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Chapter 5: The Real Emergency

2:47 AM.

The tone hadn't finished its first pulse before Ace was awake. Blade in hand. Shadow pooling around her before conscious thought caught up.

"Theta-24. Priority override. Site 17."

Mai's voice. Flat the way it got flat when she was reading data faster than she was processing it.

Not their site. Not their rotation.

Shammy came down from drift, folding through the bedroom doorway, head nearly brushing the frame. The apartment's air pressure shifted. Just that. The way a front moves in before you see clouds.

"Backup." Mai's fingers on the terminal. "Primary containment went dark forty-three minutes ago. Secondary made contact seventeen, tertiary stopped transmitting."

She said it like a weather report. That was fine. Ace was already moving.

The transport hummed beneath them. Foundation-issue. No comfort. No pretense of it.

Shammy sat against the bulkhead, knees up, tracking something in the air that neither of them could see. Mai reviewed tactical displays, light reflecting off her eyes. Her fingers moved in a rhythm Ace recognized. Not the one from calm analysis. The other one.

She didn't ask. Didn't need to.

Comms crackled. @DaRussianBadger: "Walking War Crimes are live. Twelve minutes ahead. Initial assessment." Static chewed the channel. "Anomaly not contained. Repeat: not contained. Grouse found primary team's last position. They're." More static. Then, quieter: "Move fast."

Mai: "Define the situation."

"Can't. Not on open." A pause that wasn't humor. "Just move."

The engines pushed harder.

Site 17. Concrete. Functional. The kind of building that said *nothing happens here* while making damn sure nothing could leave if it did.

Inside was different.

Breach corridor. Amber emergency light. Reinforced walls, sealed doors, filtered air. Standard Foundation doctrine: contain, then contain harder.

Something had gotten out anyway.

Ace went first. Always first. Katanas sheathed but ready, her compact frame pressing through the corridor's tight spaces. One-twenty centimeters of shadow in amber light. Nearly invisible.

Mai followed, disruptor drawn, rune-markings throwing faint patterns on the walls. She was tracking structural integrity, exit routes, the things the architect in her never stopped building.

Shammy brought up the rear. The air adjusted as she passed. The corridor felt larger. More survivable. Not safe, Shammy didn't do safe. But survivable.

"Contact." Grouse in their ears. "Fifty meters. Intersection 7-C."

He was crouched behind a pillar when they found him. Rifle up. Face pale.

"Primary team's in the central chamber. What's left of them."

Mai: "Status?"

"Still breathing. Barely." He looked at Shammy. Jaw tight. "Something's wrong with the atmosphere in there. Can't approach without—"

Shammy moved past him. Not reckless. Not hesitant. The air bent.

"I'll hold the corridor." Warm, even now. "You focus on extraction."

The central chamber.

Big. Designed for something that didn't stay still. Something that moved through pressure gradients like a shark through water.

It had gotten out.

Five bodies on the floor. Foundation tactical gear. Movement barely visible. One curled fetal, hands pressed to temples. Another dragging toward the door, fingers scraping concrete.

The anomaly sat in the center of the room.

Not a creature. A *disturbance*. A place where air went wrong. Where sound bent and light warped and the body just, *knew*. Wrong. Wrong. Before thought. Before language. Wrong.

Ace felt it push against her shadow-nature. Trying to compress her. Make her smaller than she was.

She pushed back.

Katanas out. Emerald light cutting through amber. The blades didn't glow, they *sang*. A frequency that

bypassed ears and spoke to something underneath.

“Ace.” Mai. “Three point seven seconds for disruptor calibration. Hold.”

No answer. Ace moved.

Combat at her size meant different rules.

Most anomalies expected threats at standing height. From angles that made tactical sense. Ace came from below. From shadow. From the space people forgot to check.

She moved through the pressure disturbance. The anomaly pushed. She let it. Compressed space around her, tried to crush.

Smaller.

The Violet fragment stirred. Not awake. Aware. A pressure surge answering the challenge.

Her katana swept low. Testing. Finding the edges of the thing.

The anomaly pushed harder. She let herself be pushed. Let herself sink into shadow.

And then she wasn't where the compression was.

It lurched. Searching.

She was already behind it.

