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Chapter Two: Walking War Crimes

The briefing room held eleven people. Two of them were breathing.

Mai counted automatically. Her terminal displayed mission parameters in clean lines, urban containment, low-threat classification, single anomaly, minimal civilian presence. Standard. In and out.

The problem was the other nine.

MTF Theta-24 had arrived twelve minutes late, which by their standards counted as early, and immediately began filling the sterile briefing space with a kind of controlled entropy Mai had learned to recognize as their natural state. The team lead, @DaRussianBadger, callsign only, real name classified, was currently spinning a pen through his fingers while explaining the tactical approach to no one in particular.

“So we go in, we grab the thing, we leave before anyone starts asking questions about why there's a perfectly normal building that suddenly decided to stop obeying Euclidean geometry.” The pen completed another rotation. “Simple. Clean. What could go wrong.”

“That's not even the mission.” Grouse. Short. Flat. Leaning against the far wall, tracking something Mai couldn't see. “Something's off about the intel.”

“Something's always off about the intel.” Badger's grin didn't reach his eyes. “That's why they call us instead of the people who read the manual.”

Ace stood beside Mai's chair. Still. Katana hilts catching the fluorescent light. She hadn't spoken since entering the room. She didn't need to.

Shammy occupied the corner opposite Grouse, her frame making the standard-issue furniture look like kindergarten equipment. She was watching the room's atmosphere shift as Theta-24 settled into their pre-mission rhythm. The air pressure changed subtly around her. An offering, not a demand.

“Can we focus?” HeavenlyFather's voice carried the particular weight of someone who had spent years being the only adult in rooms full of people who treated tactical nukes as a valid first-response option. “The briefing. The anomaly. Civilian considerations.”

“Civilian considerations.” Skullker's laugh was brief and humorless. Checking her entry charges for the third time. “You mean the people who are going to run directly toward the anomaly because humans are stupid?”

“I mean the people we're supposed to protect.”

“Same thing.”

Jello's fingers moved across her comms interface, signal patterns dancing. “Narrative suppression protocols prepped. Whatever this thing is, it won't be telling stories when we're done with it.”

Mai cleared her throat. Eleven faces turned.

“Anomaly is a spatial distortion. Localized to a single retail space, abandoned electronics store, west end.” Precise. “Classified Euclidean because internal dimensions exceed external measurements. Standard containment: map the extended space, identify entities, apply stabilizing anchors at structural stress points.”

“Stabilizing anchors.” Badger's pen stopped spinning. “That's your specialty, isn't it? The rune stuff.”

“Ritual systems analysis. Yes. My team handles structural work. Your team handles chaos.”

“We don't handle chaos.” Badger's grin sharpened. “We cause it. There's a difference.”

“I'm aware.”

Two seconds of silence. Then Theta-24 started moving again, their controlled entropy resuming its natural rhythm. Grouse pushed off the wall. Skullker checked her charges. Jello's signal patterns continued dancing.

“Deployment in thirty.” Badger stood. “Everyone sync gear. Loud on my signal, quiet on HeavenlyFather's judgment. If anyone sees something that shouldn't exist—”

“We shoot it,” Skullker finished.

“We assess it.” HeavenlyFather. “Then we shoot it. Maybe. If necessary.”

“I like my version better.”

Mai closed her terminal. Ace's hand found her shoulder briefly, one touch, one breath, and then the triad was moving. Ace forward, Mai centered, Shammy following.

The mission was simple on paper.

Mai had learned to distrust paper.

Seventeen minutes of controlled chaos in the transport.

Mai used the time for final preparation. Terminal displaying architectural records, utility maps, classification protocols for Euclidean spatial anomalies. Cross-referencing containment procedures, flagging complications, building contingency models.

Theta-24 used the time differently.

“So the rune lady.” Jello had settled across from Mai, interface still dancing. “You're the structural work one, right? The anchor stuff.”

“Ritual systems analysis. Yes.”

“I had a question about narrative suppression intersecting with spatial stabilization.” Jello's fingers didn't stop. “When geometry shifts, it creates story-shaped gaps. The anomaly tries to fill those gaps with accessible narratives. If I suppress too early, does that affect your anchor placement?”

Mai's fingers paused. She looked up. "You've worked with spatial distortions before."

"Thirdhand. Stories about stories." Quick grin. "But I've seen what happens when comms and ritual work cross purposes. Not pretty."

"Suppress after the third anchor locks." Mai. "Before that, geometry's too unstable. Narrative patterns hold it together. Remove them early, the whole structure could collapse."

"Collapse meaning implode, explode, or become something worse?"

