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## Chapter Seven: The Promotion Problem

Mai's terminal displayed a spreadsheet.

Not unusual. What was unusual was the filename: PROMOTIONANALYSISv4.7FINALREVISION.xlsx. Forty-seven tabs. Cells that turned red when numbers crossed thresholds she'd defined at two in the morning.

Ace sat cross-legged in her corner. Blade across her lap. The meditation was done, had been done for forty-three minutes, but the shadow-pressure still pooled, slow to drain. Shammy stood at the window, arms folded, that static charge building around the ends of her hair whenever Mai's terminal ran hard.

Nobody had spoken since 5:47.

"The numbers are unfavorable." Mai didn't look up from the screen. "Forty-seven projection scenarios. In none of them does the Foundation's offer result in improved quality of life."

Ace's blade caught the light. "Then we decline."

"Not that simple." Keys clicked. New tabs. Graphs. "Declining creates political friction. Accepting creates operational friction. Both cost."

"Everything costs." Shammy unfolded from the window. "What's the math?"

"The math is a false binary." Mai pulled up another column. "They present it as 'accept promotion' or 'decline promotion.' But the actual choice is 'negotiate terms' or 'accept their terms.' Their terms are—"

"We negotiate." Ace cut in.

Mai's fingers stopped. "Negotiation requires leverage. We have effectiveness. They have authority. The question is whether—"

"It does." Shammy said it like a fact. "They need us more than we need them."

"They need our results." Mai pulled up a personnel file. "They don't need us. Teams that resist integration get reassigned. Split up. Distributed to other divisions. The Foundation doesn't fire effective personnel." She paused. "They disassemble them."

The air pressure dropped. Barely. Shammy's doing, or maybe just the building.

"They can't disassemble us." Ace's voice was flat. "We're not separable."

"They can try." A case file filled the screen. "MTF Epsilon-11. Previous team with comparable integration metrics. Resisted a similar offer in 2019. By 2021, all six members had been reassigned to separate facilities. Team cohesion eliminated. Individual effectiveness reduced by an average of

34%.”

“What happened to them?” Shammy asked.

“They function. Individually. Still effective at their individual roles.” Mai closed the file. “But the integration that made them exceptional, gone. The Foundation doesn't understand what it destroys when it disassembles integrated teams. Or it doesn't care.”

Shammy's jaw tightened. “They'd try to split us?”

“Optimize resource allocation.” Mai's voice went flat, bureaucratic quoting. “Ace to shadow-operations. Me to analytical command. You to atmospheric containment. Each of us valuable. None of us together.”

The morning light pressed through the window. Ace's blade had stopped moving. Shammy's presence had contracted, not fear, but the way you pull your shoulders in before a fight.

“Then we don't decline.” Ace set the blade in its stand. “We negotiate. What do we want?”

Mai opened a new document. PROMOTIONNEGOTIATIONPARAMETERS\_v1.0.docx. Blank cursor blinking.

“Protected personal time.” She started typing. “Mandatory recovery intervals. Operational autonomy within our division. Refusal rights for non-emergency deployments during off-hours. And—”

“A seat at the table.” Shammy stepped forward. “Not just accepting missions. Helping define them.”

Mai's fingers paused over the keys. “That's not standard for containment teams.”

“We're not standard.”

“The Foundation doesn't negotiate with containment teams. They issue—”

“Then we teach them.” Ace's shadow-pressure spread. “We make them an offer. They accept it, or they explain why their most effective team suddenly became less effective.”

Mai stared at the screen. The cursor blinked. Then she started typing again, faster. “That's not impossible. But the presentation has to be precise. They respond to data. Not—”

“Then we give them data.” Shammy moved to the terminal. “What do you need?”

“Recovery metrics. Fragment-pressure analysis. Atmospheric destabilization patterns. Burnout intervals. Everything they don't see when they look at our success rate.”

“Forty-eight hours.” Ace stood up from her corner. “Enough time?”

Mai's fingers were already moving. “For a presentation. Not for them to process it.”

“They'll process it.” Ace's voice carried no doubt. “They're analysts. We give them data that makes the choice clear: accept our terms, or explain the cost of refusing.”

Something shifted in the room. Shammy's presence expanded, just enough to fill the space with a different kind of pressure. Not the sacred ordinary, not anymore. Something tactical. Something they

could fight with.

