

## CHAPTER 2 — APPROACH

The morning had the wrong kind of clarity.

Not the clean, crisp kind that promised a simple day. This clarity felt like a photograph that had been over-sharpened—edges too eager, shadows too defined. The sky was pale and empty, a sheet stretched tight. The air had that early-winter bite that should have carried scent—pine, wet earth, cold stone.

It didn't.

It was air with the smell turned down, like someone had taken the forest and muted one channel.

The transport vehicle was unmarked in the way Foundation vehicles were always unmarked: not secretive, just aggressively forgettable. Matte panels, no ornamentation, interior that could be cleaned with a hose if necessary. The kind of design philosophy that quietly admitted its users expected things to get messy.

Mai sat in the front passenger seat with a clipboard she wasn't writing on.

Not yet.

Her eyes tracked the road, the tree line, the way the sunlight fell through branches and made patterns that looked too intentional. She had already read the file. She had read the appendices she was allowed to read and memorized the lines she wasn't allowed to repeat. She had built half a model in her head and then deliberately left it unfinished, like stopping mid-stitch before the thread could become a knot.

That alone would have been enough to put her on edge.

Ace was in the back, boots planted, elbows on her knees, hands loosely clasped like she was waiting for the world to start lying. She wasn't restless. She wasn't vibrating with pre-fight energy. She was still, the way a blade was still in its sheath—quiet because it didn't need to move to be ready.

Her eyes were on nothing and everything: the rearview reflection of the road behind them, the window's faint distortion, the slight sway of the vehicle. She was listening for pressure the way other people listened for sound.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Which, in the context of the file, was its own kind of something.

Shammy sat beside Ace, folded into the back seat with an awkward grace that made the vehicle feel too small for her. Long legs, long arms, all that height compressed without complaint. She stared out the side window at the forest.

Shamaterazu didn't look anxious the way humans did. Her unease lived in subtler places: the way her fingers flexed once and then stilled, the way her breathing slowed as if she was trying to avoid adding motion to the air.

Normally, the world spoke to her in pressure and shift. Air had intent. Wind had personality. Rooms carried their own thermal signatures like moods.

This forest...

This forest was polite.

And Shammy didn't trust polite.

The driver, a Foundation agent whose name didn't matter and whose silence did, kept both hands on the wheel and didn't attempt conversation. He had been briefed, given the handling notes, and then told—probably by Dr. Havel—that TRIAD wasn't a team you filled the air around with pointless words.

It wasn't superstitious. It was practical.

Because words were the thing this case didn't like.

Mai broke the silence first, not because she wanted to talk, but because she needed to place a marker.

"Time to coordinates?" she asked.

"Forty-two minutes," the driver replied. His voice stayed flat, like he was reading a number from a screen and refusing to attach meaning to it.

Mai nodded and made a small note.

Ace's gaze flicked to the back window. The road behind them curved away into trees. It looked like a normal road. It looked like it had always been there.

She didn't like that either.

"Any changes on satellite?" Ace asked.

The driver hesitated, just long enough to prove that he had been thinking about the question before answering it.

"Still inconsistent," he said. "The last sweep shows terrain consistent with a structure, but it comes and goes across passes."

Ace grunted, not agreement or annoyance. Just acknowledgment. A mental notch filed.

Mai's pen hovered over the clipboard.

"Terrain consistent with a structure," she repeated softly, like tasting a phrase that didn't want to be chewed.

Shammy's head tilted.

"It's... too smooth," she said.

Mai glanced back at her.

"The air?" she asked.

Shammy nodded once.

"It's like the forest is holding its breath," she said. Then, as if realizing she had used too many words, she added more carefully: "No drafts. No drift. No push."

Ace watched Shammy's profile.

"Meaning the place isn't pulling yet," Ace said.

Shammy didn't correct her. She wasn't sure if she could, and that uncertainty—Shammy's uncertainty—was its own warning sign.

Mai's throat tightened. She forced it to relax. She could feel the model in her head trying to complete itself. It kept reaching for a shape. It kept wanting to name what was happening.

She didn't let it.

Instead, she turned a page on her clipboard that was already blank. The action was small and deliberately pointless, a ritual of motion without meaning. It gave her hands something to do that wasn't building a trap.

Outside, the forest thickened.

The road narrowed from two lanes to one, then from asphalt to packed gravel. The vehicle's tires started making a sound—crunch, crunch—that should have been comforting in its physicality.

But even the crunch felt softened, as if the sound was being swallowed before it could fully exist.

Ace leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowing.

"You hear that?" she asked.

Mai listened. The gravel. The engine. The faint rattle in the dashboard.

"Yes," Mai said cautiously. "What?"

Ace shook her head, slow.

"Nothing," she said. "That's what I'm hearing."

Mai's pen stopped. She looked up.

The forest pressed close now, the tree trunks forming a corridor. Branches arched overhead, making an accidental tunnel. It should have been darker. It should have been cooler. It should have smelled like sap and damp rot.

It didn't.

