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## Chapter Sixteen: The Family Problem

The problem wasn't hiding the weapons.

The problem was hiding everything else.

Mai stood in the center of their apartment at 6:47 AM, three days before her sister's arrival, cataloging everything that would give them away. Her eyes tracked across the space they'd made theirs over eighteen months. The meditation corner where Ace's katanas rested, the atmospheric stabilizers Shammy had installed after her third drift episode, the rune-marked coffee maker that Mai had calibrated to exactly 87.4 degrees Celsius for optimal extraction.

Normal people didn't have rune-marked coffee makers.

Normal people didn't need atmospheric stabilizers.

"The weapons are easy." Mai's voice had the precision of someone running calculations. "They go in the lockbox. Standard protocol for civilian visits."

"The weapons are not the problem." Ace stood at the window. "The problem is us."

"The problem is me." Mai's hands pressed together. "You two are unusual. But unusual isn't impossible. I'm the one with a history."

Shammy emerged from the bedroom, ducking the doorframe. The apartment's atmospheric pressure adjusted automatically around her. A subtle shift Mai had stopped noticing months ago, but one that would be immediately apparent to anyone who didn't live with a liminal elemental.

"What history?" Shammy's voice was rough with sleep. "You've mentioned the sister. You haven't mentioned the history."

"Because the history is complicated. And complicated takes time."

"We have three days."

"We have three days to prepare for a civilian visitor who doesn't know that I work for an organization that contains anomalous threats to reality. Who doesn't know that I have anomalous abilities." Mai's voice stayed precise but the precision carried weight. "Who doesn't know that I'm in a relationship with two people instead of one. The history is the least complicated part."

Silence. Morning light through the windows.

"Start with the sister." Ace didn't turn from the window. "Everything else comes after."

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Mai's sister was named Lin.

Three years younger. Same silver hair, though Lin's fell in softer waves without the runic reflection. Same analytical bent, applied to corporate finance instead of cosmic horror containment. Same tendency toward precision, though Lin's precision was social rather than tactical.

They'd been close. Once. Before Mai had joined the Foundation. Before the triad. Before Mai had learned that some truths couldn't be shared without endangering the people you wanted to share them with.

"She thinks I work private security." Mai sat at her terminal, pulling up files that weren't mission reports but felt like them. "Corporate protection. High-risk clients. The kind of job that explains why I can't talk about work, why I have strange hours, why I moved to the city without telling her why."

"She doesn't know about the triad." Ace's voice came from her corner. Statement, not question.

"She doesn't know about the triad. She doesn't know about the anomalous. She doesn't know about anything that matters." Mai's fingers pressed against the terminal's edge. "We talk every few months. Birthday calls. Holiday messages. The appearance of sisterhood without the substance."

"Why?"

The question came from Shammy. The question Mai had been avoiding since Lin's message had arrived four days ago: *I'm coming to visit. Finally. It's been too long.*

"Because knowing is dangerous." Mai's framework held. "Because the Foundation's operational security isn't just protocol. It's protection. Because if Lin knew what I actually do, she'd become a target."

"That's operational logic." Ace cut through. "That's not the real reason."

Mai's fingers pressed harder against the terminal.

"The real reason is that she'd look at me differently." The precision of someone admitting something they'd calculated the cost of. "The sister she knew was normal. The sister I am is... this. Someone who contains anomalies. Someone who carries runes and bleeds from overuse. Someone who chose this life instead of the life she was supposed to have."

"Supposed to have?"

"Corporate. Stable. The kind of job Lin has. The kind of life our parents wanted." The framework shifted. "I was supposed to be something she could understand. Instead, I became something she can't."

"She's still coming." Shammy's voice carried warmth despite everything. "She still wants to see you. That means something."

"That means she wants to see the sister she thinks I am. Not the sister I actually am."

"Maybe she wants to see you." Ace's voice came from her corner. "Not the idea of you. You."

"You don't know her."

"I know you." Ace's shadow-pressure settled. "And I know that you're afraid of this for reasons that

have nothing to do with operational security.”

“She's coming tomorrow.” Mai broke the silence. “We have one day to figure out what we're hiding. And what we're revealing.”