“Forty-six hours remaining.” Mai's terminal displayed a countdown. “I'll build the presentation. Ace, I need your fragment-pressure data from the last six months.”

“In the blade-maintenance logs.”

“Shammy, atmospheric readings from every mission where you experienced destabilization.”

“Stored in my memory. I can dictate.”

“Then we start.” Mai was already three windows deep. “Forty-six hours to convince the Foundation that our terms are their best option.”

The triad moved.

Ace retrieved logs from her blade-maintenance kit. Shammy dictated atmospheric readings while Mai transcribed, occasionally stopping Shammy to clarify a date or a threshold. The spreadsheet grew. Tabs multiplied. The apartment, normally a space for stillness, had become something else.

They were negotiating. Not as individuals. As a triad.

That was the only way they knew how to fight.

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Three people who should have been eating breakfast stood in the kitchen instead.

Mai's tablet displayed a preliminary slide deck. Ace stood by the counter, the step-stool positioned exactly where she needed it, eighteen months of adaptation. Shammy filled the opposite end, her frame making the kitchen feel smaller in a way that wasn't uncomfortable.

“Slide one.” Mai's voice had gone into presentation mode, cleaner, flatter. “Success rate projection. Current: 94.7%. Projected under increased operational tempo: 78.3% within six months, 61.2% within twelve.”

“Why the decline?” Ace asked.

“Recovery intervals compressed. Fragment-pressure accumulation accelerated. Burnout probability increases exponentially with operational frequency.” Mai traced the graph. “The Foundation sees success rates. They don't see the infrastructure that produces them. When you compress infrastructure—”

“Show them that.”

“Slide two.” The tablet shifted. “Recovery analysis. Current average recovery between major operations: 72 hours. Foundation standard for promotion-tier personnel: 24 hours. The differential is 48 hours. Exactly the time required for Ace's fragment-pressure to stabilize, my framework to recalibrate, Shammy's presence to find equilibrium.”

“What happens at 24?”

“At 24, we're functional. Not optimal.” Supporting data. “Effectiveness reduced by 23%. Burnout probability increased by 340%. Fragment-pressure destabilization incidents: projected increase of

180%.”

“They'd accept reduced effectiveness?”

“They'd accept it until we failed a containment. Then they'd blame us.” Mai's voice had no emotion in it. That was worse than anger. “Promote personnel beyond recovery capacity. Accept reduced effectiveness. Attribute failures to individual incompetence rather than systemic compression. Replace personnel who burn out with new personnel who haven't burned out yet.”

“That's unsustainable.”

“It's the standard model.” Mai closed the slide. “We make them see the sustainability problem. Or we become part of it.”

Shammy's presence shifted. “What's slide three?”

“The offer.” Mai pulled it up. “We accept the promotion with conditions. Condition one: protected personal time. Minimum 72 hours recovery between major operations. Non-negotiable except for Alpha-class emergencies.”

“Define Alpha-class.”

“Existential threat to civilian population exceeding 10,000. Foundation facility compromise. Anomaly propagation beyond containment threshold.” Mai listed them without inflection. “Everything else waits.”

“They'll argue that every emergency is Alpha-class.”

“Then we define the definition.” Mai's voice sharpened. “Alpha-class designation requires authorization from two division heads. No single point of failure in the escalation protocol. And every Alpha-class activation during protected time triggers automatic review. If they abuse the classification, they lose the ability to use it.”

“Condition two?” Ace was planning now.

“Operational autonomy.” Next slide. “The triad defines mission parameters within our containment specialty. No reassignment without team consent. No integration with other teams unless we approve the structure.”

“They'll want to integrate us.”

“They'll want to extract our methodology and apply it elsewhere.” Mai's voice carried an edge. “We offer consultation. Not extraction. We'll help other teams improve cohesion metrics. But we remain a discrete unit.”

“Condition three?”

“Shammy's condition.” Mai glanced toward the window. “A seat at the table. Not just tactical input, strategic. When the Foundation defines mission priorities, we participate.”

Shammy stepped closer. “They plan operations without understanding what operations cost. They prioritize based on threat classification, not containment difficulty. We've been sent into situations

that could have been resolved with better intelligence. A seat at the table—”

“Also means more meetings.” Ace's voice carried dark humor.

