

## CHAPTER 12 — TRANSMISSION HYGIENE

Mai didn't like sending messages from inside the clearing.

Not because she believed in "bad signal" superstition—she hated superstition, hated how it made people sloppy—but because the air here had already proven it could curate. And if the air could curate heat, sound, and attention... then a digital transmission was just another kind of sentence the site could try to finish for them.

Still, procedure was procedure.

They had an unrequested object insertion inside their perimeter. That crossed a line. It didn't matter if the object was inert or merely suggestive—the event itself had to be reported while their recollection was still clean.

Mai stepped away from the tarp and walked to the edge of the clearing, not toward the cabin but toward the densest part of the tree line—somewhere the forest felt more forest and less stage.

Ace followed without being asked. She stayed two meters behind Mai, not crowding, just present. Her eyes kept sweeping the cabin, then the treeline, then back to Mai's hands.

Shammy stayed at the camp, motionless, like a stabilizer that refused to stabilize, eyes tracking the quarantined hard case in the distance as if she expected it to start whispering through plastic.

Mai pulled the secure comm unit from her pocket and held it in both hands. She didn't speak. She didn't read anything aloud. She didn't even let her lips move in silent rehearsal.

She typed.

Slow, minimal, cold.

TO: Dr. Havel (secure) CC: Dr. Bright (formal) SUBJECT: ΔF-SRS-118 — Update: Perimeter Breach (Object Insertion)

CONTENT: Unrequested portable tape recorder appeared within TRIAD perimeter (shared observation). No approach observed. Recorder sealed immediately (gloves, opaque containment, double layer). No replay. No inspection beyond confirmation of device form factor. Brief atmospheric drift detected concurrent with containment (Shamaterazu). Returned to baseline stillness within seconds. Object quarantined away from camp; will hand off at extraction point per protocol.

Mai stared at the text for three seconds. Not to "interpret." To check for anything that wasn't hers.

It looked clean.

She moved her thumb toward SEND.

The comm unit vibrated—one short pulse.

A normal device notification.

A normal device behavior.

Mai's thumb froze.

The screen flickered—not a blackout, not a glitch, just a subtle refresh like the unit had decided to re-render the message.

The text was still there.

But one line had changed.

Not drastically. Not in a way a casual reader would even notice.

A single phrase had been inserted—soft, plausible, bureaucratic.

“...audio content believed relevant to 199X extract...”

Mai’s stomach dropped like a stone.

Ace leaned in slightly, eyes narrowing. She didn’t touch the device. She didn’t breathe louder.

“You didn’t type that,” Ace said.

Mai’s voice came out low and flat, the tone of someone refusing panic its oxygen.

“No,” she said.

Mai deleted the inserted phrase immediately. No hesitation. No analysis. No “maybe autocorrect.”

Delete. Backspace. Clean.

She stared at the message again for two seconds.

Her thumb hovered over SEND again.

The comm unit vibrated a second time.

Same short pulse.

Same “normal” behavior.

The message refreshed again.

This time, two words had appeared at the end of the second sentence:

“...appeared within perimeter (gift).”

Mai’s blood ran cold.

Ace’s jaw flexed hard enough to show muscle.

Shammy’s voice came faintly from the camp, carried without wind, like the forest had decided to be helpful for once.

“Mai.”

Mai didn’t respond to the call. She didn’t look back. She couldn’t afford to split her attention.

She highlighted the word gift and deleted it.

Then she did something even more important:

She did not try to send again.

She powered the comm unit off.

A clean shutdown. No drama. No curse words. No “what the hell.” Those were narratives too.

Ace exhaled slowly through her nose.

“Okay,” Ace said quietly. “So the line is comms.”

Mai swallowed once. Her mouth tasted like metal.

“The line is language,” Mai replied. She kept it precise. “The device is trying to complete the report.”

Ace’s gaze stayed on Mai’s hands, on the powered-off comm unit like it might wake itself.

“We don’t give it that channel,” Ace said.

Mai nodded once.

