

CHAPTER 20 — SOMEONE ELSE'S HANDWRITING

They didn't go back to the cabin.

Not because the cabin had "won" the last exchange, and not because TRIAD was afraid of it.

Because going back immediately would have been a rhythm.

Mai hated that she could feel the rhythm forming in her bones anyway—return, observe, refuse, retreat—like her body was trying to turn discipline into habit. Habits were the problem.

So Phase II pivoted, and it pivoted the way the Foundation always pivoted when something didn't fit the manual:

They outsourced.

Not officially. Not in a clean memo. In the quiet, bureaucratic way—another team was tasked with "support observation," given only the minimum constraints, told not to touch, not to speak, not to play anything.

A safe delegation, on paper.

A dangerous variable, in reality.

Mai found out the pivot existed when Havel placed a thin folder on her table without sitting down.

He didn't look tired anymore.

He looked careful.

"Team Nine," Havel said. "Auxiliary."

Ace's eyes narrowed instantly. "Why."

Havel held his hands open, empty. "Because we need more eyes without repeating your patterns."

Mai's pen hovered above her notebook.

"More eyes is more mouths," Mai said quietly.

Havel's jaw tightened. "They have constraints."

Mai didn't accept the reassurance. She didn't reject it either. She asked the only question that mattered.

"Analog only?" she said.

"Yes," Havel replied. "No audio devices. No transmissions inside the radius."

Shammy, standing behind Mai's chair, said softly, "No naming?"

Havel nodded. "No naming."

Ace didn't look convinced. She looked like she wanted to throw a chair through a wall and call it therapy.

Mai opened the folder.

Inside was a single sheet, printed in the Foundation's usual clean format—timestamps, coordinates, witness count, action lines. It was stamped FIELD NOTE — TEAM 9.

Mai read silently.

Her fingers went cold by the third line.

TIME: 21:18 LOCATION: ΔF-SRS-118 perimeter, treeline approach (vector NE) OBS: Cabin visible. Porch intact. No interior entry. EVENT: Unrequested paper slip present on porch step (shared). ACTION: Opaque containment used. No reading. ANOMALY: Paper slip exhibited handwriting. No visual inspection conducted beyond confirming presence of text. NOTE: Team member reports "need to check first drop." Urge resisted. Grounding executed.

Mai's gaze stopped on the phrase exhibited handwriting.

She didn't like it. It wasn't illegal. It wasn't poetic. But it was still a form of description that could grow teeth.

Mai looked up at Havel.

"Why are you showing us this," Mai asked, voice flat, "in a room with a printer."

Havel didn't flinch. "Because it happened. And because Bright wants you to see the drift."

Ace's eyes snapped to the page. "Drift where."

Mai's voice stayed calm, but her pulse was not.

"Handwriting," Mai said.

Shammy leaned in, not to read the report more closely—just to be nearer to the conversation.

"It's writing again," Shammy murmured.

Mai closed the folder gently, like closing it too hard might count as emphasis.

"Describe the handling," Mai said, to Havel. "Not the content."

Havel nodded once, grateful for the frame.

"Paper slip was found on the porch step," he said. "Team Nine used opaque bagging immediately. They did not unfold. They did not read. They did not photograph. They did not speak. They transferred it to isolation."

Ace's jaw clenched. "So what's the problem."

Havel exhaled slowly.

"The bag," he said, and his tone turned clinical. "The outer opaque bag came back with ink on it."

Mai's stomach dropped.

Ace stared. "Ink where."

Havel lifted a second sleeve from under the folder. Not opened. Not shown directly. Just held.

"A smear," he said. "On the exterior. Like wet pen dragged across polymer. Archive Integrity did not attempt to analyze the pattern. One look. Opaque again."

Mai's mouth went dry. She could feel her mind trying to imagine the smear—letters, shapes, a message.

She refused.

"I want to define," Mai said, one sentence, and immediately looked down and counted the staples in the folder binding.

One. Two. Three. Four.

The itch dulled.

Ace watched her. Then Ace's shoulders tightened—she was doing the same thing without admitting it. Fighting her own brain.

Shammy's voice came quiet. "It's trying to write without being read."

Mai looked up, carefully.

Shammy's phrasing was dangerous. It gave intent. But it also captured the practical effect: writing was now happening even when no one engaged the paper.

Mai reframed it into something procedural.

"It's leaving residue," Mai said. "Ink as contamination."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "That means it's trying to breach containment by touch."

Havel nodded once. "Possible."

Mai's gaze returned to the report sheet inside the folder, though she didn't re-open it. She didn't want her eyes to touch the words again.

"Did Team Nine report urge distribution?" Mai asked.

Havel's response was immediate, too crisp.

