

CHAPTER 3 — BRIEFING WITHOUT DRAMA

The cabin didn't smell like a cabin.

That was the first thing Mai noticed, even before her eyes finished adjusting. No wet wood. No old smoke. No animal musk in the corners. Not even the faint, stale sweetness of dust that had been sitting undisturbed for years.

It smelled like... air.

Plain air, carefully uncommitted.

The second thing was the light. It didn't fall the way it should have. The window—single, grimy, facing the clearing—should have cast a pale rectangle across the floorboards. Instead the room held light in a dull, even way, as if the darkness had agreed to share instead of fight.

Ace stepped in first, because Ace always did, and because it mattered who the space "met" first. She didn't draw her blades. She didn't even touch them. She just let her presence enter like a question that refused to become an accusation.

Mai followed, clipboard tucked against her side. She kept her pen capped. She could feel the urge to write, already—an itch in her fingers, a reflex that wanted to trap the world in lines and labels.

Shammy came last, tall enough that her head nearly brushed the low ceiling if she stood straight. She did stand straight anyway. She looked almost offended by the cabin's attempt to reduce her.

The room itself was small: one main space, a table, a chair that looked like it had been moved and then moved back into place by someone trying to remember how rooms were supposed to look. There was a shelf along one wall with a few meaningless objects—an empty tin, a cracked cup, a coil of old rope that felt too neatly coiled to be accident.

A doorway led to what might have been a back room. Another led to nothing but shadow.

Everything was ordinary. Everything was inoffensive. Everything was exactly the kind of ordinary that made the mind lean forward and whisper, *This is a trap.*

Mai forced herself to take in the room in pieces instead of as a story.

Floorboards. Grain. Nails. The slight sag near the table. The chair's legs. The angle of the shelf. The distance from door to window.

She did not allow herself to assemble those pieces into an "interpretation."

Ace walked two slow circles around the room, not like a predator, but like someone tracing the edge of a puzzle without trying to solve it. Her boots were quiet on the boards—too quiet. The sound of her steps seemed to die before it finished being sound.

Mai saw her notice it. Ace's jaw tightened just slightly.

Shammy stood near the center of the room with her eyes half-closed, not meditating—listening. Her senses weren't like Mai's, and not like Ace's either. Shammy didn't catalog or scan. She felt.

The cabin gave her nothing.

She opened her eyes and looked at Mai, then at Ace.

"It's not... moving," she said.

Mai nodded once. "No drift."

Shammy's lips pressed together. "No breath," she corrected.

Ace's gaze flicked to her. "Meaning?"

Shammy hesitated. That hesitation was rare. Shammy usually had an instinctive confidence about the air around them, about pressure and flow and the subtle physics of the world.

Here, her instincts weren't returning anything sharp enough to trust.

"It feels like a room that's been held still," she said, choosing the simplest words she could. "Not stabilized. Just... held."

Mai's grip on the clipboard tightened, then loosened. She was careful not to let her mind jump from held to by what. The file had warned them, in a way that wasn't quite a warning: don't feed it meaning.

Ace stopped by the window and stared out into the clearing. The trees were exactly where they should have been. The light was thin. The world outside looked normal enough that the cabin's internal neutrality became more suspicious by contrast.

Ace's voice was low when she spoke.

"No pressure," she said. "No pull. Nothing trying to get in my head."

Mai listened not just to the words but to what was missing in them. Ace didn't say safe. Ace never said safe unless she could measure it with a weapon.

Mai stepped to the table and looked down at its surface. The wood was scarred and worn, the kind of wear that implied years of hands and cups and knives.

No dust.

That was odd. Not impossible. Odd.

She didn't comment.

Instead she set her clipboard down gently, like placing it too hard would be a statement. She finally uncapped her pen and wrote only one line at the top of a blank page:

Baseline: interior present. perception aligned.

She stared at her own writing for a heartbeat, then added, beneath it, in smaller letters:

Avoid narrative.

Ace noticed the writing.

"You're policing yourself," Ace said.

Mai didn't look up. "Yes."

Ace didn't mock it. She understood the discipline behind it. Ace's discipline lived in muscle; Mai's lived in mind.

Shammy moved closer to the table and leaned down until her hair almost brushed the surface. She inhaled slowly, as if scent might come on the second attempt.

Nothing.

