

[← Chapter 3](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 5 →](#)

Chapter Four: Institutional Absurdity

The room smelled like someone had tried to clean despair with lemon wipes.

Mai clocked the architecture before she sat down. Chairs angled for forced intimacy, close enough to feel invasive, far enough to prevent whispering. Fluorescent panels behind a frosted diffuser that made everyone look like they'd been sick for a week. One certificate on the wall. Foundation Psychological Services. Hung at exactly the height where you'd have to look at it if you let your eyes drift during hard questions.

She'd read the manual. She knew which one.

"Please, sit." Dr. Vance gestured toward the three chairs arranged in front of his desk. He had the kind of smile that came with a training certificate, practiced warmth over something harder. "We can make this as quick or as thorough as you prefer."

Ace hadn't moved from the back of the room.

She stood with her weight distributed the way she did before a fight. Not aggressive, just ready. Shadows in the corners leaned in. That was normal for Ace. The room just got darker when she was in it.

"We prefer quick." Mai took the center chair. "The evaluation is mandatory. We'll complete it."

"Efficient." Dr. Vance's smile stayed in place. "That's consistent with your file."

Shammy came through the doorframe ducking, the same way she'd ducked through the last two doorframes in this building, the same way she ducked through every doorframe built for human-scale bodies. The fluorescent light above her flickered. Once. The air pressure changed, ears popping subtle, the way they do when you drive into the mountains.

She folded herself into one of the small chairs and her knees sat higher than the seat was designed to accommodate. Foundation furniture assumed a certain kind of body. It assumed wrong a lot.

Dr. Vance settled into his own chair. Tablet in hand. He looked at Mai. Not at Ace, not at Shammy. Mai. "Your file mentions some... unique circumstances. The Foundation requires periodic psychological evaluation for all field personnel. For unconventional arrangements, we conduct joint assessments."

"Joint assessments." No inflection from Mai. "You want to evaluate our relationship."

"I want to evaluate your psychological fitness for continued field duty." His smile didn't waver. "Your arrangement is a factor. The Foundation needs to understand how personal dynamics affect operational performance."

Ace stood beside her chair. Not in it. Beside it.

"You can sit, Ace." Dr. Vance glanced at her for the first time. His expression did something complicated, recognition, recalculation. Training met something training hadn't accounted for. "This isn't an interrogation."

"No." Flat. Not hostile. Just true. "This is an evaluation. I prefer to stand."

"She prefers to stand." Shabby's voice carried warmth, but the air thickened just slightly. Dr. Vance shifted in his chair without knowing why. "She's more comfortable when she can move."

"I see."

He didn't see. That was obvious. His stylus moved across the tablet, practiced, automatic.

"Let's start with some basic questions. Individually, then as a group." He addressed Mai. "How would you describe your role within the triad?"

"Tactical analyst." Mai's posture was exact. Spine aligned, hands on the armrests, no fidgeting. "Strategic planning, threat assessment, ritual systems coordination. In the field, I direct containment operations."

"I meant within your personal relationship."

"I understood your meaning." Mai didn't blink. "The question assumes a separation that doesn't exist. I'm the tactical analyst. That's my role in all contexts."

Dr. Vance's stylus paused. "You don't distinguish between work identity and personal identity."

"Should I?"

The question sat there. Dr. Vance had training for deflection. Training for evasion. Training for hostility. He didn't have training for genuine confusion, the kind that comes from someone who doesn't understand why you'd split something that's never been split.

"In most psychological frameworks," he said, and his voice stayed pleasant, "maintaining separation between professional and personal identity is considered healthy. It prevents burnout. Protects relationships from workplace stress."

"Our relationships are the workplace." Mai's hands stayed flat on the armrests. "We met during a containment operation. We integrated as a triad during active field duty. The bond is structural. Separating work from relationship would be like pulling a load-bearing wall out of a building and asking why it collapsed."

Dr. Vance made a note. His stylus moved slower than before. "You view your relationship as structural."

"I view it as essential to our function. The data supports this. Operational effectiveness increases by thirty-four percent when we operate as a triad. Mai solo operations show a twelve percent decrease in successful containment. Ace solo, twenty-three percent decrease. Shabby solo operations are not recommended."

"Not recommended." He looked up. "Why?"

"Shammy's abilities require anchoring. Atmospheric modulation without a stable reference point destabilizes the surrounding environment. Her presence alone is an asset. Her presence without grounding is a variable."