“Better meetings. Ones where we're consulted instead of deployed.” Shammy gestured at the tablet. “The Foundation sees us as instruments. We make them see us as architects.”

Mai paused. “It's unprecedented. Containment teams don't request strategic input authority.”

“We're unprecedented.” Ace's voice was certain. “We request what we need. They accept it or explain why they don't need our effectiveness.”

Ace on her step-stool. Mai with her tablet. Shammy by the window. The kitchen had become a different kind of space.

“What's the fallback?” Ace asked.

“If they refuse all conditions?” A new spreadsheet appeared. “We accept the promotion. Document every violation of our recovery requirements. Record every instance where their demands exceed our capacity. After six months, when the success rates have declined and the burnout metrics have increased, we present the data again. This time with evidence.”

“They'll say we manufactured the evidence.”

“They'll say we're incompetent.” Mai's voice carried no illusion about this. “The third option is: we accept the promotion, we fail, they split us up, and they blame our relationship for the failure. That's their preferred outcome. They get to say they tried to integrate us, but we couldn't handle the responsibility.”

“Then we don't fail.” Ace's voice carried iron. “We negotiate terms that prevent failure. And if they refuse—”

“We document everything.” Shammy's presence expanded. “Not threat of failure, threat of exposure. They want to understand us? We give them understanding. The kind that shows them what they're breaking when they try to optimize us.”

Mai's terminal hummed. The presentation expanded.

“Slides four through twelve.” Presentation mode. “Supporting data. Every mission in the past eighteen months. Recovery intervals. Burnout incidents. Fragment-pressure readings. Atmospheric destabilization patterns. Everything they don't see when they look at our success rate.”

“How long?”

“Forty-seven minutes. Plus fifteen for questions.” Mai adjusted the timing. “We're not asking for permission. We're presenting a strategic analysis that makes their optimal choice obvious.”

“And if their optimal choice is splitting us up?”

“Then their optimal choice is wrong.” Ace's voice cut through. “And we show them why.”

Shammy moved toward the refrigerator. “We should eat. Before the real work starts.”

The tactical briefing ended. Something in the kitchen relaxed, not completely, but enough. Mai's

terminal dimmed. Ace's shadow-pressure loosened a fraction.

"Eat." Mai had left presentation mode. "Then finalize. Then sleep. Then present."

"In that order?" Faint humor in Ace's voice.

"In that order." Mai opened the refrigerator. "The ritual matters. Even before negotiations."

"Especially before." Shammy's presence wrapped around the kitchen. "We don't fight for the ritual. We fight from it."

They made breakfast. Mai's precision with the coffee grinder, Shammy adjusting the air without thinking about it, Ace stationed at the counter cutting fruit into pieces that were, somehow, exactly the same size.

Forty-five hours until presentation.

But first, breakfast.

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The presentation occupied 47 minutes.

Mai had timed it. She'd rehearsed in the bathroom mirror at 3 AM, when Ace was meditating and Shammy was drifting. She'd adjusted the pacing based on Shammy's atmospheric feedback. "Too fast here, they won't process the fragment data" and "emphasize this slide, the burnout metrics are the leverage." She'd refined the language until every word carried precise weight.

Now she stood in the Foundation's formal conference room.

"Good morning." Her voice was clear, rehearsed, exact. "I'm presenting a strategic analysis of the promotion offer extended to our team. The analysis includes forty-seven projection scenarios, eighteen months of operational data, and a recommendation that serves both the Foundation's interests and our operational sustainability."

Dr. Kessler sat across the table. Not alone, two other Foundation officials flanked her. Director Chen from Operations. Administrator Park from Personnel. The recording device hummed in the center of the table like a small patient insect.

Ace sat to Mai's left. Close to the door, but not fleeing. Shadow-pressure pooled, contained but present. Her katanas rested at her hip, dimmed.

Shammy stood behind them. The room wasn't designed for someone her height, nothing in the Foundation was, but standing let her presence fill the space. The sterile air pressure adjusted. Just enough to make breathing easier.

"Slide one." Mai's tablet displayed the success rate projection. "Current effectiveness: 94.7%. Projected effectiveness under the promotion's operational tempo: 78.3% within six months, 61.2% within twelve."