It smelled like... nothing important.

Mai's mind tried again—Is it a perception filter? Is it memetic? Is it semantic?—and she pushed it down with a silent, practiced ruthlessness.

She would not build a theory in the car.

She would not hand the case a shape it could bite.

The driver slowed as the gravel road broke into something closer to a path.

"Here," he said.

He pulled the vehicle into a small clearing that looked like it had been cut from the forest with surgical neatness. Not a campsite. Not a logging spot. Just a circle of flattened growth where the trees stood back as if giving a stage its space.

Mai stepped out first. Cold air hit her cheeks. She expected scent. She got a blank canvas.

The clearing didn't feel hostile. It felt... prepared.

Ace came out next, rolling her shoulders once as if resetting her joints. She didn't reach for her blades. They were there, but she didn't want them out yet. It wasn't that kind of case. Not yet.

Shammy unfolded from the back seat and stood, stretching once. Her hair lifted slightly in the breeze.

Then fell.

No drift. No direction.

She frowned.

Mai took two steps toward the tree line and stopped.

"Do you see it?" she asked, voice low.

Ace's gaze followed hers.

There, through the trunks, just far enough to require walking, just close enough to feel like it had been waiting, sat the structure.

A cabin.

Wooden. Old. The kind you could imagine in any forest, in any decade, in any country that had enough trees to hide something forgotten. A pitched roof. A small porch. One dark window. One door that looked too straight for the rest of it.

It was... disappointingly normal.

Which made Mai's skin prickle.

The cabin didn't look like an anomaly.

It looked like a statement.

Shammy stood behind them and didn't move, her eyes fixed on the space around the cabin rather than the cabin itself.

Mai waited a second, then asked the question that mattered more than it should have.

"Does it feel like anything?"

Ace's eyes narrowed further.

"No pressure," she said. "No pull."

Mai looked at Shammy.

Shammy's lips parted as if she was about to say something poetic. She chose something simpler, because poetry made this case hungry.

"It's quiet," she said.

Mai nodded once, and in that nod there was a decision: no assumptions, no naming, no cleverness.

They started walking.

The ground underfoot was covered in dead leaves that should have been loud. Each step should have been a crisp, satisfying crackle.

Instead, the leaves gave way with a muted sigh, like paper dampened before it could burn.

Ace noticed it too. Her gaze flicked to the ground, then back to the cabin. She didn't comment. She didn't want to contribute unnecessary words.

The porch came into clearer view. The wood looked weathered, but not rotten. The nails didn't rust the way they should have. The door handle caught a thin line of light.

Mai felt her mind itch with questions.

Why is it here? Why does it keep coming back? Why doesn't it want to be photographed?

Her pen-hand twitched, and she forced it still. If she wrote too much too soon, she'd be trying to pin the thing down.

And the file had already taught them what happened when you tried to pin it down.

They reached the bottom step of the porch.

Ace stopped. Not in hesitation—Ace didn't hesitate in the usual way—but in the deliberate pause of someone choosing where to place her weight in a room she didn't trust yet.

Mai stood beside her. Shammy stood behind, tall enough that her shadow fell over both of them.

The door was closed.

Mai could swear she saw a thin line of light at the edge of it, like it wasn't fully latched.

Ace stared at the handle for a long beat.

Then she reached out and placed her palm flat against the wood next to the frame.

Not the handle. Not the latch.

Just the wood.

Her eyes closed briefly.

She wasn't listening for sound.

She was listening for resistance.

There was none.

Ace opened her eyes again.

Mai watched her face.

Ace didn't look afraid.

She looked... annoyed.

"The door isn't lying," Ace said quietly.

Mai frowned.

"That's good," she said.

Ace's gaze stayed on the frame.

"No," she replied. "It's worse."

Mai's mouth opened, then closed again. She let Ace's statement hang, because to interrogate it would be to pull on meaning.

Shammy's voice came from behind them, low.

"It's waiting," she said.

Mai's heart gave a small, involuntary hitch.

Ace looked at the handle again.

Then, with a movement that was careful without being timid, she wrapped her fingers around it and turned.

The latch clicked.

A normal sound.

A sound that should have been reassuring.

The door opened inward.

And the darkness inside the cabin did not rush out like a threat.

It just sat there, patient and neutral, like a room that had been cleaned and left empty, ready for someone to decide what it was going to mean.

Mai didn't step over the threshold yet.

Neither did Ace.

Neither did Shammy.

They stood on the porch for a moment longer than necessary, three bodies in a line, letting their nervous systems take one last clean breath of outside air.

Because once they went in, the case file would stop being words on paper.

It would become the thing that paper had been trying, and failing, to agree on for forty years.

Mai's gaze flicked to Ace's hand still on the door.

Ace didn't look at her.

But her fingers tightened on the handle just enough to signal: Ready.

Mai nodded, once.

Shammy's hand hovered behind Ace's shoulder and then withdrew, a quiet promise that she would not stabilize what didn't want stabilizing.

Then they crossed the threshold together.—

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