"A variable." The stylus again. "So the relationship is operationally necessary?"

"The relationship is the foundation of our effectiveness. The Foundation trains us to understand systems. We are a system."

Dr. Vance turned to Shammy for the first time since she'd entered. The air in the room had been thickening, gradual, not intentional on Shammy's part, just what happened when she occupied a space that wasn't built for her kind of presence.

"Shammy." He used his warm voice again. The one that was supposed to make people open up. "How do you experience the dynamic between the three of you?"

She shifted in the too-small chair. Made it look intentional. "I experience it as presence. The three of us together make the space work better."

"Work better." He tapped his stylus on the tablet edge. "Can you elaborate?"

"I can try." Shammy's voice was warm and the light above her flickered again, almost imperceptibly. "Mai reads spaces like circuits. Structure, flow, connections. Ace reads them like pressure. Where the weight sits, where movement wants to go. I read them like atmosphere. The way air moves. The way people breathe."

"And together—"

"Together we see everything." Shammy smiled. It was soft. "That's why we work. Not because we're three people who happen to be together. Because we're three ways of seeing, and when you put them together, there's nothing we miss."

Dr. Vance's stylus moved. Slower now. Calculating instead of recording.

"That's a poetic description." Pleasant tone. "But I need the practical dynamics. You're in a romantic relationship with Mai and Ace simultaneously—"

"No."

Ace's voice cut through. The shadows in the corners leaned closer.

Dr. Vance turned. "I'm sorry?"

"You're categorizing incorrectly." Ace's hand went to her katana. Not drawing. Resting. Grounding. "Mai and I are romantic. Shammy and I are warrior-sister. Mai and Shammy are wordless trust. We're not 'all together' the way you're implying."

"I see." The stylus hovered. "So it's a hierarchical structure? Primary and secondary relationships?"

"No." Still flat. Still not hostile. "Three vectors. Different connections. Equal importance."

"Equal importance." He made a note. "And this arrangement functions smoothly? No conflicts? No jealousy? No competition for resources?"

The air pressure in the room jumped. Dr. Vance straightened in his chair. Didn't know why.

"We don't compete." Something moved behind Ace's words. Not anger. Something quieter. "We complete."

"Complete." Dr. Vance leaned back. Just a fraction. "You feel incomplete without the others?"

"I feel like myself with them." Her hand stayed on her katana hilt. "I feel like I'm waiting without them. That's not incomplete. That's structural."

"You use that word frequently."

"Because it's accurate." Her voice didn't change register. "The Foundation understands systems. We're a system. The system works because the components work together. That's not romantic. That's not emotional. That's operational reality."

"And your romantic relationship with Mai—"

"Is romantic. But also structural." Ace's grip on the katana didn't tighten. It stayed. "Mai grounds me. I protect Mai. The romantic connection is part of the structure."

Dr. Vance looked back at his tablet. The evaluation framework he'd been trained on had categories for monogamous couples. Categories for polyamorous groups, hierarchical arrangements, primary-secondary dynamics. Categories for jealousy, conflict, power imbalances. It did not have a category for a system that described itself in operational terms and refused every box he offered.

"Let me try a different approach." He set the tablet down. A deliberate gesture. Disarming, or supposed to be. "I'm not here to judge your relationship. I'm here to assess your psychological fitness for continued field duty. The Foundation has concerns about entanglement in high-stress operational contexts. When personal relationships become too intertwined with professional function, it can create vulnerabilities."

"We know." Mai's voice stayed level. "We've accounted for that."

"You've accounted for it."

"Calculated the vulnerabilities." Her posture didn't shift. "Our bond creates dependency, if one of us is compromised, the others are affected. But separation creates greater vulnerability. Our effectiveness drops. Our survival probability decreases. Our containment success rate declines. The data is clear: together, we're stronger. Apart, we're weaker. The Foundation's concern about entanglement assumes independence is the baseline for psychological stability. For us, interdependence is the baseline. Removing it would cause the instability you're trying to prevent."

Dr. Vance's professional mask slipped. Just a crack. "You've calculated your relationship's vulnerabilities."

"Of course." Mai's voice carried something that might have been confusion, if Mai did confusion. "How else would we manage risk?"

"Most people don't manage their relationships like tactical operations."

"Most people don't have relationships that are tactical operations."

Shammy laughed. Soft. The air pressure in the room eased. The lights stabilized.

