

CHAPTER 17 — THE ANTI-RITUAL PACKAGE

They gave TRIAD a room that felt like an apology.

Soft light. No sharp corners. A table with rounded edges. A coffeemaker that hissed politely. Even the chairs had that “someone thought about your spine” shape.

Mai hated it on principle.

Comfort was a story.

And ΔF-SRS-118 ate stories.

So she made the room ugly again the only way she could: with rules.

“No shared debrief,” she said, and her voice was calm enough to make it sound like a weather report. “Not here.”

Ace dropped into a chair like she was trying to dent the floor through it. “We already know.”

Mai nodded once. “Good. Then you’ll tolerate it.”

Shammy stood instead of sitting, tall in the corner where the wall met the ceiling. She looked like she was listening for the building’s ventilation. Not because she expected to hear anything. Because listening had become her version of keeping a hand on the emergency brake.

Havel didn’t join them. That was also a signal.

He had delivered Bright’s constraint list and then stepped away like a man who knew proximity itself could become part of the problem.

Instead, he left them with a single sheet of paper in a clear sleeve, slid across the table like contraband:

PHASE II / ANTI-RITUAL GUIDANCE (TRIAD DRAFT) — Not a protocol. Not a pattern. Not repeatable. —

Mai didn’t pick it up immediately.

Picking it up would have been the first move in a sequence.

She waited three breaths, then reached for it with deliberate boredom and pulled it close.

Ace watched her hands. Shammy watched the air above the paper like it might decide to behave differently.

Mai read silently.

The draft wasn’t fancy. It wasn’t a Foundation manual. It was more like a set of guardrails scribbled by someone who had finally admitted that the enemy wasn’t claws.

It was coherence.

Mai tapped the sleeve once with her fingernail.

“This is fine,” she said.

Ace's brow lifted. "You're not going to rewrite it?"

Mai's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. More like an acknowledgment that Ace had seen through her.

"I'm going to weaponize it," Mai said.

Shammy's head tilted slightly. "How."

Mai set the sleeve down and slid a blank notepad toward herself—paper, not tablet.

Then she wrote one word at the top in heavy block letters:

NOISE

Ace stared at the word like it offended her.

Mai continued. She drew a line down the page into three columns and labeled them:

ACTION / LANGUAGE / TIME

"Phase II," Mai said, and kept her voice flat, "requires variability without ritual."

Ace made a low sound. "Random."

Mai shook her head once. "Not random."

Ace blinked. "That's... what variability is."

Mai didn't argue the concept. She argued the implementation.

"Randomness becomes a ritual if we treat it as sacred," Mai said. "Coin flips. Dice. 'Let fate decide.' That becomes a thing."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "A symbol."

Mai nodded. "Exactly. So instead of 'random,' we do 'unpredictable to it' and 'unremarkable to us.'"

Ace leaned forward a fraction. "Explain it in fighter terms."

Mai wrote under ACTION:

Approach vector changes (left/right/perimeter, never "center" by habit)

Entry refusal windows (sometimes we don't enter at all)

Touch discipline remains constant (no contact, no inspection)

Object response is always the same (opaque, double-layer, quarantine)

Under LANGUAGE:

No naming

No speculation

One-sentence symptom callout ("I'm curious." "I'm pulled." "I'm itchy.")

Grounding task immediately (count screws / inventory bolts / read serial numbers silently)

Under TIME:

No fixed returns

No "overnight = baseline" assumption

No predictable extraction cadence

Then she circled the last one.

"We break the rhythm," Mai said.

Ace sat back, chewing the inside of her cheek like she was trying not to bite a hole through her own impatience.

"So what," Ace said, "we just... show up whenever?"

Mai looked at her. "We show up when it can't start learning our schedule."

Shammy's voice was low. "It will still learn."

Mai didn't deny it. She nodded once.

"Yes," Mai said. "So we deny it the same pattern twice."

Ace snorted. "That's going to annoy it."

Mai's pen paused.

She didn't like the word annoy. It gave the phenomenon a personality it hadn't earned.

"We keep it from modeling us," Mai corrected.

Ace's lips twitched. "Same thing."

Mai didn't argue.

Instead, she did the one thing Bright had asked for—she treated curiosity like a symptom.

"Check," Mai said, looking between them. "Right now. Any pull?"

Ace didn't answer immediately. She stared at the table's rounded edge like it had offended her, then exhaled.

"Not curiosity," Ace said. "Anger. I want to break it."

Mai nodded. "Good to know."

Shammy's voice came quiet from the corner. "No pull. Just... residue. Like held air remembered my skin."

Mai wrote that down without poetry:

Residual sensation post-site.

Then she looked down at her own hands.

Mai hesitated for one heartbeat too long.

Ace noticed instantly. "You."

Mai hated being seen, but not as much as she hated pretending.

"Yes," Mai said. "There's an itch. Not to go back. Not to open anything. Just... to define."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "Completion."

Mai didn't say the word back. She nodded once instead, and then—without drama—she turned her attention to the nearest air vent and started counting the screws.