She turned and walked back toward camp with the kind of controlled calm that only existed when fear was being managed, not absent.

Shammy met them halfway, moving like a tall shadow between trees. Her face was tight.

“I felt it,” Shammy said.

Mai didn’t ask what. She already knew. The air had moved again—not physically, but socially, like something had leaned closer to listen.

“It wanted the words to go out,” Shammy continued.

Mai nodded. “Yes.”

Ace’s voice was a low growl. “It wants witnesses.”

Mai didn’t correct the implied motive. She just re-framed it into something safe.

“It benefits from propagation,” Mai said.

Shammy’s eyes narrowed. “So we don’t propagate.”

Mai’s jaw tightened, then relaxed. “We switch to analog.”

Ace blinked once. “Paper.”

Mai nodded. “Handwritten. Sealed. Delivered physically at extraction. No transmission from inside the clearing.”

Shammy’s shoulders lowered by a fraction, relief punching through tension like a tiny leak in a dam.

Mai sat on the equipment case again and pulled out a small waterproof notebook—plain, unremarkable, not Foundation-branded, not printed with templates. Just paper.

She wrote in block letters, slow, careful, leaving no room for the case to “help” her.

ΔF-SRS-118 / TRIAD / FIELD NOTE — DO NOT COPY EVENT: Unrequested object insertion inside perimeter (portable tape recorder). ACTION: Immediate opaque containment; no replay; no inspection beyond device form factor; quarantined away from camp. OBSERVATION: Brief atmospheric drift concurrent with containment; baseline stillness resumed. COMMS NOTE: Attempted secure transmission showed unauthorized text insertion. Transmission aborted. Device powered down.

She tore the page out cleanly, folded it once, and sealed it inside a small evidence sleeve—clear plastic, not opaque. She didn’t want to treat paper like a ritual object. She wanted it to be boring.

Then she sealed the evidence sleeve inside a second sleeve—opaque this time—not because the words were magical, but because she was done giving this site anything it could read back.

Ace watched the process with a kind of grim admiration.

“You’re building containment for sentences,” Ace said.

Mai didn’t look up. “Yes.”

Shammy stared at the cabin through the trees.

“And it will try again,” Shammy murmured.

Mai capped her pen and tucked it away.

“Then we keep refusing,” Mai said. “We keep it boring.”

Ace’s lips twisted. “It’s starting to feel like boring is the hardest thing we’ve ever done.”

Mai met her eyes.

“It is,” Mai said.

They sat in silence for a while after that. Not because they had nothing to say. Because they had too much.

The cabin remained in sight, still, patient. The clearing remained too round.

Then, as if to mark that it had been listening the whole time, the forest did something small and nasty.

A single bird call sounded from the tree line—sharp, bright.

Then the exact same bird call repeated, identical in pitch and timing.

Like a recording.

Ace’s head snapped toward the sound.

Mai’s breath caught.

Shammy’s eyes narrowed to slits.

The call repeated a third time.

Exactly the same.

Mai felt something in her chest tighten with a fresh, cold understanding:

It wasn't only objects the site could place.

It could place behaviors.

Sound. Habit. Reflex.

A template.

Ace spoke first, low and hard.

"It's learning our rhythms."

Mai's mouth went dry again.

She didn't deny it. She couldn't. Not honestly.

She only answered with the next procedural truth—the kind of truth that kept you alive when the world became a liar.

"Then we keep changing them," Mai said.

Shammy's voice was almost a whisper.

"And we keep our mouths shut."

The cabin sat in daylight.

Perfectly ordinary.

Perfectly still.

And somewhere inside it—whether physically or conceptually—there was a missing tape that the Foundation hadn't recovered in 199X, a recorder that had crossed into TRIAD's camp without footsteps, and a case file that now tried to edit its own report.

Mai glanced once at the porch.

The door looked closed.

She couldn't remember seeing it close.

She didn't speak that thought.

She didn't complete the sentence.

Not here.

Not for it.—

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Last update: **31/03/2026 16:21**