"She's not wrong." Shammy's warmth filled the space. "But she's also not giving you the whole picture. Because the whole picture isn't tactical. We're not just a system. We're also, us. Three people who chose each other. Three people who wanted to come home together after yesterday. Three people who had dinner reservations and had to reschedule because a building decided to eat five people."

Something shifted in her voice. Not the warmth, that stayed. But beneath it, a current. The kind of presence that made people turn toward her even when they didn't know why.

"We're a system," Shammy said. "But we're also a home. And those two things aren't separate for us. They can't be. We don't compartmentalize like that."

Dr. Vance picked up his tablet. The stylus moved, but his expression suggested he was writing notes to himself, not evaluation criteria.

The fluorescent light above him buzzed. A fly circled near the diffuser panel. It had been doing that since they walked in, spiraling in the blue-tinged light, looking for a window that didn't exist. Nobody mentioned it.

"I'm going to ask about recent operational stress." His voice shifted. Less warmth, more clinical distance. "The mission yesterday. Five civilian casualties. How has that affected you individually?"

Shammy's presence adjusted. Creating space for the question to land without crushing them.

"Ace." Dr. Vance turned toward her. "How do you process operational losses?"

"Threats eliminated. Containment secured. Collateral damage assessed. Then I move."

"You move."

"I don't calculate." Her hand stayed on the katana. "Mai calculates. Shammy holds. I move. That's how I process. Movement. Not sitting in a room talking about feelings."

"You don't process emotions after operations?"

"I process them by doing my job." The shadows near Ace's feet were denser now. "Yesterday's mission had casualties. Civilians consumed by an anomaly before we arrived. We contained the anomaly. We couldn't save the civilians. That's operational reality. I process by being ready for the next one."

"And you don't feel guilt? Regret? The need to process emotional weight?"

"I feel it." Flat. Not defensive. Just there, like the katana on her hip. "But I don't let it stop me. Shammy holds it. Mai analyzes it. I move. That's the structure."

The stylus moved faster.

"Mai." He turned. "How do you process?"

"I analyze mission parameters. Identify failure points. Develop protocols to prevent similar losses." Her voice stayed clinical. "Yesterday's civilian casualties resulted from delayed detection, the anomaly had been growing for six months before we were deployed. I've submitted recommendations

for improved early warning systems in abandoned urban structures. The Foundation can implement these or not. I've done my part."

"And the emotional weight of those deaths?"

"I process through structure." A pause. "The five civilians who died are a data point. That sounds cold. It isn't meant to be. Their deaths matter. But I can't change them. I can only change future outcomes. So I calculate how. That's how I process. That's how I survive."

"You don't need emotional support after operations?"

"I have emotional support." Mai's hand moved, not toward Ace, not toward Shammy, but toward them. Subtle. Clear. "They're here. That's support."

Dr. Vance looked at Shammy.

"Shammy. How do you process?"

Shammy's smile was soft. But her eyes held something deeper, something she was holding, not showing. "I hold. That's my job. Mai calculates. Ace moves. I hold the space between them. When we lose people, like yesterday, I hold that too. I let it be present. I let us feel it. And then, when we're ready, I help us move through it."

"You hold emotional space."

"I hold space." Her voice stayed gentle. "Not just emotional. Atmospheric. Physical. When Mai's projections get too heavy, I adjust the air around her. When Ace's pressure gets too dense, I give her somewhere to release it. When we lose people, I hold the weight so they don't have to carry it alone."

"And you don't need someone to hold space for you?"

Her smile flickered.

"That's a perceptive question."

Dr. Vance's stylus paused. "It's part of the evaluation. Understanding the support structures within the arrangement."

"I hold space for everyone." Shammy's warmth stayed, but the air thickened. Denser. Concentrated. "Sometimes I need someone to tell me it's okay to stop holding. That I don't have to regulate everything. That I can just, be."

"And do Mai and Ace provide that?"

Her smile came back. Genuine this time. "They do. In their own ways. Mai calculates when I'm reaching my limit, she sees it in the atmospheric data before anyone else. And Ace..." A pause. "Ace is there. Present. She doesn't need to say anything. She just stands next to me, and the pressure in my chest finds somewhere to go."

"She stands next to you."

"She stands next to me." Shammy's voice went soft. "That's what she does. She's presence. When I'm holding too much, she reminds me I don't have to hold it all by myself. She just... stands there. And

somehow, that's enough."

