

CHAPTER 14 — INTAKE THROUGH BRIGHT

They didn't speak until the forest stopped feeling like it had an audience.

That took longer than it should have.

Five minutes after Marker Two, the air still felt... attentive. Not heavy, not pressurized—just aware in the way a room was aware when someone stood behind you too close. Mai kept her eyes forward and her mouth shut. Ace kept point with the hard, clean posture of a woman who hated being watched by something she couldn't stab. Shammy kept scanning the space between trunks, searching for drift like a diver searching for current.

Then—finally—ordinary wind arrived.

It brushed their faces with a direction. It carried actual scent. Pine, damp soil, that faint metallic bite of cold water somewhere nearby.

Shammy's shoulders lowered half a centimeter like someone releasing a muscle she hadn't realized she'd been holding for days.

"Outside," she said quietly.

Mai nodded once. She didn't add the rest (outside the cut, outside the stage, outside its rules). She didn't want to make outside into a prayer word.

Ace grunted, not disagreement, not humor—just the sound of a system recalibrating.

They continued to the extraction rendezvous without theatrics. No sprint. No over-checking. No looking back, even when Mai's mind offered her small, poisonous gifts—flickers of a cabin between trees, a porch too close, a dark rectangle on a table.

She swallowed each flicker like it was ash.

When they reached the rendezvous point, it was nothing special: a stretch of service road where the forest opened just enough for a vehicle to exist without looking staged. A second Foundation vehicle waited there—same matte, same forgettable shape. Two agents stood beside it, faces blank, hands visible. The kind of professionals whose bodies said we are not curious.

Good.

Curiosity was a contagion here.

Mai stopped three meters short and held her empty hands out slightly, showing there was nothing in them.

"No transmissions," she said, low. "Physical handoff completed at Marker Two."

One of the agents nodded once. No questions. No what happened. No why. Just procedure. They didn't move toward TRIAD like they were eager to get close.

Ace spoke next, voice flat.

"Quarantine case placed at Marker Two with sealed note. Do not open in field. Do not play anything. Do not read aloud."

The second agent's jaw tightened—a micro-expression of someone realizing they had just inherited the kind of problem that didn't wash off.

"Understood," he said.

Shammy's eyes stayed on the treeline. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Her silence was the fourth member of the team right now.

The handoff itself was almost anticlimactic: coordinates confirmed, marker phrase exchanged, the retrieval team moving out with slow, non-ritual efficiency.

Mai watched them go and felt the urge—small, stupid, human—to hope the problem would now become someone else's.

She killed that hope instantly.

ΔF-SRS-118 didn't transfer cleanly.

It persisted.

They returned to Site-Δ without conversation. A silence built on discipline, not mood. When they passed through the gates, the lights were too white and the air smelled like disinfectant and institutional certainty—comforting in a way that made Mai want to punch something.

Havel met them in a corridor that looked like every other corridor: clean, unforgiving, fluorescent. He had the "I've been awake too long" face of a man who lived on protocols and regret.

He didn't ask how they were.

He asked the only question that mattered.

"Any vocal events?" Havel said.

Mai shook her head. "None."

Ace's voice was low. "No replay. No reading. No contact."

Shammy spoke last, quiet, precise.

"Air was held inside the clearing. Direction returned outside. Brief drift response observed on containment and again during attempted comms."

Havel's gaze flicked to Mai.

Mai didn't embellish. She didn't dramatize. She delivered the fact like a sealed container.

"Comms text insertion occurred," Mai said. "Twice. We aborted. Powered down. Switched to analog."

Havel's eyes narrowed in that particular way Foundation doctors narrowed their eyes when something crossed from "field anomaly" into "propagation risk."

"Good," he said, and meant it.

Then he did exactly what you had asked him to do: he took it to Bright before it had time to become a

rumor.

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The room Bright used wasn't a "lab" in the cinematic sense. It was a controlled intake space with too many cameras and too few comforting edges. A desk. A chair. A sealed playback box they were not using today. A red label on one wall that read NO AUDIO INTAKE WITHOUT ISOLATION in font so large it felt like someone had once screamed it into existence.

Dr. Bright was leaning against the desk when Havel arrived, posture casual in the way that was never actually casual.

He looked at Havel's face and sighed like a man reading a punchline before the joke finished.

"Let me guess," Bright said. "A cabin. A forest. And something that keeps trying to turn professional adults into amateur linguists."

Havel didn't laugh.