"Yes," he said. "Two members. Same phrase. First drop."

Ace's jaw hardened. "It's spreading it."

Mai didn't say yes. She didn't want to make that a shared conclusion.

Instead she asked the next safe question.

"Was TRIAD present?" Mai asked.

"No," Havel said. "Different team. Different approach vector."

Mai's blood went colder.

So it wasn't Mai's mind anymore.

It wasn't their habits.

It was the phenomenon exporting the same thought across personnel.

A meme without a mouth.

Mai felt the urge to swear. Swearing would have been human noise, but she didn't want to punctuate the moment with anything that might feel like a ritual release.

Instead she said the boundary, quietly and flat.

"New rule," Mai said. "If the phrase 'first drop' appears as an urge, we do not speak the words aloud inside the radius. We use a neutral code."

Ace frowned. "We just said it now."

Mai's eyes met hers. "We said it here. Not inside. And we won't again."

Shammy nodded slowly. "Code."

Ace's lips pressed into a line. "Fine. Code word?"

Mai didn't pick something cute. Cute became sticky.

"Marker Zero," Mai said.

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "Dry."

"Dry is good," Mai replied.

Havel nodded once. "Bright will approve."

Ace leaned forward. "So what happens to Team Nine now."

Havel's expression went hard. "Rotation out. Monitoring. No further proximity."

Mai exhaled slowly.

That was the right move. It also meant the file was already costing the Foundation more people than it should for "a cabin."

Mai stood, closed her notebook, and forced her voice into the tone of a checklist rather than a narrative.

"We return," Mai said.

Ace's eyes sharpened. "Now?"

Mai shook her head. "Not now. Inconvenient later."

Ace made a low sound of frustration. "You love that."

"I love surviving," Mai replied.

Shammy's gaze stayed distant, as if she could feel the held air from kilometers away.

"If it can smear ink onto the outside," Shammy said softly, "it can smear other things."

Mai didn't let the sentence bloom. She cut it clean.

"Then we treat every surface as potentially contaminated," Mai said. "Gloves remain. No bare skin contact. No face-touching. No eating inside radius."

Ace nodded once. That was concrete. That was a fight she could win.

Havel slid the folder back toward himself.

"One more thing," he said.

Mai didn't like that sentence. "Go on."

Havel's eyes held hers.

"Bright looked at the smear," Havel said, "without reading it as text."

Mai's throat tightened.

"And?" Ace demanded.

Havel's voice stayed flat.

"He said the handwriting style matches the 2007 excerpt. Not content. Hand."

Mai felt her stomach turn over.

The cabin wasn't just offering objects and urges.

It was offering familiarity. Continuity. A sense of "this belongs to the file."

The most seductive thing of all: a pattern you could recognize.

Mai looked at Ace and Shammy.

"We do not chase the hand," Mai said quietly. "We do not build a person out of it."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It wants us to."

Mai reframed. "It benefits if we do."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "So we don't."

Mai nodded once, then turned to Havel.

"Tell Bright," Mai said, "that TRIAD requests one addition to his constraint list."

Havel's eyebrow lifted. "Which."

Mai's voice was steady.

"Any analog artifact coming out of radius is treated as contaminated," she said. "Double containment. Exterior wipe protocol. And nobody looks at smears twice."

Havel nodded once. "Done."

Mai stepped toward the door, then paused.

The itch flared again—Marker Zero. First drop. Go see what's there. It's important.

Mai stopped, didn't fight, didn't debate.

"One sentence," Mai said aloud.

Ace's gaze snapped to her.

Mai kept it clinical. "Marker Zero itch."

Then she looked down and counted the ceiling tiles.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

The itch dulled.

Ace's jaw was tight, but her voice stayed controlled. "Same."

Shammy's voice came quiet from behind. "Same."

Mai looked at them both, and she didn't feel fear so much as anger at the elegance of it.

The cabin didn't need to shout.

It didn't need to open the book.

It didn't need to play the tape.

It had learned a shortcut: put the destination in their heads, and let their own minds do the walking.

Mai opened the door.

"Inconvenient later," she said again, like a mantra she refused to make into a mantra.

Ace snorted. "Petty survival."

Shammy's eyes stayed distant. "Unrepeatable."

They left the room, and the corridor's clean air hit Mai like a lie.

Because somewhere in the woods, a clearing remained too round, a cabin remained too patient—

—and now the file had a new symptom that didn't need props at all:

A shared urge with a shared phrase, exported across teams like a contagion.

Marker Zero.

The first drop.

The place nobody was supposed to go back to.

And the simple fact that they all wanted to, just a little, was the most honest proof yet that ΔF-SRS-118 had finally found a way to touch them without ever touching their skin.—

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