The fly hit the diffuser panel again. Tapped against the plastic. Tapped again.

Dr. Vance set his tablet down. Slower this time. More deliberate. He was recalibrating. The framework didn't have a place for this triad. They kept refusing to fit.

"One more question." He leaned forward. "For all three of you. How do you handle situations where your relationship might interfere with operational decisions?"

The air pressure increased. Shammy's presence shifted. Mai's posture tightened, barely, just the smallest adjustment in her shoulders. Ace's hand moved from her katana to her side.

"Clarify." Mai's voice was precise.

"If one of you is in danger during an operation, do you prioritize their safety over mission objectives?"

Silence.

Three seconds. Mai counted them.

"No." Ace's voice cut clean. "We don't prioritize individuals over objectives."

"We prioritize the system." Mai followed. "Which means we prioritize the mission, because the mission is what we're designed to accomplish. But we also prioritize each other, because the system requires all three components to function."

"That sounds like a contradiction."

"It's not." Mai's posture stayed controlled. "It's optimization. If one of us is in danger, we adapt. We don't abandon the mission. We don't abandon each other. We find the path that accomplishes both."

"And if that's not possible?"

"It's always possible."

"Never?"

"Never." Shammy's warmth sharpened. The air pressure focused, not warm anymore, or not just warm. Something with an edge. "We're not just three people who work together and happen to love each other. We're designed to work together. Every mission we've ever run, we've found the path that keeps us all safe and accomplishes the objective. That's not luck. That's architecture."

"Architecture." Dr. Vance made another note. "You keep using structural terms."

"Because we're describing structure." Ace's hand stayed at her side. "You keep looking for emotional complications. We're telling you we don't have them. Not because we don't feel. Because we've built a system that accounts for our feelings."

"A system that accounts for feelings." Dr. Vance's voice carried something, skepticism, maybe, or the beginning of something he couldn't name. "That sounds—"

"It sounds like what we are." Mai cut through. "You can evaluate us against standard frameworks. You'll find we don't fit. That's not a failure on our part. That's a failure of your frameworks."

The stylus stopped. The fluorescent lights hummed. The fly circled.

"I'm not trying to fit you into frameworks." Dr. Vance's voice changed. Less clinical. More direct. "I'm trying to understand if your relationship creates vulnerabilities that could compromise operations."

"We've told you it doesn't." Mai's precision didn't waver. "We've explained why. We've provided data. We've answered your questions. What else do you need?"

Dr. Vance looked at his tablet. The evaluation was supposed to take thirty minutes. They'd been here for nearly an hour. The clock on the wall showed the time in harsh institutional digits. Red. Like a countdown. The room had no windows. Of course it had no windows.

"I need to understand the emotional dynamics." His pleasant voice had an edge now. "The Foundation's concern isn't just operational. It's psychological. Relationships like yours are unusual. They require more scrutiny."

"More scrutiny." Ace's flatness carried something this time. Not anger. Just clarity. "Because we're unusual."

"Because you're unconventional." He delivered it with the weight of someone trained to sound neutral while making a judgment. "The Foundation has protocols. I'm following them."

"You're following protocols designed for standard evaluations." Mai didn't blink. "We're not standard. Applying standard protocols to non-standard systems produces unreliable data."

"So what would you suggest?"

The question surprised him. He'd asked it before thinking, the reflex of a psychologist trained to seek the subject's perspective.

Mai's posture stayed precise. "Evaluate us on outcomes. Mission success rates. Psychological stability over time. Operational effectiveness. The data shows we're stable. We're effective. We're functional. The only vulnerability you've identified is that we don't fit your frameworks. That's not a psychological problem. That's a categorization problem."

"Categorization is part of psychological assessment."

"Then your assessment is flawed." Mai's voice didn't waver. "Not because we're flawed. Because your categories don't account for us."

The air shifted again. Shammy's presence adjusted, creating space for Mai's statement to land without destroying the conversation entirely. A subtle intervention. Professional. Calibrated.

Dr. Vance looked at his tablet. Then at Mai. Then at Ace, still standing, still not sitting, her hand at her side. Then at Shammy, whose presence filled the room in a way that was both warm and structural at the same time.

The fly hit the plastic one more time and gave up.

"I'm going to recommend continued evaluation." His voice found its neutral footing again. "Not because I have concerns about your psychological fitness. But because your arrangement requires additional study."

