

CHAPTER 16 — BRIGHT'S CONSTRAINT LIST

The isolation corridor didn't smell like disinfectant.

It smelled like nothing.

Not "clean." Not "sterile." Just... absent. Like the air had been filtered so hard it forgot what air was supposed to carry.

Mai hated it immediately, because it reminded her of the cabin's curated neutrality—except here it was human-made, deliberate, defensible. A weaponized emptiness.

The corridor was short and unremarkable: gray walls, matte floor, a single reinforced door with a keypad and a red status strip that stayed stubbornly unlit. No windows. No posters. No "safety reminders." Nothing that could become a comforting ritual.

Havel stopped at a marked line on the floor and didn't cross it.

Neither did TRIAD.

"Bright's inside," Havel said. "You stay on this side."

Ace's eyes flicked to the reinforced door. "It's in there too?"

Havel didn't answer the question directly.

"It is not in this corridor," he said. "That's intentional."

Mai's jaw tightened. The phrasing mattered. Not in the building, not on-site, not in containment—not in this corridor. A boundary inside a boundary.

Shammy's gaze stayed on the status strip like she could hear light behind it.

Havel pressed the intercom button. The speaker clicked once.

For a second, there was only the faint electrical hiss of a live line.

Then Bright's voice came through—too cheerful for a place like this.

"Welcome to everyone's least favorite hallway," Bright said. "If you're here voluntarily, please seek professional help."

Ace snorted once, involuntary, then killed the sound in her throat as if even amusement might count as participation.

Mai didn't react.

Shammy didn't blink.

Bright continued, tone still casual, but with something sharp underneath it.

"Rule zero," he said. "No one crosses your line. Not you, not me, not Havel's pet goldfish. This is a briefing, not a field trip."

Havel didn't speak. He didn't need to.

Mai spoke quietly, controlled. "Understood."

Bright made a small sound of satisfaction through the speaker.

"Good. Rule one: no naming. Not in reports, not in jokes, not in private notes, not in your head if you can help it." He paused. "Yes, I know the human brain is a trash raccoon that loves labels. Train it."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "We've already implemented that."

"I know," Bright said. "Which is why you're the only people I'm not tempted to sedate as a preventative measure."

Mai didn't smile. She couldn't afford it. But the line registered as something else: Bright was rattled. He was masking it in humor, but the humor had a thin edge.

Bright's voice sharpened.

"Rule two: no audio. Anywhere near this file. Not just playback—recording. No on-body mics. No ambient capture. No 'for documentation.' The environment is now demonstrably able to disagree with devices." He let the sentence hang. "That's how teams start fighting each other instead of the problem."

Mai nodded once.

Ace's jaw flexed like she wanted to argue with the policy and couldn't, because it was correct.

Shammy's voice was low. "It repeats."

Bright paused. "Yes," he said, quieter now. "It repeats."

He coughed once, then continued, tone regaining its dry bureaucratic bite.

"Rule three: no outbound transmission from within the defined radius. Not 'secure.' Not 'shielded.' Not 'air-gapped but technically...' No. Analog only, physical relay only, and anyone who tries to 'just send a quick update' gets to spend a week doing nothing but inventorying expired tranquilizer darts."

Mai said it flatly. "Comms are a language vector."

Bright made a noise that was half laugh, half grim agreement.

"Exactly. Rule four: treat the phenomenon as propagation-oriented until proven otherwise. That means you don't give it new mouths. You don't give it new hands. You don't give it new witness pools."

Ace's eyes hardened. "So we keep the team small."

"And disciplined," Bright added. "Small teams panic less, but they can also spiral faster. Discipline is the only thing that scales here."

Mai's fingers tightened, then loosened. "What about the bound volume itself?"

There was a brief silence on the intercom line.

Not a glitch.

A pause that felt like Bright choosing his nouns carefully, the way you chose your footing on ice.

“Rule five,” Bright said at last. “If it produces a bound volume again—anywhere—it goes opaque, double-layered, and it does not come within fifty meters of sleeping quarters, eating areas, or break rooms. People do dumb things when they’re tired and hungry.”

Ace’s voice was low. “And nobody opens it.”

Bright’s response was immediate. “Correct. Nobody opens it. Nobody ‘peeks.’ Nobody photographs it. Nobody sketches it. Nobody tries to ‘describe’ it for the record. The record can survive without adjectives.”

Mai felt a tight knot in her chest loosen slightly, like hearing someone else say out loud the line she’d been drawing in her own head.

Shammy’s eyes stayed on the door. “Does it react to being ignored?”

Bright exhaled. “It reacts to everything,” he said. “The question is what kind of reaction you can survive.”

He switched tone—less humor now, more clinical.

“We have one confirmed addition event at Marker Two: your items remained stable, and an additional volume was placed adjacent. That is escalation by association. It means your handling discipline is now part of the environment’s toolkit.”

Ace’s posture tightened. “So our ‘boring’ became a template.”

“Yes,” Bright said. “And before you start spiraling—no, that doesn’t mean you did the wrong thing. It means you did the right thing loudly enough that the phenomenon noticed.”