Director Chen leaned forward. "Those projections are based on what data?"

"Eighteen months of operational records. Recovery interval analysis. Burnout tracking. Fragment-pressure readings from Ace's personal logs. Atmospheric destabilization patterns from Shammy's memory dictation." Mai's voice remained precise. "Supplementary documentation in tabs fourteen through thirty-one."

Administrator Park made a note. "You're projecting a decline based on... recovery metrics?"

"I'm projecting a decline based on the Foundation's own personnel models." A supporting slide. "Standard operational tempo for promotion-tier personnel assumes 24-hour recovery intervals. Our methodology requires 72. The differential is not negotiable. It's structural."

"Structural how?" Dr. Kessler's voice was clinical.

"Ace's fragment-pressure requires 48 hours to stabilize after activation. My framework requires 24 hours to recalibrate after extended tactical operations. Shammy's atmospheric presence requires 12 hours to find equilibrium after extended modulation." Mai listed these like specifications. Not preferences. Infrastructure. "These produce the 94.7% success rate the Foundation values."

"What happens if the infrastructure is compressed?"

"Effectiveness declines. Burnout increases. Fragment-pressure destabilization incidents increase. Atmospheric anomalies increase." Next slide. "Three scenarios. Scenario one: we accept the promotion as offered. No modified recovery requirements. Success rate declines to 61.2% within twelve months. Burnout probability exceeds 80%. Fragment-pressure destabilization incidents increase 180%."

"And scenario two?"

"We accept with protected recovery time." The edge in Mai's voice now. The obvious solution, why wasn't it obvious to them? "Seventy-two hour recovery intervals between major operations. Non-negotiable except for Alpha-class emergencies. Success rate maintained. Burnout probability below 15%."

"Scenario three?"

"We decline the promotion." Flat. "The Foundation continues to deploy us at current operational tempo. We continue to produce results. But we remain outside the formal structure, which limits our ability to influence operational decisions. And the Foundation continues to try to understand us without our cooperation."

Director Chen exchanged a glance with Administrator Park. "You're presenting these as the only options."

"I'm presenting these as the structural options. The Foundation can optimize for short-term capacity or long-term effectiveness. Not both."

Shammy's presence adjusted the air pressure. Ace's shadow-pressure pooled. Neither was a threat. Neither was not a threat.

"We're prepared to accept the promotion." Mai continued. "With conditions. Condition one: protected recovery time. Seventy-two hour minimum between major operations. Alpha-class emergency override requires authorization from two division heads. Automatic review for every override."

"That's not standard protocol." Administrator Park's voice carried skepticism.

"Neither are we. Condition two: operational autonomy. The triad defines mission parameters within our containment specialty. No reassignment without team consent. No integration with other teams unless we approve the structure. We offer consultation on team cohesion for other units. Not extraction of methodology."

"And condition three?"

Shammy spoke. Her voice was warm despite the sterile room. "Strategic input authority. When the Foundation defines mission priorities, we participate in the definition. Not for every operation, for operations involving our deployment. We've been sent into situations that could have been resolved with better intelligence. A seat at the table—"

"Containment teams don't request strategic input authority." Director Chen's voice was measured.

"Containment teams don't produce our effectiveness metrics." Mai didn't flinch. "We're not requesting authority we haven't earned. We're requesting authority that reflects our actual operational role."

"What authority specifically?"

"Priority review for missions involving our deployment. Right to refuse non-emergency operations during protected recovery time. Participation in quarterly operational planning sessions. Right to propose mission alternatives that achieve Foundation objectives without compromising team architecture."

Dr. Kessler's pen stopped moving. "You're asking for significant concessions."

"We're offering significant value." Final slide. "The Foundation's alternative is to accept the promotion without conditions, compress our recovery capacity, and accept reduced effectiveness. Or refuse the promotion and maintain current capacity without formal recognition. Both are inferior to this proposal."

"Inferior for whom?"

"Inferior for the Foundation." Mai's voice carried no hesitation. "Our proposal maintains effectiveness while providing the integration the Foundation wants. We accept the promotion. We accept increased responsibility. We accept formal recognition. In exchange, the Foundation accepts the conditions that make continued effectiveness possible."