"Additional study." Ace. "We're a subject now."

"You're personnel with an unconventional relationship structure." Dr. Vance's stylus moved across the tablet. "The Foundation needs to understand how that structure affects long-term stability. Six months. Another evaluation in six months."

"Six months." Mai. No inflection. "That's acceptable."

"It's not acceptable." Ace's voice sharpened. "It's tolerated. There's a difference."

Dr. Vance's stylus paused. "The difference being?"

"The difference being we'll show up in six months because we're ordered to." The shadows in the corners leaned in. "Not because we think this evaluation is useful. Not because we think you understand us. We'll show up because that's the structure. And we follow structure."

"Even when the structure doesn't follow us." Shammy's warmth carried something new, an edge beneath it. The air pressure sharpened.

Dr. Vance looked at Shammy. The room's atmosphere had been shifting the entire evaluation, and he was starting to register it, the way his thoughts kept settling into certain patterns, the way his questions kept forming in particular directions. He was trained to recognize psychological influence. This was different. This was atmospheric.

"Is this evaluation concluded?" Mai's voice cut through.

"It is." Dr. Vance made a final note. "You're cleared for continued field duty. With the caveat that your relationship structure will be monitored ongoing."

"Monitored." Ace's hand left her side. "That's new."

"It's standard for unconventional arrangements."

"It's standard for relationships the Foundation doesn't trust." Not anger. Not hostility. Just statement. "We've given you no reason for distrust."

"You've given me no framework for understanding." His voice stayed neutral. "The Foundation requires both."

"Then the Foundation's requirements are flawed." Ace's presence shifted, the pressure around her releasing into something that wasn't relaxation but wasn't combat-ready either. "We'll see you in six months."

She turned and walked toward the door. Compact. Efficient. Her frame filling more space than it should have been able to.

Mai rose from her chair with exact geometry. Her posture stayed controlled, but something in her expression, not frustration, not anger, just the particular tension of someone who had calculated every possible outcome and found none of them satisfactory.

"Thank you for your time." Clinical. "We'll comply with the monitoring requirements."

Shammy rose last. Unfolding from the small chair, her frame negotiating the space the way she negotiated every space that hadn't been built for her. The air pressure in the room settled as she

moved, not releasing, but finding a new equilibrium.

"We'll see you in six months, Doctor." Her warmth was still there, but something ran beneath it now. "I hope your frameworks catch up before then."

They moved toward the door. Ace forward, Mai centered, Shammy following. The same pattern they used in the field. The same pattern they used at home. The same pattern everywhere, because they were the same people everywhere.

The work phone rang before they reached the hallway.

The sound cut through the corridor, harsh, demanding, the ringtone that meant only one thing. Mai's hand was at her hip before she registered the movement. Her disruptor pistol was suddenly present, though she hadn't drawn it.

Ace's body shifted. Combat-ready. Her hand found her katana, touching, not drawing. Emerald glow flickered to standby.

Shammy's presence expanded. The air pressure in the corridor increased, enough that anyone standing nearby would have felt their ears adjust.

Mai answered. "This is Mai."

The voice on the other end was controlled. Professional. The particular tone that meant something had gone sideways.

"Classification priority." Mai's voice shifted, the precision of the evaluation room replaced by field precision. "Theta-24 status... Understood. We're en route."

She ended the call.

"Mission?" Ace. Business.

"Mission." Mai's fingers moved across her terminal. "Theta-24's primary containment failed. They're requesting backup."

"What kind of backup?" Shammy's warmth had been replaced by focused attention. Atmospheric readiness.

"The kind that requires all three of us." Mai's voice was precise. "We leave in five minutes."

"Five minutes." Ace was already moving. "Enough time."

"Enough time." Shammy followed, ducking through another doorframe that hadn't been designed for her height.

They moved toward the deployment bay. The evaluation was behind them. The questions. The categories. The Foundation's inability to understand what didn't fit its forms.

Ahead of them: a containment. A mission. A reason to be exactly what they were.

The system worked. Even if the Foundation couldn't see it. Even if Dr. Vance couldn't categorize it. Even if the forms and frameworks and evaluations couldn't capture it.

The system worked.

They moved together. Three vectors, three ways of seeing, three people who had chosen each other and a life that didn't fit into boxes but somehow fit together.

The deployment bay doors opened ahead of them.

They walked through.

Together.

[Chapter Four End]

[← Chapter 3](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 5 →](#)

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