He handed Bright the sealed analog sleeve without opening it.

Bright didn't take it immediately.

He looked at it the way you looked at a sealed envelope that you knew contained a live insect.

Then he exhaled and took it with two fingers.

"I love my job," Bright said dryly. "It's like therapy, except the universe does the gaslighting for free."

Havel's mouth tightened. That was as close to a smile as he allowed himself in this context.

"Read silently," Havel said.

Bright lifted two fingers in a lazy salute. "I can do that. I'm a professional."

He didn't open it right away. Instead he walked to a corner where a small camera sat behind a shielded panel and pointed at the desk. He turned the panel off.

No recording. No archive. No "persistent extract" reappearing later because somebody gave it a home.

Then Bright sat and opened the sleeve with slow, deliberate care. He unfolded the paper, eyes scanning it without moving his lips. He didn't mouth the words. He didn't let the report become sound.

For a long moment, the only noise in the room was the soft rustle of paper and Bright's breathing.

Then Bright's brow lifted.

Not surprise.

Recognition.

He looked up at Havel.

"It edited their comms," Bright said.

Havel nodded once. "Yes."

Bright's gaze sharpened. "Not autocorrect. Not glitch."

"Inserted semantically appropriate phrasing," Havel said. "Two instances."

Bright tapped the paper once with a fingernail.

"Gift," he muttered. "Cute."

Havel didn't respond. He didn't want the word echoed.

Bright noticed his silence and, for once, respected it.

He read the rest again with his eyes only, slower this time.

When he finished, he folded the paper back up and slid it into the sleeve.

Bright leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling like it had personally inconvenienced him.

"Well," he said, "that's a boundary-crossing behavior if I've ever seen one."

Havel's voice was flat. "Your sign-off?"

Bright's lips quirked.

"Of course," he said. "Because if there's one thing I love, it's being the adult in the room when the room itself is trying to write the minutes."

He paused, then added, quieter—less performance, more warning:

"Don't let anyone try to 'solve' it."

Havel didn't blink. "We're not."

Bright nodded once. "Good. Because this thing doesn't want to kill you. It wants to recruit your need for coherence."

Havel's eyes narrowed. "How would you classify the mechanism?"

Bright shrugged. "If I had to pick a word that will haunt you later? Completion."

Havel didn't like that word.

He didn't reject it either.

Bright stood and placed the sealed sleeve in a secondary opaque envelope without looking at it again.

"No audio," Bright said. "No playback. And no one—no one—gets to treat that recorder like it's a puzzle box."

Havel nodded.

Bright pointed at him with two fingers.

“And for the love of every bureaucratic god you pretend not to worship—keep TRIAD’s ‘boring’ protocol intact. They’re doing the one thing this thing hates.”

Havel’s expression stayed unreadable.

“They refused participation,” Havel said.

Bright’s grin was sharp and brief.

“Exactly,” Bright replied. “So now it’s going to try harder.”

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When Havel returned to TRIAD, he didn’t deliver comfort. He delivered structure.

“You did the right thing,” he said, and then immediately followed with the next directive, because praise without procedure was meaningless.

“Phase II begins,” Havel continued. “No site return until retrieval team confirms the Marker Two package is stable in transit. Comms are restricted. Analog only. You will receive instructions via secure in-person relay.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “What did Bright say?”

Havel didn’t imitate Bright’s tone. He didn’t need to.

“He signed off,” Havel said. “And he said: no one tries to ‘solve’ it.”

Mai felt her chest tighten.

“That aligns,” Mai said quietly.

Shammy’s gaze stayed distant, as if she could still feel the held air in her bones.

“It will push,” Shammy said.

Havel’s eyes flicked to her. “Yes.”

Ace’s jaw flexed. “Let it.”

Mai looked at both of them, then at Havel.

“We maintain boring,” Mai said.

Havel nodded once. “Maintain boring.”

And for the first time since the cabin placed a recorder inside their perimeter, Mai felt something like real clarity—not the wrong sharp clarity of the forest, but the clean clarity of a team that had found the only workable spine.

They weren’t going to beat ΔF-SRS-118 by understanding it.

They were going to beat it by refusing to complete it.

Because the scariest thing about the cabin wasn't the missing tape, or the light in the window, or the book that flickered into a single mind and then vanished.

The scariest thing was simpler:

It had started trying to write through them.

And now that it knew it could, it would keep testing where the pen could go next.—

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