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The list took three hours to compile.

Mai approached it like a containment protocol. Which was exactly the problem, according to Ace, who pointed out that normal people didn't make lists with “threat assessment” categories for family visits.

#### **ITEMS TO HIDE:**

1. Weapons (all of them—katanas, disruptor pistol, backup blades, emergency runes) 2. Rune-marked equipment (coffee maker, terminal stabilizers, atmospheric calibrators) 3. Foundation documentation (badges, protocols, mission logs) 4. Anomalous indicators (Shammy's static-shifted hair, Ace's shadow-pressure movement, the way Mai's eyes reflect runic patterns under certain light) 5. The fact that all three of them share one bedroom

#### **ITEMS TO REVEAL:**

1. They live together (roommates—technically true) 2. They work together (private security—technically true) 3. They care about each other (obviously true, though the degree would require explanation) 4. They're happy (true, though the kind of happiness that required explaining)

“This is insane.” Ace's voice came from the couch, reading over Mai's shoulder. “We're not roommates.”

“We're not going to tell my sister we're a polyamorous triad in the first conversation.” Mai's framework held. “That's not hiding. That's pacing.”

“That's lying.” Ace's shadow-pressure shifted. “I don't lie. It's too slow.”

“You'll lie if I ask you to.” Mai's eyes met Ace's. Violet to silver-blue. “Because this matters to me. Because I need you to.”

Silence. Ace's stillness held. Then—

“Fine.” Flat. “But I won't like it.”

“Noted.”

Shammy emerged from the bedroom, having spent the last hour adjusting the apartment's atmosphere to something that read as “normal human living space” instead of “liminal containment environment.” The task had required more concentration than she'd expected. The apartment had absorbed so much of their presence that “normal” felt almost hostile.

“The bedroom is the problem.” Shammy's voice carried the weight of someone who'd been calculating. “One bed. Three people. Even if we hide the relationship, we can't hide the architecture.”

“We have a guest room.” Mai's fingers moved across the terminal. “We use it for recovery. It has a bed. It can be staged.”

“Staged.” Ace's voice carried no inflection. “We're staging a life.”

“We're presenting a version of our life that Lin can understand.” The framework held. “That's not lying. That's translation.”

“That's definitely lying.” Shammy's presence shifted. Warm despite the observation. “But I understand why. Some truths need context.”

“Context we won't have time to build.” Mai's fingers pressed together. “One dinner. One evening. One chance to let her see me without seeing everything she can't understand.”

“And after?”

After. The question Mai had been avoiding since Lin's message arrived.

“After, we see what happens. We see if she accepts the version of me I can show her. We see if that's enough.”

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The afternoon was logistics.

The weapons went into the lockbox. A Foundation-standard secure container that Mai disguised as a filing cabinet. The rune-marked equipment went into storage. The atmospheric stabilizers were powered down, leaving Shammy's natural presence as the only anomalous pressure in the apartment.

The bedroom.

One bed. Three people. Eighteen months of shared space that had shaped itself around their presence. The closet held their clothes, intermingled, not separate. The nightstand held items that didn't require explanation individually but collectively told a story.

“We move things.” Mai's voice had the precision of someone implementing a protocol. “Guest room becomes 'my room.' Bedroom becomes 'Ace and Shammy's room.' Close enough to true.”

“Close enough to true.” Ace's voice came from the doorway. “You keep using that phrase.”

“Because sometimes close enough is all we have.” The framework held. “I want Lin to see me. I can't show her everything. So I show her what I can.”

“What about us?” Shammy's presence expanded. “What do we tell her about the three of us?”

“That we're close. That we live together. That we work together.” Fingers pressing together. “All true.”

“But not the truth.” Ace's shadow-pressure shifted.

“Not the whole truth.” Mai's eyes met Ace's. “Not yet. Maybe not ever. Maybe Lin doesn't need to know that I love two people and both of them love me back in ways that don't fit any category she'd recognize.”

“That sounds like a decision you're making for her.”

"It sounds like a decision I'm making for us." The precision of someone who'd calculated the cost. "If she reacts badly, it's my family. My risk. Not yours."