"Option three." Mai returned to her terminal. "Suppress after third anchor. Not before."

"Got it. After third anchor. Noted."

Across the transport, Badger shuffled a deck of cards. Shuffle. Cut. Shuffle. Automatic. Pointless fidgeting.

"Cards?" Skullker. Flat.

"Lucky deck. Never lost a mission with this deck."

"You've lost missions."

"With other decks." The shuffle continued. "This one's undefeated."

HeavenlyFather sat near the front, eyes closed. Not sleeping, breathing too controlled for sleep. Meditating, maybe, or existing in a pre-mission calm the rest of Theta-24 couldn't quite reach. Grouse had taken position near the door, weapon across her knees, eyes tracking nothing anyone else could see.

Shammy sat beside Mai, steady warmth in the cramped transport. Air pressure had shifted when she boarded, subtle, making the close quarters feel less suffocating. Ace stood at the rear door, back against the wall, eyes on the ceiling. Still. Waiting.

"Two minutes," the pilot's voice came through. "Approaching containment site."

Badger's cards disappeared. His face changed. Still amused, but sharper now. The humor a blade rather than a deflection.

"Alright, Walking War Crimes. Let's do what we do."

The containment site looked exactly like what it was: an abandoned retail space in a forgotten corner of a city that had moved on without it. Small strip mall, other businesses closed years ago. Weeds through cracked concrete. Windows boarded, but someone had pried boards loose, scrape marks on the frames, shadows visible through gaps.

"Cozy." Badger on comms. "Grouse, give me eyes."

"Already looking." Grouse had moved to the eastern approach, too quiet for someone carrying that much recon gear. "Geometry's wrong. Interior space through the windows doesn't fit behind that facade."

"Confirmed." Mai's terminal displayed the same anomaly. "Distortion extends approximately forty-seven meters beyond external wall. That's our containment area."

"Forty-seven meters of shouldn't-be-there." Badger's laugh was sharp. "Worked with worse."

"Triad handles anchor placement." Mai's fingers moved across the interface, marking optimal positions. "Theta-24 provides perimeter security and entity response."

"Entity response." Skullker's voice carried an edge that made Mai's jaw tighten. "We expecting entities?"

"Unknown. Spatial distortions of this classification may contain autonomous manifestations. That's why we have you."

"That's why they have all of us," HeavenlyFather cut in. Warning in his tone. "Let's remember why we're here."

The triad approached in formation. Ace moved first, not rushing, but leading. Her presence was pressure that made shadows shift differently. Mai followed at precise distance, disruptor pistol holstered, hands free for ritual work. Shammy brought up the rear, adjusting the air around them, making the approach feel less like assault and more like weather moving in.

"Front door's clear." Jello on comms. "Signal interference minimal. Whatever's in there isn't broadcasting."

"Yet." Grouse. "Something's off about this whole approach. Too quiet."

"It's an abandoned building." Skullker. "Buildings don't talk."

"Some do." Grouse wasn't joking. "This one's not talking. That's what's off."

Mai filed the observation. Grouse's intuition had a statistical accuracy rate that exceeded Foundation predictive algorithms. When something felt off to Grouse, something was off.

"Proceeding to threshold." Ace. Short, clipped. She'd reached the entrance. Hand on the door frame. Not entering yet. Waiting.

"Copy that." Badger. Amusement still present. "Going loud in three, two—"

"Hold." HeavenlyFather. "Civilian presence detected. Western approach. Homeless encampment in the adjacent lot. We need to clear them before we go loud."

"We don't have time for evacuees." Skullker. Controlled impatience. "Anomaly's active."

"Anomaly's been active for six months per the intel." HeavenlyFather didn't waver. "Six more minutes won't collapse the geometry."

"Actually." Mai started.

"Mai." Badger cut through. "Your read?"

Her fingers moved across the terminal. Spatial readings shifting. The distortion was expanding, slowly, but measurably. "Anomaly's growing. Current expansion rate: two centimeters per hour. Wait

six minutes, containment perimeter increases by twenty centimeters. Wait longer, expansion accelerates. Spatial distortions feed on delay."

"That's not how Euclidean anomalies work." Jello's confusion. "They're stable until disrupted."

"This one isn't." Mai's readings confirmed it. Growth accelerating. "Something's feeding it."

"Entity confirmed." Grouse's voice came through sharp. "Movement inside. Multiple contacts. Not human."

"Shit." Badger lost the amusement. "All teams, going loud now. HeavenlyFather, handle civilians. Everyone else, contain first, questions later."

Controlled chaos.