Mai’s mouth went dry. She didn’t like the word noticed. It smelled like story. But she understood the point: behavior was now a manipulable variable.

Mai asked the next question carefully.

“What is the goal for Phase II?”

Bright’s answer came without hesitation.

“You build a protocol that does not become predictable,” he said. “You do not outsmart it. You do not ‘solve’ it. You deny it consistent hooks. We call it... anti-ritual.”

Ace’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I hate that I understand exactly what you mean.”

Bright’s voice regained a touch of humor, thin and sharp.

“Congratulations, you’re evolving. Try not to do it in a haunted forest again.”

Mai ignored the joke.

“Phase II is observation without habituation,” she said, reframing it into something she could hold.

“Exactly,” Bright replied. “And because you three are allergic to the Foundation’s usual method of

'poke it until it screams,' you're staying lead."

Havel spoke for the first time, voice flat. "Retrieval Team 07 also reported an urge."

Bright's voice cut in, immediate. "Yes. The 'urge to check the first drop.'"

Mai felt cold creep up her spine.

"That's new," Mai said quietly.

"It's not new," Bright corrected. "It's just... now it's portable enough to show itself in language. An urge. A completion itch. A thought that feels like it's yours."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "But it isn't."

Bright paused, and for a second his voice lost the performance entirely.

"That," he said, quietly, "is the entire problem."

Silence held. Even the corridor's nothing-air felt like it leaned in.

Mai kept her breathing slow. She didn't want to give the moment a pulse it could remember.

Then Bright cleared his throat and snapped the tone back into place like a mask.

"Practical additions," he said. "Rule six: rotation limits. No one stays in proximity longer than the specified window. Fatigue increases compliance. Rule seven: no lone personnel. Ever. If someone insists they're fine alone, they're not. Rule eight: you debrief separately and you do not reconcile memories on-site. You compare notes later, in a safe room, under supervision, and you keep the comparison strictly factual."

Mai nodded. "No forced consensus."

"Bingo," Bright said. "And here's the part everyone hates: Rule nine—if you start feeling weirdly interested, you tell your teammate immediately, with one sentence, and then you do something physical and stupid and grounding, like counting screws in a vent grate."

Ace's mouth twisted. "You want us to announce curiosity."

"I want you to treat curiosity like a symptom," Bright replied. "Not a virtue."

Shammy's voice was soft. "And if it escalates?"

Bright didn't joke this time.

"Then we pull you," he said. "We don't argue. We don't negotiate. We pull you out."

Mai felt the weight of that rule in her bones. A clean line. A refusal to bargain with the human need to finish.

She spoke carefully.

"Do we have any direct visual of the volume that appeared at Marker Two?"

Bright exhaled. "Yes," he said. "Archive Integrity viewed it under silent conditions. Still sealed. Still

opaque. Nobody opened it. Nobody 'accidentally' slipped."

Ace's voice was a low threat. "If someone does—"

Bright cut her off. "If someone does, we have bigger problems than disciplinary action." He paused. "We have propagation."

Havel's eyes stayed on the reinforced door.

Mai looked at that door too, and for a moment her brain tried to imagine what was behind it—the envelope, the object, the weight of it.

She shut the image down before it could settle.

Bright's voice softened, just slightly—enough to be human.

"You're doing the only thing that works," he said. "You're refusing to complete the sentence. Keep doing that."

Then the humor came back, brittle.

"And if any of you start hearing a voice that sounds like it's been waiting politely? Don't be heroes. Be cowards. Cowards live."

Ace snorted once, quieter this time. "Cowards. Got it."

Shammy didn't react.

Mai only nodded.

Havel removed his hand from the intercom button. The speaker clicked off. The corridor returned to its dead, managed quiet.

For a moment, none of them moved.

Ace stared at the door like it was a rival.

Shammy stared at the air like it had offended her.

Mai stared at the painted line on the floor and felt the strange, ugly truth settle in:

The Foundation wasn't afraid of a monster in the woods.

They were afraid of a procedure that could crawl.

A file that could rewrite itself.

A place that could place objects inside your camp, edit your report, and then leave you with the worst weapon of all:

A thought that felt like it belonged to you.

Mai turned away from the door first.

Not dramatically. Not defiantly.

Just... refusing to give the object even the dignity of her gaze.

“We proceed,” Mai said quietly.

Ace’s eyes flicked to her. “Back to the site?”

Mai nodded once. “Phase II field return, under new constraints. But not today.”

Shammy’s head tilted. “Why not?”

Mai’s answer was simple, and it wasn’t fear.

“Because leaving now would be a rhythm,” Mai said. “And we’re done giving it rhythms.”

Ace’s lips quirked, sharp and approving.

“Anti-ritual,” she said.

Mai nodded. “Anti-ritual.”

They walked away down the fluorescent corridor, their footsteps finally sounding random again—human, imperfect, unrepeatable.

Behind them, the reinforced door remained closed.

And somewhere beyond it, something waited without moving, without breathing—patient enough to let people do the work for it.

All it needed was one person, one tired mind, one private moment of curiosity...

...one small, doomed attempt to finish the sentence.—

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