One.

Two.

Three.

She forced her brain to follow the stupid line until the itch dulled.

When she looked up again, Ace was watching her with something that wasn't pity and wasn't softness.

Respect, maybe.

"You're scary when you're disciplined," Ace muttered.

Mai's mouth twitched. "Thanks."

Shammy's gaze flicked between them, faint amusement like a ghost of a smile.

Then the door to the room opened, and a different kind of cold entered.

A man from Archive Integrity stepped inside. He wasn't armed in an obvious way, but his posture had that stiff, contained tension of someone carrying a risk he couldn't put down.

He didn't sit.

He didn't even step all the way into the room.

He stood near the doorframe and spoke as if every extra second in the room added weight.

"Dr. Bright asked me to deliver one datum," he said.

Mai didn't ask for more. She didn't invite elaboration. She waited.

The man held up a paper slip, sealed in plastic—again, analog, again, boring.

"Package from Marker Two," he said. "Hard case mass measurement. One reading only. Per Bright's instruction."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Mass?"

The man nodded once. "Yes. The hard case weighed 3.42 kilograms on intake. Eighty-seven minutes later, without opening, without movement beyond transfer between isolation shelves, it weighed 3.37 kilograms."

A loss of fifty grams.

Not much.

Enough.

Mai felt the air in the room thin, and she hated that her mind immediately tried to fill in the gap:

Tape missing. Plastic changed. Something edited itself.

She didn't speak it.

Instead she asked the one safe question.

"Was the scale verified?" Mai asked.

The man nodded. "Two scales. Calibration verified. One measurement. No repeats after discrepancy."

Mai felt a flicker of grim approval at that last line. No repeats. No "let's keep checking." No making the measurement itself into a ritual.

Bright was learning too.

Ace's jaw clenched. "So it can change while sealed."

The man didn't answer that framing. He didn't agree or deny. He simply held position like a doorstop in human form.

"The datum is delivered," he said. "No additional commentary authorized."

Mai nodded once. "Thank you."

The man left as cleanly as he entered, and the door shut behind him with a soft click that sounded too much like the cabin's rehearsed latch.

For a beat, none of them spoke.

Then Ace broke the silence, voice low.

"That's not good."

Mai didn't soften it. "Correct."

Shammy's eyes were distant. "It can shed. Or it can shift across... layers."

Mai's pen hovered above the page.

“Careful,” Mai said quietly.

Shammy’s throat worked once. She nodded. “Yes. Sorry.”

Mai wrote only what was safe:

Hard case mass discrepancy observed in isolation. Single reading. No repeats.

Ace leaned forward again, elbows on knees.

“So Phase II isn’t ‘go back and watch,’” she said. “It’s ‘go back and watch ourselves.’”

Mai met her eyes. “Exactly.”

Ace’s mouth twisted. “I hate that.”

Mai’s expression stayed neutral. “That’s why it works.”

Shammy finally sat—slowly, as if sitting was a statement.

“Phase II return timing,” Shammy said. “When.”

Mai stared at the word TIME on her page.

If they went back immediately, that was a rhythm.

If they waited until tomorrow morning, that was a rhythm.

If they waited too long, the file would attract other hands—hands with curiosity, hands with cameras.

Mai tapped the paper twice and decided.

“Today,” Mai said. “But not on a schedule.”

Ace’s eyes sharpened. “Meaning?”

Mai’s voice stayed flat. “We leave after an irrational delay. Not on the hour. Not after a meeting. Not after lunch. We leave when it feels inconvenient.”

Ace snorted once. “That’s petty.”

Mai’s mouth twitched. “It’s also effective.”

Shammy nodded slowly. “Anti-ritual.”

Mai rose and closed her notebook. She didn’t ceremonially stack papers. She didn’t create order the way the cabin created order.

She simply stood.

“Gear,” Mai said. “No audio devices. No comms powered on inside the radius. Approach vector changes mid-walk. If anyone feels the itch, you call it. One sentence. Then grounding.”

Ace stood too, rolling her shoulders like she was getting ready for a fight she couldn’t throw punches at.

“Boring,” Ace said.

Mai looked at her. “Still.”

Shammy corrected softly, as if the word mattered more than comfort. “Unrepeatable.”

Mai nodded once.

They moved toward the door, and Mai felt that familiar, nasty little flicker in the back of her skull—the urge to look at the sealed slip again, to calculate what fifty grams might mean.

She didn’t.

She counted the screws in the door hinge instead.

One.

Two.

Three.

And when she stepped into the corridor with Ace and Shammy beside her, she understood the new shape of the case with painful clarity:

The cabin didn’t need to get inside their bodies.

It only needed to get inside their process.

So Phase II wasn’t about surviving a haunted place.

It was about surviving the temptation to become predictable.

And somewhere, far beyond these fluorescent hallways, a clearing remained too round, a porch remained too patient, and a structure waited in the woods—perfectly content to let disciplined professionals do the hardest work for it:

Try not to finish the sentence.—

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