Theta-24 moved like water finding cracks. Each member flowing into role without hesitation. Skullker through the door first, breach charges leaving the frame smoking but standing. Grouse flanking left, weapon up, tracking something Mai couldn't see. Jello's signal work beginning, patterns dancing across the airwaves.

Badger laughed. The sound of someone finding exactly what he was looking for.

"Contact." Grouse. "Four entities. No, six. Multiplying."

"Define 'multiplying.'"

"They're splitting. The spatial distortion is creating them."

Ace moved.

Mai didn't give the order. Didn't need to. Ace had already seen what Mai saw, entities forming at the distortion's edges, emerging from space that shouldn't exist. Half-real, geometry breaking down around their edges, like the universe couldn't decide if they belonged.

The interior was wrong. Mai's spatial sense registered it before her eyes processed the contradictions: aisles extending further than walls allowed, shelving multiplying in recursive patterns, fluorescent lights with no power source casting shadows in impossible directions. The space was stretching. Reaching.

The first entity reached for Ace. Her blade was already moving.

Emerald glow caught fluorescent light. The entity screamed, or tried to, the sound coming from somewhere that wasn't quite its throat, and then Ace was past it, katana trailing light as she pivoted toward the second contact. No wasted motion. No hesitation. Her body a weapon that happened to be holding weapons.

"Two down." Ace. Calm. "Four remaining."

"Make that three." Skullker's entry charge had opened a second path. Her weapon sang through something that shouldn't have been standing. "These things don't have anatomy. Just geometry given a grudge."

"Anatomy's overrated anyway." Badger had entered behind Skullker, weapon up but not firing. Watching. Enjoying himself more than was strictly professional. "Movement in the extended section."

Geometry's pushing deeper."

"Confirmed." Mai's terminal registered the readings, forty-seven meters of shouldn't-exist space, now folding in on itself as entities moved through it. The distortion was reacting to their presence. Learning. "Extended section's unstable. Shammy, can you read it?"

"Reading." Shammy's voice came through atmospheric, warm despite the tension. She'd entered behind Mai. "The space is hungry. Fed, but wanting more. Eastern wall's the anchor point, stabilize that, the rest follows."

"Eastern wall's in the extended section." Grouse. "Deep in the anomaly."

"That's where we need to be." Mai was calculating. "Ace, frontal approach, draw entity attention. Shammy, flank through the southern aisle, reach the eastern wall. I follow Ace's line and set anchors as we go."

"Identify the stress points." Mai moved toward the eastern wall, disruptor pistol drawn but not firing. She needed anchor positions. "Shammy, eastern stabilization. Ace, continue entity suppression. I need three minutes for anchor placement."

"Three minutes." Badger. "Eternity in a hot zone."

"That's what I need." Mai didn't waver. "Cover me."

The chaos shifted.

Theta-24 didn't stop their assault, couldn't, not with entities still emerging, but they adjusted. That was the thing about working with professionals: even the chaotic ones understood when precision was required.

Skullker took position near Mai. "Move fast. These things are learning."

"They're not sentient." Mai's fingers traced the first anchor pattern on the wall, runes flickering into existence.

"Adapting. Same difference."

First anchor locked. The spatial distortion shuddered, geometry beginning to stabilize, just slightly, at this single point. Two more to place.

"Eastern approach stabilizing." Shammy's voice came through warm. She'd reached her position, air around the eastern wall settling into something readable. The stretching space was beginning to remember its proper dimensions. "Grouse, western flank needs attention. Distortion's pushing that direction."

"On it."

"Second anchor." Mai traced faster. Spatial readings improving. Thirty-two percent stabilization, forty-one, forty-seven. "Ace, status?"

"Busy." Short. Blades singing, emerald light constant as entities emerged and fell. "Accelerating."

"Because you're killing them." Jello's signal patterns frantic. "The distortion replaces what you

remove. You're feeding it."

"I'm supposed to stop killing them?" Something that might have been amusement in Ace's voice.

"I'm supposed to." Jello cut off. "No. Badger, narrative patterns are forming. This thing is trying to write itself into existence."

"Write it out." Badger went flat. "Mai, how long on that third anchor?"

"Forty seconds." Mai's fingers moved with ritual precision. The pattern was complex. The distortion had been growing for months, and its geometry had its own logic now. She had to work within that logic, not against it.

"Thirty-eight seconds." Badger's voice carried something that wasn't humor. "Too long."

"Why?"

"Because HeavenlyFather found something." Flat. "Tell them."

Static before HeavenlyFather's voice came through. Still outside. Still handling civilian evac. But the weight in his voice was new.