"That's not how triads work." Shammy's voice carried warmth despite the weight. "Your family is our risk. That's what being a triad means."

Mai's framework shifted.

"I know." Her voice carried something it hadn't before. "That's what I'm afraid of."

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The evening brought a different kind of preparation.

Mai sat at her terminal, pulling up files she'd avoided for years. Photos. Messages. The digital archive of a relationship that had once been close and had slowly become distant. Not through conflict, but through the simple impossibility of sharing a life Lin couldn't understand.

Lin's messages were consistent. Birthday wishes that arrived at midnight exactly. Holiday greetings that included photos of her life. A corporate office, a normal apartment, a normal boyfriend. Questions about Mai's life that Mai deflected with professional vagueness.

*How's work?*

*Busy. The usual.*

*Are you seeing anyone?*

*Not really. Focused on the job.*

*You should take more time for yourself.*

*I'm fine. Really.*

The lies accumulated. Year after year. A sister who existed in Mai's phone but not in her reality.

"She asked if I was seeing anyone." Mai's voice came from the terminal. The photos of Lin's life glowed on the screen. Normal, understandable, the kind of existence Mai had left behind. "I told her not really."

"When?" Ace's voice came from the couch.

"Last year. Before..." The framework paused. "Before I understood that 'not really' was going to become 'two people I love more than I knew I could love.'"

"You didn't know about us then." Shammy's voice came from the kitchen. "That's not lying. That's timing."

"That's the excuse I've been using." Mai's fingers pressed against the terminal's edge. "But the truth is I've been lying to Lin since I joined the Foundation. Not about this. About everything. About who I am. About what I do. About the life she thinks I have versus the life I actually have."

"She's still coming." Ace cut through. "She still wants to see you. Whatever version of you she thinks exists."

“What if that version doesn't exist anymore?”

“Then she meets the version that does.” Ace rose from the couch. Movement. Decision. “I don't know your sister. But I know you. And I know that you've been carrying this alone for years. Whatever happens tomorrow, whether she accepts you or doesn't, you won't be carrying it alone anymore.”

Shammy's presence expanded. Mai's framework shifted.

“That's what triads do.” Shammy's voice came from the kitchen. “We carry things together. Not because we can solve them. We can't, some things can't be solved. Because carrying alone is heavier than carrying together.”

“I know.” Mai's voice carried something it hadn't carried in weeks. “I've always known. I just...”

“You just didn't want to involve us in something that might hurt.”

“Something that will definitely hurt.” The framework held. “If Lin doesn't accept me. If Lin sees the truth and can't understand it. If I lose the last family I have outside this life because I couldn't maintain the fiction.”

“You won't lose us.” Ace cut through. “That's the one thing you don't have to calculate.”

“I know.” Mai's fingers pressed together. “That's what makes this harder. I have you two. I don't have to pretend with you. And Lin... Lin is the only person left who knew me before. Who remembers the version of me that didn't have this.”

“This.” Shammy's presence expanded. “The triad?”

“The Foundation. The anomalous. The life I chose instead of the life I was supposed to have.” The framework held. “Lin represents the path I didn't take. Seeing her means facing that choice. Telling her the truth, or not, means deciding what that choice cost.”

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The night brought something unexpected.

Mai lay in the center of their bed, caught between Ace's compact presence on one side and Shammy's tall frame on the other. The position was automatic now. Eighteen months of finding the arrangement that let all three of them sleep. Ace needed space to move if the Violet-fragment stirred. Shammy needed enough room that her atmospheric drift didn't pull at the others. Mai needed to be anchored between them.

Tonight, the arrangement felt different.

“I've been thinking.” Mai's voice came from the darkness. “About what Lin said when she called.”

“What did she say?” Ace's voice came from Mai's left. Quiet. Alert despite the stillness.

“She said she missed me.” The framework shifted. “Not the idea of me. Me. She said she wanted to see her sister. Not the version on the phone. The real one.”

“That's what you're afraid of.” Shammy's voice came from Mai's right. “Not that she won't accept you.”

That she wants the real you, and you don't know if you can show her."

