

## CHAPTER 15 — MARKER TWO DIDN'T STAY MESSY

Havel didn't call them into an office.

He called them into a corridor.

That alone was a signal.

Foundation offices were for decisions you expected to survive daylight. Corridors were for things you didn't want to give a room-shaped memory.

Mai saw him first—standing under a harsh strip of fluorescent light, hands empty, posture too still. He looked like he'd slept exactly one hour and spent the rest of the night negotiating with something that didn't sign forms.

Ace approached with her usual quiet stride, Shammy beside her like a tall shadow. Mai kept a half-step back, eyes scanning corners out of habit even though the site was supposed to be "clean."

There was no such thing as clean anymore.

Havel didn't bother with pleasantries.

"Marker Two retrieval completed," he said.

Mai felt her shoulders loosen by a millimeter. Not relief—just the end of one held breath.

Ace's expression didn't change. "And?"

Havel's jaw tightened.

"And the package did not remain singular."

Mai's stomach dropped like a stone.

Mai didn't ask what do you mean. That phrasing was too close to a plea. Instead she asked the question that had become their spine.

"Shared observation?" she said.

Havel nodded once. "Yes."

Ace's voice flattened, dangerous. "What was added."

Havel took a breath and held it for a beat too long. Then he spoke in the most clinical tone he could manage.

"An additional item was present at the handoff location upon retrieval."

Mai's mouth went dry. "Define item."

Havel's eyes flicked to Mai, then away, as if he didn't want to give the next noun too much air.

"A bound volume," he said.

Shammy's fingers flexed once, involuntary.

Ace's gaze went hard. "The book."

Mai refused to say Necronomicon even in her head. The word was a handhold. The file wanted handholds.

"Was it seen by more than one observer?" Mai asked.

"Yes," Havel said. "Two retrieval agents and the drone camera feed. The volume is... physically present."

Mai's brain tried to sprint into theory—it manifested. It migrated. It followed the dead-drop. It wants propagation. She strangled the sprint before it became a run.

"What happened to the original items?" Mai asked. Her voice stayed calm because she forced it to be calm.

"The sealed note and the hard case were present," Havel said. "Untampered. The additional volume was placed adjacent. No stack. No burial. No obvious tool marks."

Ace let out a slow exhale through her nose.

"It learned our 'messy,'" she said.

Havel didn't correct the implied intent. He didn't have the energy. He only offered the procedural truth:

"It presented as consistent with your non-ritual concealment."

Mai felt something cold settle behind her ribs.

"That's escalation," she said.

Havel nodded once. "Yes."

Shammy's voice was quiet, almost strained.

"Did the air move?" she asked.

Havel's eyes flicked to her. "Yes. At the moment the retrieval team approached, atmospheric drift became directional for approximately six seconds. Then baseline stillness returned."

Shammy's shoulders lowered, not in relief—in recognition. Like a musician hearing a note repeated and realizing it wasn't accidental.

Ace's jaw flexed. "And now it's on-site."

Havel's expression tightened. "No."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

Havel reached into the inner pocket of his coat and produced a thick, matte-black evidence envelope. He held it by the edge like it was warm.

"It's in isolation," he said. "Not in general storage. Not in transit. Not in an office."

Ace didn't move. "And you didn't open it."

Havel's voice went flat as steel.

"No one opened it."

Mai watched his hands. No tremor. No flinch. Havel had done this before—handled dangerous things without giving them the dignity of fear.

Mai's throat worked once.

"Who has eyes on it?" Mai asked.

Havel hesitated a fraction, then answered because procedure mattered more than secrecy in a case like this.

"Bright," he said. "And Archive Integrity. Silent-only handling. No audio. No spoken text. No staff rotation inside the isolation cell."

Ace's lips pressed into a thin line.

"So it got past our 'no thread pulling' without us pulling," she said.

Havel nodded. "Correct."

Mai stared at the matte-black envelope in Havel's hand. It looked like any evidence pouch.

It didn't feel like any evidence pouch.

It felt like a sentence that had followed them home.

"Show us nothing," Mai said softly. "No visual. No description beyond form factor."

Havel's eyes held hers.

"That's why we're in a corridor," he said.

Ace's gaze flicked once to the nearest security camera. "Then why are you here with it?"

Havel didn't blink.

"Because Bright insisted on one more gate," he said. "He wants TRIAD to set the next rule."

Mai felt her heartbeat slow into something colder and steadier.

He wasn't giving them a puzzle.

He was handing them authority.

Because this case wasn't about containment tech. It was about behavioral containment—what you allowed yourself to do.

Mai looked at Ace.

Ace looked back, expression hard but clear: You lead this part.

Mai looked at Shammy.