"Or we could simply order you to accept the promotion without conditions."

The words hung in the sterile air. Administrator Park's voice carried the weight of institutional authority.

Mai's response came instantly. Not because she hadn't considered this, because she'd considered it at 3 AM, in the mirror, multiple times.

"You could." Precise. Unhurried. "And we would comply. For a time. The Foundation has authority. We have effectiveness. Authority without effectiveness is meaningless."

"Are you threatening to reduce your effectiveness?"

"I'm stating structural reality." No threat in her voice. Just calculation. "Our effectiveness is produced by the architecture you're asking us to compromise. When you compromise architecture, you compromise results. That's not a threat."

She paused.

"It's physics."

The conference room held its silence. Shamy's presence adjusted the air. Ace's shadow-pressure expanded slightly.

Not a threat. A reminder.

Director Chen leaned back. "You've prepared detailed documentation."

"Forty-seven scenarios. Eighteen months of data. Recovery metrics. Burnout analysis. Fragment-pressure readings. Atmospheric destabilization patterns." Mai's voice remained precise. "The Foundation asked for understanding. We're providing it."

"We asked for understanding of your methodology. Not understanding of your demands."

"They're the same thing." Mai's voice sharpened. "You wanted to know how we work. This is how we work. Recovery intervals. Protected time. Operational autonomy. Strategic input. These aren't demands. They're specifications."

Administrator Park made another note. The pen's scratching filled the sterile air.

"If we accept your conditions," Dr. Kessler's voice was clinical, "we're establishing precedent. Other teams will request similar accommodations."

"Other teams don't have our effectiveness metrics. When they do, they can make similar requests. Until then, the precedent applies to teams that produce 94.7% success rates and require structural accommodations to maintain them."

"You're asking us to treat you as an exception."

"I'm asking you to treat us as effective." The edge in Mai's voice now. "The Foundation optimizes for results. We produce results. The conditions I'm presenting make those results possible. If the Foundation wants different results, it can optimize for different conditions. But it can't have our results without our architecture."

The silence that followed was different. Heavier. Decision weight.

Director Chen looked at Administrator Park. Administrator Park looked at Dr. Kessler. Dr. Kessler looked at her notes.

"We'll need to review the documentation." Director Chen's voice was measured. "The conditions require authorization at levels above this meeting."

"I understand." Mai's voice carried no surprise. "The documentation is comprehensive. I'm available for clarification."

"How long will the review take?"

“That depends on Foundation internal processes.” Precise. “We have 31 hours remaining before the promotion decision deadline. I'd recommend completing the review before then. But the choice is yours.”

“We'll be in contact.” Administrator Park's voice carried bureaucratic neutrality. “You're dismissed.”

The triad rose. Mai's tablet powered down. Ace's shadow-pressure reorganized, contained to ready. Shammy's presence marked the transition from negotiation to exit without a word.

They didn't speak until they'd left the conference room. Until they'd navigated the Foundation's corridors. Until they'd reached the outside air and Shammy's presence could finally expand.

“They'll accept.” Mai's voice was certain. “The calculation is obvious.”

“They'll accept because the alternative is writing a report that says 'we refused conditions that would maintain our most effective team.'” Ace's voice carried dark humor.

“They'll accept because they have to.” Shammy's presence expanded. “Not because they want to. That's the leverage.”

“And then we have to make it work.” Mai's analytical framework was already running. “Acceptance isn't the end.”

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The evening light caught the apartment differently than the morning.

Amber through the windows. Shammy's presence had already shifted to recovery mode, barely noticeable, just enough to make the space breathable after the Foundation's sterile conference room. Ace sat in her corner, blade across her lap, shadow-pressure slowly releasing. Mai's terminal displayed the presentation one final time. Not calculating. Just looking.

“They'll call tomorrow.” Mai's voice was quiet. “Before the deadline.”

“They'll call because they have to.” Ace's blade caught the amber light.

“They'll call because the math is obvious.” Shammy moved toward the window. “But they'll resent us for making it obvious.”

“They'll resent us for forcing them to acknowledge what they wanted to ignore.” Mai's terminal powered down. “That we're not instruments. That we have architecture. That the architecture produces the results, and they can't have one without the other.”

“We made them see.” Ace's voice was certain. “That's what matters.”