"The real me contains anomalies." Mai's fingers pressed against the sheets. "The real me loves two people in a configuration that doesn't fit any category Lin would recognize. The real me has abilities that would terrify her."

"Or she'd surprise you." Ace cut through. "She's your sister. Maybe she's more than the category you've put her in."

"What category?"

"Normal." Shadow-pressure shifted. "You've been thinking of her as normal. As someone who can't understand. But she's your sister. She shares your blood. Your history. Maybe she shares more than you've given her credit for."

"She works in corporate finance."

"You work in cosmic horror containment. We make room for difference."

The silence that followed held something Mai hadn't expected. Not resolution. Not certainty. Just... space.

"I don't know how to do this." The precision of someone admitting defeat. "I know how to contain anomalies. I know how to calculate threat vectors. I don't know how to be a sister to someone I've been lying to for years."

"Then don't be a sister." Shammy's presence expanded. "Be yourself. Let her meet you. Not the version you've been presenting. You."

"That's the version that contains anomalies."

"Then let her meet someone who contains anomalies." Ace cut through. "You've been so focused on what you're hiding that you haven't thought about what you're showing. You're showing her someone who chose a different life. Someone who found people to love. Someone who built a home. That's not a lie. That's just not the whole truth."

"The whole truth is that I'm happy." The framework shifted. "In a way I never expected. With people I never expected. Doing work that matters in ways Lin can't imagine."

"That's the truth you show her." Shammy's voice carried warmth. "Whatever else she needs to know, or doesn't, that's the core. You're happy. You're loved. You're home."

"What if that's not enough?"

"Then it's not enough." Shadow-pressure settled. "But it's what you have. And it's more honest than anything you've shown her before."

For the first time since Lin's message had arrived, the weight felt different. Not lighter. Just... shared.

---

The morning arrived too quickly.

Mai woke at 5:47 AM. Earlier than her usual 6:00, her body responding to the pressure of the day

ahead. The apartment held its staged architecture: guest room prepared with Mai's nominal belongings, bedroom adjusted to suggest two roommates instead of three, weapons hidden, anomalous indicators minimized.

Ace was already in her meditation corner. But today, her shadow-pressure carried something different. Not tension. Presence. The kind that said: I'm here. Whatever happens.

Shammy emerged from atmospheric drift at 6:02 AM. The air pressure adjusted around her, but subtly. Controlled. The kind of modulation that wouldn't register as anomalous to someone who didn't know what to look for.

"Coffee." Mai's voice came from the kitchen. Not a question. A ritual. The thing she could control when everything else felt uncertain.

"Eggs." Ace's voice came from her corner. Not a request. An offering.

Shammy appeared in the doorway. "Atmosphere." Not a statement. A promise.

They moved through their morning choreography. The sacred ordinary. The ritual that had survived investigations, promotions, and every pressure the Foundation could apply.

Now it would survive this.

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The call came at 11:23 AM.

Mai's personal phone lit up with a contact she'd been expecting and dreading.

She answered on the second ring.

"Lin!"

"Mai! Bright. Familiar. The sister Mai remembered from before. "I'm in town! Just landed! I know I said I'd come tomorrow, but my meeting got moved up and I figured—why wait? I'm so excited to see you!"

The words landed like a containment breach. Fast. Unexpected.

"You're in town." Mai's voice stayed precise. "Now."

"Now! I'm at the airport. I can take a car to your place—what's the address again? I want to see where you live! Meet your roommates!"

Silence. Not because Mai didn't have answers. Because she had too many, and none of them ready.

"The address." The precision of someone running calculations against a collapsed timeline. "I'll text it. You're coming now."

"Thirty minutes! Maybe forty. Traffic looks light."

"Thirty minutes."

"Mai, I'm so excited! It's been too long!"

The line went dead.

Mai stood in the center of the apartment. Thirty minutes. The timeline had collapsed. Everything she'd prepared for tomorrow, every staged room, every hidden weapon, every practiced deflection, now had to be ready in less than an hour.

Ace rose from the couch. Shadow-pressure shifted. Decision.