Mai knelt by the chamber entrance. Disruptor in both hands. Fingers tracing runes along the barrel, old marks, older than Foundation equipment should carry. Each one adjusted output. Frequency. Amplitude.

Atmospheric anomalies needed atmospheric solutions. Standard protocol: pressure equalization, environmental containment, systematic isolation.

Standard protocol assumed time.

“Eighty-three percent.” Level. Talking to Ace, to Shammy, to herself. “I need—”

The anomaly noticed her.

A pressure wave crossed the chamber. Not violent. Not loud. Just *wrong*. In the sinuses. The inner ear. The places that knew before knowing.

Blood ran from Mai's nose.

She didn't stop. Didn't touch it. The runes intensified. Eighty-seven. Ninety-one.

Shammy on comms: “I've got the chamber. Mai, focus. Ace.” The air shifted. “Don't hold back.”

Shammy at the threshold.

The anomaly's pressure pressed against her. A question. A challenge. Stormfront meeting stormfront.

She didn't push back.

That wasn't how she worked.

The air in the chamber held too much. Too dense. Too compressed. The anomaly had made a place where physics forgot its own rules.

Shammy offered something else.

Not control. Balance. Not force. *Space*. She didn't suppress the disturbance, she made room for it. A gradient between what it was and what the chamber needed to be.

Pressure equalized.

Not perfectly. Not completely.

Enough.

Enough for Mai to finish. Enough for Ace to find her angle.

Enough for the primary team to breathe.

The anomaly was learning.

Its pressure waves adapted. Shifted. Tried new configurations. Each time Ace moved through shadow, it adjusted. Each time Shammy created space, it tried to fill it.

This was why containment teams failed. Not because it was invincible, because it was *responsive*. It evolved.

But so did they.

Ace saw it before Mai did. Before Shammy could articulate it. The anomaly moved in waves, pressure building, releasing, building again.

A rhythm.

It's breathing.

She didn't think it. Her body moved the knowledge through her katanas. One blade pressed forward, testing the intake. The other swept low, waiting for the release.

The anomaly pushed.

She let herself be pushed.

Into shadow.

Out of space.

Behind it.

The first katana cut through the pressure gradient's center. Not physical, the anomaly wasn't physical. But it had *structure*. Shape. Thin spots where its own compression created weakness.

Her blade found one.

The anomaly *screamed*.

Not sound. Not light. Something that bypassed both. A disturbance in the places where humans kept their *wrong* instincts.

Shammy caught most of it. Air compressed around her, redirected, softened the wave before it reached Mai. But some of it.

Shammy swayed. Eyes unfocused. Stormlight flickering.

"Shammy." Mai. "You're drifting."

"I know." Soft. "I need to hold this. Just—"

"Mai." Ace. "Now."

Mai rose.

Bleeding from the nose. Eyes locked on target. Runes blazing on the disruptor, not light, *information*. Frequencies. Patterns. The language of disruption translated into something the anomaly could understand.

"Shammy, eastern edge. Ace, don't kill it for four seconds."

Ace stopped moving. Held. Waited.

That was harder than killing.

Shammy's presence shifted. Pressure releasing in the east, compressing elsewhere. The anomaly rotated toward the weak point.

Mai fired.

The beam didn't hit the anomaly. It hit the *space* around it. A frequency that resonated with the pressure gradients, found the places where the anomaly's own structure created instability.

It didn't explode. Didn't collapse.

It *equalized*.

The pressure smoothed out. Flattened. Became what it should have been: air. Just air. Normal

pressure. Normal density.

The screaming stopped.

Silence.

Then groans. The primary team stirring. Remembering they were alive.

Ace sheathed her katanas. Her hands were shaking.

Not fear. The Violet fragment settling deeper, satisfied with the violence, demanding rest. She didn't give it rest. Not yet.

Shammy stood in the center of the chamber. Stormlight gone from her eyes. Air thin around her. She was holding herself upright through something other than physical strength.

Mai lowered the disruptor. Runes dimmed.

Blood dripped from her nose onto concrete.

Nobody mentioned it.

Primary team evacuated. Theta-24 on cleanup. Anomaly secured for transport.

Ace stood in the corridor. Hands had stopped shaking. Mostly.