"The homeless encampment. They've been using the building for shelter. The anomaly's been feeding on them, on their stories, their memories. That's why it's growing. That's why it's creating entities. It's learning to be real."

The mission parameters shifted.

Mai's fingers didn't stop. Thirty seconds. Twenty-five. The pattern was almost complete.

"Casualties?" Shammy. Soft. The air pressure had changed, not just around the eastern wall now, but the whole structure. Shammy was holding more than her position. She was holding the space itself.

"Unknown." HeavenlyFather. Controlled. "The encampment had twelve people. I've found seven. The others—"

"The others became the entities." Grouse. Flat. "They're not just geometry. They're memories given form."

The entities weren't just hostile manifestations. They were people, or what remained of people after an anomaly processed them. The information changed nothing about the tactical situation. But it changed everything about the weight of the action.

Ace's blades didn't stop. Couldn't. The entities, if they could even be called that now, were still reaching for her, still trying to add her to their number. The geometry they represented was hungry. It had learned hunger from the people it consumed.

"Fifteen seconds." Mai. Steady despite the horror. Third anchor pattern forming, runes locking into place.

"Make it ten." Skullker. Tight. "They're adapting faster. The ones Ace isn't killing are learning to flank."

"I see them." Ace's pivot carried her between two entities, blade tracing an arc that shouldn't have

been possible, her body moving before the geometry could react. "Mai. Finish it."

Third anchor locked.

The spatial distortion screamed.

Not a sound exactly. A frequency that bypassed ears entirely, a recognition of loss expressed as the geometry began remembering proper dimensions. Walls that had stretched beyond limits snapped back. Entities emerging from nowhere found themselves emerging from somewhere, specifically, from spaces they should have occupied.

"Ace, hold." Mai. Sharp. "Don't kill the ones stabilizing."

"They're all trying to kill me."

"Then move. Shammy, collapse the eastern approach. Grouse, western flank's yours. Skullker, hold the entry. Jello, suppress the narrative. Whatever this thing learned, it doesn't get to keep."

The commands came naturally now. Mai wasn't just reading the situation. She was defining it, giving each person their role. The triad worked in concert: Ace holding entities at bay without killing, Shammy guiding eastern geometry toward coherence, Mai directing the overall pattern.

Theta-24 adjusted around them. Chaos, yes, but experienced. They recognized tactical command and adapted without complaint.

"Narrative suppressed." Jello's voice came through exhausted. "This thing had stories. Six months of stories. I've scrambled what I can, but—"

"But some of it will leak." Badger. Grim. "Foundation's going to need a cover team. HeavenlyFather, civilian status?"

"Seven recovered alive. Traumatized but stable." Something that might have been grief in his voice. "The other five... we'll need to identify them from what remains after the collapse."

"Shit." Badger's voice lost all humor. "That's a bad day."

"That's Thursday." Skullker. "Building's stable. Mai, confirm containment."

Mai's terminal displayed the readings. The spatial distortion had stabilized, not collapsed, but returned to proper dimensions. The building was the size it should be. The geometry had remembered. The entities had faded as the space creating them returned to normal.

But the five people who had been consumed, their stories, memories, lives, were gone. The anomaly had digested them, and now that it was contained, there was nothing left to recover.

"Containment confirmed." Mai's voice was steady. Had to be. "Structure stable. No further entity manifestation. Classification upgrade: Euclidean to Safe, pending full analysis of residual narrative patterns."

"Safe." Badger's laugh was hollow. "Tell that to the five people who don't exist anymore."

No one responded. There was nothing to say.

Theta-24 regrouped in the parking lot as Foundation cleanup crews arrived. The contrast was stark: Theta-24 moved with loose, chaotic energy, professionals who had seen too much to pretend order mattered. The cleanup crews moved with precise, bureaucratic efficiency, people who would document every detail.

Badger sat on a vehicle hood, lucky deck in his hands. Shuffle. Cut. Shuffle. Face returned to default, amused, distant.

"That went well." No conviction. "Standard containment. No unexpected complications."

"Five civilians died." HeavenlyFather. Flat. "That's not 'no unexpected complications.'"

"Five civilians were dead when we arrived." Badger's shuffle continued. "They became part of an anomaly six months ago. We didn't kill them. We didn't fail to save them. We confirmed they were gone."

"Convenient framing."

"Accurate framing." Cards kept moving. "There's a difference. You of all people should know that."

Grouse appeared beside Mai at some point, recon gear stowed. She moved like smoke, present, then somewhere else without visible transition.

"Eastern approach was clean." Observational. "Your team knows what they're doing."

"Thank you."

"Not a compliment. An observation. The triad works. Most teams don't. You should know that's unusual."