She straightened and looked toward the back doorway.

"There's another room," she said.

Mai's pen hovered above the page, then deliberately lowered without writing. "We know," she said softly. "We don't rush."

Ace turned from the window. Her eyes moved over the cabin again, as if checking whether it had shifted while she wasn't looking.

It hadn't.

That was the problem.

They stood there for a moment, three bodies in a room that pretended to be neutral, and the silence between them wasn't awkward. It was tactical.

This was the real briefing. Not the one in the fluorescent room back at Site-Δ. Not Dr. Havel's measured voice or Bright's sardonic signature.

The real briefing was them calibrating to each other in a space that wanted them to disagree.

Mai broke the silence carefully.

"Remember the file," she said, voice low, controlled. "The drift starts when we try to force consensus."

Ace nodded once. "So we don't force it."

Shammy's gaze stayed on the doorway. "And we don't stabilize it," she added. "Not unless it's breaking us."

Mai's throat tightened again at the phrasing. Breaking us. It was an honest way to put it. Too honest, almost. But the triad had long since outgrown the need to pretend.

Ace moved to the door and looked at the handle as if it had personally offended her. She didn't touch it yet.

"This place wants something," Ace said.

Mai's pen stopped. She didn't write. She didn't ask what. She only asked the question that mattered.

"Do you feel that as pressure," Mai asked, "or as... expectation?"

Ace's lips pressed together. She considered. She hated considering in front of other people, because it meant giving the world time to act while she paused.

But she did it anyway.

"Expectation," she said finally. "Like it's waiting for us to do something stupid."

Shammy let out a slow breath. "It's polite," she murmured. "That's what scares me."

Mai almost smiled at the phrasing. Almost. She didn't allow the smile to happen. Even humor could be a form of meaning here, a way of binding the room into a story.

Instead she picked up her clipboard again and flipped to the handling notes she had copied by hand—not printed, not scanned, not stored anywhere that could drift.

In her own handwriting, the words looked safer, less like a trap:

DO NOT READ RECOVERED TEXT ALOUD. DO NOT REPEAT UNKNOWN PHONEMES. DO NOT TEST LANGUAGE ON-SITE. IF PERCEPTION IS NON-SHARED, WITHDRAW OVER CLARIFY. IF BOUND VOLUME OBSERVED: DO NOT TOUCH. DO NOT PRIORITIZE.

Mai closed the clipboard like a prayer book she refused to believe in.

Ace watched her.

"You think it's semantic," Ace said.

Mai's answer came without ego.

"I think it behaves like something that punishes completion," she said.

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "Completion."

Mai nodded once. "The moment we decide what it is, we've fed it. So we don't."

Ace's gaze went to the door again. "So what do we do?"

Mai's fingers tightened around the clipboard edge. She felt the reflex to build a plan with steps and if-then branches. She tasted it. She refused it.

"We do the simplest thing," she said. "We observe without finishing the sentence."

Shammy shifted her weight, the floorboards giving a muted, reluctant sound beneath her. She looked down, then up, as if checking whether the room cared.

It didn't react.

Ace's hand finally moved toward the back door handle—and stopped just short, hovering.

She didn't glance at Mai for permission.

She glanced at Shammy.

Shammy's answer was a small nod. Not "yes." Not "go." Just a shared alignment: We do this together. No solo decisions.

Ace turned the handle.

The door opened with a dry click.

Beyond it was a smaller room, darker, tighter. The air was the same: scentless, neutral. The darkness didn't feel like threat. It felt like absence.

And the absence felt deliberate.

Mai stepped forward half a pace, stopping at the threshold.

She did not cross it yet.

Instead, she asked the only question she could trust.

"Are we all seeing the same thing?" she asked quietly.

Ace stared into the darkness. "A room," she said.

Shammy stared into it too. "A room," she echoed.

Mai nodded, and the small relief that followed was almost embarrassing. She felt it anyway.

"Then we go," she said.

They crossed together.

And somewhere in the cabin's quiet, something waited a little more attentively—not moving, not changing, just... leaning in, the way a story leans in when it senses a reader might finally be about to commit to an interpretation.

Mai kept her mouth shut.

Ace kept her blades sheathed.

Shammy kept the air unshaped.

For now, they did exactly what the file wanted them not to do:

They refused to give it a clean, finished meaning.—

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