“We made them see what we wanted them to see.” Shammy's presence expanded. “The rest they'll learn when they test us.”

Mai turned from the terminal. “They will test us. Acceptance isn't the end. It's the beginning. They'll push the Alpha-class definition. The recovery intervals. The strategic input authority. Every boundary.”

"Then we document every push." Ace's voice carried iron. "Every violation. Every time they try to compress what we protected."

"And we show them the data again." Mai's voice was precise. "As many times as it takes."

The evening light pressed through the windows.

"We should eat." Shammy's voice was warm. "The negotiation is done. The ritual is next."

"In that order?" Faint humor from Mai.

"In that order." Shammy's presence wrapped around the apartment. "We fought. Now we recover. That's the architecture."

Mai rose from her terminal. The presentation was complete. The Foundation would call tomorrow, and they would accept, and the triad would have terms that protected what they'd built.

They moved toward the kitchen. Not urgently. With purpose.

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The call came at 9:47 AM.

Director Chen's name on Mai's terminal. Speakerphone. Sterile even through digital transmission.

"After review of the documentation provided, the Foundation has determined that the proposed conditions are acceptable." Director Chen's voice was flat, reading from a prepared statement. "You will be promoted to senior containment analyst positions, effective immediately. The protected recovery time protocol, operational autonomy parameters, and strategic input authority provisions will be formalized in your updated personnel files."

Mai's analytical framework processed. Expected outcome. Calculation confirmed.

"Additionally, the Foundation requests that you provide consultation on team cohesion methodology for MTF Epsilon-11, effective next month." Something that might have been reluctance in Director Chen's voice. "Your approach to integrated team dynamics has been flagged for potential replication."

"Consultation." Mai's voice was precise. "Not extraction."

"Consultation." Director Chen confirmed. "The Foundation recognizes that your methodology is not transferable. We're interested in understanding what makes it effective, not in disassembling it."

"We'll provide consultation. With the understanding that we define the consultation parameters."

"Understood." Flat. "Your first strategic input session is scheduled for Friday. You'll receive the agenda within the hour."

"We'll be there."

"One more thing." Director Chen's voice shifted slightly. "The documentation you provided was... comprehensive. The Foundation will be incorporating your recovery interval analysis into the standard personnel optimization models. For all teams, not just yours."

Mai's analytical framework processed. The implications expanded. Not just acceptance, impact.

"Thank you for the feedback." Mai's voice remained precise. "We're available for clarification."

"The call is concluded." Director Chen's voice cut off.

The apartment held its breath.

"They accepted." Shammy's presence expanded. "All of it."

"The calculation made it obvious." Ace's voice was flat.

"They accepted because we made them see." Mai's terminal powered down. "Not just us. All teams. The recovery interval analysis. They're changing their model."

Shammy's voice carried something, warmth, but underneath it, relief. "That's more than we asked for."

"We asked for our terms. They gave more." Mai's framework was processing. "The Foundation doesn't give more. They extract more."

"They gave more because they finally understood." Ace's shadow-pressure released. "They saw what happens when you compress teams that need architecture. And they didn't want to be responsible for that."

Shammy moved toward the kitchen. "They finally understood that we break when we're compressed."

"Now we have to make it work." Mai's voice carried the calculation. "The terms are in place. The Foundation will test them. We maintain the boundaries."

"We maintain them the same way we set them." Ace rose from her corner. "With data. With precision. With documentation."

"And with each other." Shammy's presence wrapped around the apartment. "That's the architecture that made them listen."

Morning light through the windows. The triad stood in their kitchen.

"Now what?" Ace's voice was flat. The question was genuine.

"Now we make it work." Mai moved toward the coffee maker. "We accept. We maintain. We document. And we live."

"Together." Shammy's presence expanded. "That's the architecture."

"The ritual is us." Mai began preparing coffee. Precision. Ritual. "Together. That's what we protected."

"Not the promotion." Ace's blade caught the morning light. "Not the authority. The ritual."

"The sacred ordinary." Shammy's presence filled the apartment. "The thing they can't document. Can't replicate. Can't extract."

Mai poured the coffee. Three mugs. The same three mugs, every morning, in the same order.

Now they lived it.

**[Chapter Seven End]**

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