"We're not ready." The precision of someone calculating failure points. "The guest room isn't finished. The lockbox still reads as anomalous. Shammy's atmospheric presence—"

"Is fine." Shammy cut through. "I can hold normal for a dinner. I've done it before."

"The bedroom—"

"Is staged." Ace moved toward Mai. Presence. Not fixing. Just being there. "Thirty minutes is enough for what matters."

"What matters is that my sister is about to walk into a life she doesn't know exists, and I have thirty minutes to figure out how to present that life in a way she can understand."

"You have thirty minutes to decide if you want to keep presenting a fiction." Ace's voice carried no judgment. Just fact. "Or if you want to let her see the truth."

Mai's framework ran calculations. Protocols for civilian contact, threat assessments for information exposure, risk projections for relationship disclosure.

None of the calculations accounted for the fact that Lin was her sister. That Lin had called early because she was excited. That Lin was arriving in thirty minutes whether Mai was ready or not.

"We do what we prepared." The precision of someone committing to a course. "Guest room is my room. Bedroom is Ace and Shammy's room. Weapons hidden. We're roommates who work together."

"That's what we prepared." Shadow-pressure settled. "Is it what you want?"

"It's what I have time for." Mai's fingers pressed together. "The rest comes after. If it comes at all."

Shammy's presence expanded. The apartment's pressure adjusted. Not dramatically. Just enough to make the space feel normal. Human.

"Thirty minutes." Warm despite the urgency. "We move together."

"We move together."

---

The preparations took twenty-three minutes.

The guest room was finished. Mai's clothes moved from the shared closet, personal items distributed with strategic casualness. The bedroom was adjusted. Ace and Shammy's belongings positioned to suggest a shared space that was theirs, not all three. Weapons confirmed hidden. Anomalous indicators minimized. The apartment looked like a normal living space shared by three professionals

who worked private security.

Normal. Or close enough.

Mai stood at the window when the buzzer sounded. 11:52 AM. Eight minutes early.

Shammy's presence held steady. Normal, human, nothing to see. Ace's shadow-pressure settled into stillness.

Mai pressed the intercom.

"I'm here!" Lin's voice came through the speaker. "Oh my god, Mai, your building is so nice! I can't wait to see your apartment!"

The buzzer sounded. The door unlocked. Footsteps in the hallway.

Mai turned to face the door. Ace stood at the window's edge. Present but not central. Shammy occupied the kitchen doorway. Warm but not overwhelming.

The knock came.

Mai opened the door.

Lin stood in the hallway. Silver hair in soft waves. Corporate-professional attire. The analytical eyes Mai recognized from her own mirror, though Lin's held a different kind of calculation. Social, not tactical.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Sisters separated by years of distance, by lives that had diverged, standing in the doorway of an apartment that contained more truth than Mai could explain.

Then Lin smiled.

"Mai!" Her arms opened. "It's been too long!"

She moved forward. Hugged Mai with the casualness of family who'd never stopped being family. Held on a moment longer than necessary. The kind of hug that said: I missed you. I'm here.

Mai held back. Her arms came up, stiff, mechanical. Three years of distance in that embrace. Lin had to feel it.

Lin pulled back. Her eyes moved across the apartment. Taking in the space. The people. The arrangement that was more than it appeared.

"Your roommates." Warm but calculating. "I've heard so much about them in your messages. It's finally good to meet them in person."

She turned to Ace. To Shammy. To the two people Mai had hidden behind strategic omission for years.

"Lin," Mai's voice came from somewhere that felt both familiar and foreign, "this is Ace. And this is Shammy. They... they work with me. They live with me. They—"

She stopped.

The fiction sat on her tongue. Ready to be spoken. Roommates. Colleagues. Close but not romantic.

But Lin was looking at her with those analytical eyes. Those sister eyes. The eyes that had known Mai before the Foundation, before the triad, before everything.

And Mai couldn't do it.

"They're my family." The words came out rough. Uneven. Nothing like the precise delivery she'd planned. "They're my family, Lin. And I've been too afraid to tell you."

The fiction collapsed.

And Lin, normal, corporate, supposed-to-be-unable-to-understand Lin, looked at her sister with those analytical eyes and said:

"I know."

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## [Chapter Sixteen End]

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