Shammy's eyes were on the envelope, but her posture held a refusal—she would not stabilize the wrong thing, she would not soften a line that needed to stay sharp.

Mai turned back to Havel.

"Rule," Mai said quietly. "If it produces a bound volume in any context, it goes opaque and stays opaque until it reaches an isolation cell with no audio devices, no recording surfaces, and no staff who will interpret it as cultural artifact."

Ace's voice came in low, immediate. "And no one uses the word for it."

Mai's lips pressed together. She nodded. "Yes. No naming."

Shammy added, softer but no less firm: "And no one keeps it near sleeping quarters. Not even on a different floor."

Havel's jaw tightened—approval without warmth.

"Bright will like that," he said.

Mai inhaled once, then continued.

"Second rule," Mai said. "No one discusses the content as content. No 'what it might say.' No 'what it could be.' Only handling. Only boundaries."

Ace nodded once.

Shammy's voice was almost a whisper: "No curiosity rituals."

Mai held Havel's gaze.

"Now tell us the retrieval team report," Mai said. "Minimal. No storytelling."

Havel didn't need to be asked twice. He flipped open a thin folder he'd been carrying under his arm—paper, not tablet—and slid a single sheet out.

He didn't hand it to Mai.

He held it so she could read without touching, without taking possession, without turning the act into exchange.

Mai's eyes scanned the lines.

RETRIEVAL TEAM 07 — MARKER TWO STATUS: Completed ANOMALIES:

Line-of-sight inconsistency: target structure briefly visible at non-viable distance (approx. 4-7 seconds).

Audio environment: bird call repetition recorded by on-body mics (identical waveform x3). Team reports hearing it once; recording indicates three instances.

Additional object present: bound volume adjacent to package. No contact. Opaque containment used.

## NOTES:

One team member reported “urge to check the first drop.” Urge resisted.

No vocal events. No reading. No replay.

Mai’s eyes paused on one line.

Team reports hearing it once; recording indicates three instances.

The old extract whispered in her memory: we didn’t hear it until we did.

Her stomach tightened.

She didn’t say it aloud.

She looked up at Havel.

“Your people are still using on-body mics,” she said.

Havel’s face hardened.

“Yes,” he said.

Mai’s voice stayed controlled, but it had an edge now.

“That’s a vector.”

Havel didn’t argue. He looked tired in a way that meant he’d already had the same thought at three in the morning and didn’t like where it led.

“Bright is drafting an immediate restriction,” he said. “No on-body audio capture within a defined radius. Visual-only if required.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “Good.”

Shammy’s eyes narrowed. “The forest is copying sound.”

Havel didn’t correct the motive. He only nodded.

Mai stared at the report sheet again.

The cabin had reached beyond the clearing. It had reached into the dead-drop procedure. It had reached into comms. Now it was reaching into recording—creating discrepancies between what people experienced and what devices claimed happened.

That wasn’t an attack in the usual sense.

It was a wedge.

A wedge that could split teams by making them argue about reality.

Mai looked at Ace and Shammy.

“We keep doing the same thing,” Mai said quietly. “We don’t argue with devices. We don’t argue with

each other. We treat discrepancies as hazards, not mysteries.”

Ace nodded once. “No fights over memory.”

Shammy’s voice was low. “No finishing.”

Havel slid the sheet back into the folder.

“Bright wants you in the isolation corridor in fifteen minutes,” he said. “Not to see the item. To hear his constraint list.”

Ace snorted once. “He doesn’t want us near it.”

Havel’s gaze stayed flat. “No one wants you near it.”

Mai felt something almost like grim approval.

“Then why involve us at all?” Mai asked.

Havel’s answer was immediate.

“Because you are the only team so far that has not fed it,” he said. “And Bright knows that’s not luck.”

Silence held for a beat.

Not awkward. Not empty.

Just the weight of a truth they didn’t get to refuse.

Mai nodded once.

“Then we keep it that way,” she said.

Ace’s mouth twisted. “Boring.”

Shammy’s eyes stayed distant, as if she could feel the clearing’s held air even here under fluorescent lights.

“Still,” Shammy corrected.

Mai looked at both of them, then back at Havel.

“Lead us,” Mai said.

Havel turned and began walking down the corridor without looking back.

TRIAD followed.

And as they moved deeper into Site-Δ’s clean, humming belly, Mai felt a quiet, nasty certainty settle in:

The cabin wasn’t just persistent.

It was mobile in the only way that mattered.

Not through space.

Through procedure. Through language. Through the human need to complete.

And now the Foundation had a bound volume in isolation that nobody had opened—yet.

Which meant the real test wasn't whether the book was dangerous.

The real test was whether the people around it could stay boring long enough to survive the urge to find out.—

© 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

**Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.**

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace18:chapter15>

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