Shammy leaned against the wall. Head near the ceiling. Air pressure normal now, the anomaly's wrongness gone. But Shammy's presence felt *hollow*. Like she'd given something away and hadn't gotten it back.

Mai wiped blood from her upper lip. Examined her hand. Wiped again.

"That was inefficient." Clinical. "Calibration window was wider than optimal. We need to revise our approach to atmospheric-class anomalies."

Ace looked at her.

Mai's eyes met hers.

Neither spoke.

"We'll debrief." Mai continued. "Standard protocol. After medical."

"We're fine." Flat.

"You're shaking. Shammy's drifting. I'm." She stopped. Hand to her nose again. "We're fine for now. But the Foundation will want to know what happened. Whether the approach is sustainable."

"Sustainable." Ace's repetition carried weight beyond the word.

"The question isn't whether it worked." Mai's fingers found her temple. That rhythm again. "It's whether we can keep doing it. Without." Pause. "The question is sustainability."

Debrief room. Smaller than theirs. Sterile. Designed for observation.

Three chairs. One table. Two-way mirror.

The debrief officer wasn't familiar. New, or just someone they hadn't worked with. She sat across from them, terminal ready, expression professionally neutral.

"MTF Theta-24 requested backup at 02:47. You arrived at 03:14. Containment at 03:31." She looked up. "Unusually narrow window for atmospheric-class anomalies."

"We've worked together before." Mai.

"Your success rate is notable." The officer's eyes moved across the triad. Shammy, hollowed, leaning back. Ace, compact and coiled, tracking the room. Mai, dried blood still visible beneath her nose. "Your methods less so. Standard protocol for atmospheric anomalies requires—"

"We're aware of standard protocol." Polite. Final. "We adapted based on field conditions."

"Adapted." The officer's tone carried weight. "Your disruptor's readings showed significant overclock. Above recommended thresholds."

"The anomaly required it."

"The anomaly, or the timeline?"

Silver-blue holding professional gray.

"Both."

A note. Fingers across the terminal.

"The primary team is stable. Six survived. Two critical but improving. Your intervention prevented further casualties." Pause. "The Foundation's interest isn't criticism. It's understanding."

"Understanding what?"

"How you work. Together." Her gaze swept the triad again. "Most MTF teams need extensive coordination. Communication protocols. Established hierarchies. You function as a single operational unit."

"We've worked together before." Same weight as before. Final.

"For how long?"

Silence.

Long enough that Mai could feel Ace's tension without looking. That Shammy knew where to hold space without being asked. That they moved through crisis like breathing.

"Years." Factual. Unexpanded.

Another note. The officer's expression stayed neutral, but something in her posture logged the answer. Categorized. Filed.

"Follow-up evaluations. Medical and psychological. Standard for high-intensity engagements."

"Of course."

"Your team performed well." Terminal closed. She stood. Hand extended toward Mai, then seemed to think better of it. "The Foundation appreciates your service."

The door closed.

The corridor outside. Clean. Efficient. Forgettable.

Ace by the wall. Hands steady now, but she could still feel the echo. The Violet fragment in its usual pressure point. Waiting.

Shammy beside her. Close enough that their shoulders nearly touched, except Shammy's shoulders were somewhere above Ace's head. The air around her had started to feel present again. But something had shifted. Something always shifted after they pushed too hard.

Mai emerged from the debrief room. Face pale. Blood cleaned away, but traces in the lines around her nose. The places she'd wiped too many times.

Ace didn't ask if she was okay.

She moved to Mai's side. Close. Present. Not asking. *Being*.

Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. Warmth offering itself. Not demanding. Just there.

Mai's eyes closed. For a moment, just a moment, she let herself lean into it. Into them. The precision she held so carefully, letting go just enough.

"They're going to ask questions." Soft. "About sustainability. Methods." Pause. "Us."

"Let them." Ace. Short. Certain.

"We need to recover." Shammy's warmth despite the hollowness. "All three of us. Together. Not." She stopped. "The Foundation can have its questions. Tomorrow. Tonight we go home."

Mai's eyes opened. Silver-blue finding violet finding stormlight.

"Home."

"Yeah." Ace's hand found Mai's. Compact fingers interlacing with precise ones. "Home."

The corridor stretched ahead. Clean. Efficient. Forgettable.

They moved through it together.

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