her the truth. The rest is just details."

One day left.

The night before.

Mai sat at her terminal. The personal phone rested beside her. Silent now, but weighted with everything it represented. Tomorrow, her sister would walk through the door. The three years of lying would end. She would have to be someone true.

"I'm terrified." The admission came out precise. Structured. The way Mai did everything, even fear. "I've faced anomalies that could end the world. I've contained entities that defy physics. I've worked through situations that would break most people."

"This is different." Ace's voice came from beside her.

"This is my sister. Someone who knew me before. Someone I've been lying to because I thought I was protecting her." Mai's hands pressed together. "What if I wasn't protecting her? What if I was protecting myself?"

"You were protecting yourself." Shammy's presence wrapped around the terminal space. "That's not wrong. You had something worth protecting."

"Was it worth the lies?"

"The lies kept her out of the Foundation." Ace's voice carried observation. "That was worth something. The Foundation isn't kind to civilians who know too much."

"But the other lies. The personal ones. The ones about you. About us." The weight of three years of distance. "Were those necessary?"

"They were your choice." Shammy's voice stayed warm. "You chose to keep parts of your life separate. That wasn't wrong. It was survival."

"Survival."

"You survived. We survived. The triad survived." Shammy's presence expanded. "Tomorrow you face something new. But you're not facing it alone."

"I always planned for this conversation as if I'd be having it alone." The framework stirred briefly. "As if I'd have to explain us without having you there."

"You won't be alone." Ace's voice came from beside her. "We'll be there. That's how we face things."

"Together." Mai said it like something she was learning to trust. "We face things together."

"Tomorrow won't be different." Shammy's presence wrapped around Mai. Not fixing. Not solving. Just there. "Whatever she decides... we'll still be here. That won't change."

"That won't change." Mai's voice carried the weight of the truth. "Whatever happens tomorrow, I still have you. I still have this."

"You'll always have this." Ace's shadow-pressure shifted. Not threat. Just presence. "That's what we built. That's what we protect."

Tomorrow.

The morning of.

Mai's coffee ritual happened at 6:00 AM, same as always. Two sugars, measured to the gram.

But the calculations running in the back of her mind weren't threat assessments. Arrival times. Traffic patterns. The walk from the airport. The time between her sister's landing and the dinner they'd scheduled.

Not strategic calculations. Personal ones.

Ace's meditation corner held her at 4:47 AM. The Violet-fragment was quiet. But the quiet was different now. Not suppressed. Waiting.

Shammy drifted into the kitchen at 6:03 AM. Later than usual. The pressure shifts in the apartment had been keeping her awake. But she was present.

"She lands at 4 PM." Mai's voice came from her coffee. "She'll be here by 5:30. Dinner at 7."

"We'll be ready." Ace's voice came from her corner. Not reassuring. Just certain.

"Ready." The weight of the word. "What does ready mean for this?"

"It means being here." Shammy's presence wrapped around the kitchen. "Being us. Not hiding."

"I've been hiding for three years." The framework ran briefly. "I don't know how to not hide."

"You stop hiding when she walks through the door." Ace's voice came from beside her. "You be who you are. We be who we are. She sees what she sees."

"And if what she sees isn't what she wants?"

"Then she tells you." Shammy's voice carried warmth despite the weight. "And you face that together. With us. That's how you stop hiding."

Something was coming. Something personal. Something that couldn't be calculated.

The real crisis wasn't containment. Wasn't anomaly. Wasn't Foundation investigation.

The real crisis was family.

And in four hours, it would walk through the door.

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