"We're aware."

"Good." Grouse's attention shifted. "The anomaly had a story. Six months of it. The people it consumed, they fed it. Gave it memories. Gave it shape. The entities weren't just geometry. They were what remained after the anomaly finished digesting."

Mai recorded the observation. "That's not in the initial classification."

"Initial classifications are written by people who haven't been there." Something that might have been respect. "You were there. You know what you saw."

"Thank you. For the observation."

"Thank you for the containment." Grouse moved away, presence fading before Mai could respond.

Skullker approached Ace. Her movement was controlled violence mirroring Ace's economy of motion, though her approach was entirely different, brute force where Ace used precision, overwhelming presence where Ace used pressure.

"You're fast." Statement, not question.

"Fast enough."

"I've seen blade specialists. You're not blade specialists." Skullker's eyes tracked Ace's posture, positioning, subtle tension in her shoulders. "You're something else."

Ace didn't respond.

"Good working with you." Something that might have been respect in Skullker's voice. "Most teams slow us down. You kept up."

"You kept up." Clipped. "Same difference."

Skullker's laugh was brief. "Same difference." She moved toward the transport.

The debrief was mercifully short. The Foundation had questions, always questions, but the containment had been successful, the casualties had been civilians already compromised before the mission began, and the anomaly was stable. Paperwork would follow. It always followed.

Theta-24 dispersed quickly. Badger into a debrief room with someone from ethics, Mai didn't envy whoever had to explain why five civilians had become geometry. HeavenlyFather stayed outside, handling civilian survivors with a care that surprised no one who knew him. Grouse vanished, apparently normal for her. Skullker checked her gear for the fourth time and left without a word. Jello stayed behind to work with narrative suppression, ensuring the anomaly's stories would remain contained.

The triad stood at the parking lot's edge. The abandoned electronics store looked exactly like what it was now, a forgotten retail space, nothing more. The geometry had remembered. The building had forgotten what it had learned.

Mai looked at her terminal. 7:47 PM.

"The reservation." Flat. "It was for seven-thirty."

Ace's shoulders dropped. A fraction. Mai noticed.

"They'll hold it for fifteen minutes." Shammy said it like a fact. "They always do."

"Not when we're forty-seven minutes late." Something not quite frustration. "They gave our table away at seven-thirty-two."

"You know this because...?"

"I called during the third anchor." Precise. "The restaurant has a strict no-holding policy. We need to reschedule."

Mundane logistics of dinner reservations after a containment that had consumed five lives. Mai's voice didn't waver. This was how she processed, the practical, the manageable, the things that could be solved. The five civilians who had become geometry couldn't be solved. But dinner could be rescheduled.

Ace moved closer. Her presence was pressure against Mai's side. Not demanding. Just there. Grounding Mai's spiraling thoughts.

“New reservation.” Short. “Tomorrow. Same place.”

“Tomorrow's not an option.” Mai's fingers moved across the terminal. “Fully booked until Thursday. Thursday is—”

“Thursday.” Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. Air pressure shifted, settling, not demanding. “Thursday works.”

“Thursday works.” Mai's fingers confirmed. 7:30 PM. Table for three. The restaurant's confirmation pinged back almost instantly.

They stood in silence. The building behind them held nothing now, just space, geometry, ordinary dimensions. The five people who had become something else were contained the only way they could be: forgotten by the anomaly, remembered by the Foundation that had failed them.

“Mai.” Ace. Quiet. “Stop calculating.”

Mai's fingers stilled on the terminal. She hadn't realized she was still moving them.

“We did what we could.” Shammy. Soft. “The five were gone before we arrived. You know that.”

“I know.” Precise. “That doesn't change the outcome.”

“No.” Ace's hand found Mai's. The grip was steady. “It doesn't.”

Three people holding onto each other at the edge of a parking lot where a building had learned to eat people. Mission complete. Containment stable. Dinner rescheduled for Thursday.

It wasn't enough. It was never enough. But it was what they had.

“Home?” Shammy. An offer, not a demand.

Mai looked at her terminal one more time. The new reservation glowed: Thursday. 7:30 PM. Table for three.

“Home.”

They moved toward the transport. Behind them, the building held its ordinary shape. The cleanup crews would handle the rest. The five people who had become geometry would become statistics, lessons learned, protocols updated.

And the triad would go home. Hold each other through the night. Reschedule dinner.

Thursday would come.

They would be there.

Together.

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Last update:
23/04/2026
16:19

novellas:containment-domestic-bliss:chapter2 <https://datavault.ws/doku.php/novellas:containment-domestic-bliss:chapter2>

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:19**

