

CHAPTER 6 — HISTORICAL EXTRACT (199X)

FOUNDATION INTERNAL / ARCHIVAL RETRIEVAL FILE: ΔF-SRS-118 “FOREST STRUCTURE / RECURRENT SITE” EXTRACT ID: 118-HX-199X-AUDIO CLASS: Legacy Material / Elevated Handling NOTE: Appendix contains audio-derived transcription. Do not replay audio in shared spaces. Do not read transcript aloud.

The oldest pages didn't look old in the romantic way. They looked old in the way that made you distrust them.

The paper had that tired stiffness, like it had been dried too many times. The ink had bled slightly at the edges, not from water but from time pressing down on it. The binder holes were torn where someone—more than once—had yanked the pages free, as if urgency had demanded the file be carried away by hand.

A Foundation archive tech had once written, in the margin, a single sentence that wasn't stamped, wasn't authorized, and therefore felt more honest than anything else in the folder:

This case hates being preserved.

Beneath the note was a retrieval label: 199X. The decade blurred because the file couldn't agree on the year. Three different dates appeared in the header across three duplicates. Two of those duplicates did not, officially, exist anymore.

But the extract remained.

Because ΔF-SRS-118 persisted in the archives the same way it persisted in the forest: stubbornly, and without respect for containment.

The first page was a simple summary block, typewritten, mercilessly plain.

FIELD REPORT SUMMARY (199X-10-??)

TEAM: Sweep Unit 04 / Site-Δ LEAD: Agent [REDACTED] OBJECTIVE: Confirm structure. Inventory previously logged equipment. Withdraw. RESULT: Structure confirmed. Equipment discrepancy. Audio anomaly recorded.

NOTABLE:

Team reports no auditory anomaly experienced in real-time.

Recorder indicates low-frequency vocalization present on tape.

Transcription attempt yields inconsistent results between listeners.

Team members report delayed distress after returning to Site-Δ.

Addendum includes phrase “we didn't hear it until we did.”

HANDLING ADVISORY (RETROACTIVE): Do not replay recorded material on-site. Do not replay in shared quarters.

Below the summary, the report became messy. Not in a “field agent with poor handwriting” way. Messy in a way that suggested the report had been edited by multiple hands—hands that did not

agree about what had happened, or about how it should be remembered.

One section had been stamped VERIFIED and then later stamped REVIEW over the first stamp, as if verification was a temporary mood rather than a state.

A separate sheet was attached with a binder clip that had left rust stains like dried blood.

EQUIPMENT INVENTORY (PARTIAL)

LOGGED PRIOR SWEEP:

Portable tape recorder (Model: [REDACTED])

3x magnetic tapes (unlabeled)

1x spare battery pack

RECOVERED 199X:

Portable tape recorder (Model: [REDACTED])

2x magnetic tapes (unlabeled)

1x spare battery pack

DISCREPANCY: One tape unaccounted for.

NOTE (HANDWRITTEN):

“We didn’t take it. We didn’t see it. It wasn’t there until we left.”

SECOND NOTE (DIFFERENT HAND):

“Stop writing that down.”

The transcript came next.

Not a clean transcript. Not a “dialogue” transcript. A transcript that looked like the Foundation had tried to drag sound into language, and language had refused to cooperate.

At the top, a bold warning:

TRANSCRIPTION IS APPROXIMATE. LISTENERS DO NOT AGREE ON CONTENT. DO NOT READ ALOUD.

Someone had underlined DO NOT READ ALOUD three times.

Then, under that, a line that had been added later in pen, the ink darker and newer:

Yes, even if you’re “just checking.”

APPENDIX A — AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION (199X)

SOURCE: Tape 2/3 (unlabeled) DURATION: 00:03:12 NOTES:

Low-frequency artifact present throughout.

Speech-like modulation detected between 00:01:04–00:02:41.

Team members report no memory of hearing any voice during recording.

00:00:00 — [ambient] footsteps on wood (muted); one chair movement (single scrape); breathing (2 sources). 00:00:12 — [ambient] door latch; wind (faint, inconsistent). 00:00:29 — [unidentified] low-frequency tone begins (sub-audible to some listeners). 00:00:44 — Agent A: “—clear. Nothing here.” 00:00:51 — Agent B: “Copy.” 00:00:59 — [ambient] silence (non-uniform); paper-like flutter (unconfirmed). 00:01:04 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:01:08 — Agent A: “Did you hear—” 00:01:09 — Agent B: “No.” 00:01:14 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:01:19 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:01:24 — Agent A: “We’re not—” 00:01:25 — Agent B: “—stop.” 00:01:33 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:01:39 — [ambient] breathing increases; one cough. 00:01:45 — Agent A: “We didn’t—” 00:01:46 — Agent B: “Don’t.” 00:01:52 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:02:01 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:02:10 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:02:18 — Agent A: “We should leave.” 00:02:19 — Agent B: “Agree.” 00:02:26 — [speech-like] (unintelligible) 00:02:33 — [ambient] footsteps; door latch; exterior sound dampened. 00:02:41 — [speech-like] ends abruptly. 00:02:55 — [ambient] vehicle engine; one voice laughs once, short, involuntary. 00:03:12 — end.

Below the transcript were three columns titled LISTENER INTERPRETATIONS.

The columns were mostly blank.

Not because nobody had tried to fill them.

Because the entries had been crossed out—hard—over and over, until the paper was torn. The few surviving fragments were worse for being fragmentary.

In the left margin, faintly visible under the scratches, was one partial word:

...book...

In the center column, half a line survived, the ink pressed deep:

...don’t finish—

And in the right column, a phrase that had been circled, then boxed, then boxed again, as if the person writing it had wanted to trap it:

...we didn’t hear it until we did...

Under the columns, the report continued with the kind of cold calm that only came after someone had already panicked.

POST-OP NOTES (199X)

All personnel interviewed separately. All personnel deny hearing any third voice during operation. All personnel report increased distress upon replay of tape in debrief room. One personnel (Agent A) vomited during replay. One personnel (Agent B) requested immediate file closure and transfer.

OBSERVATION: Hearing the audio does not appear to require proximity to site. Hearing the audio may create secondary association with the site. Secondary association may produce intrusive ideation (“completion urge”).

RECOMMENDATION (RETROACTIVE): Do not replay audio in shared spaces. Do not replay audio in

sleeping quarters. Do not replay audio at all unless isolation protocols are in place.

At the bottom of the final sheet, someone—later, much later—had added an official stamp:

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And beneath that, typed cleanly, as if trying to make the words behave:

The audio transcript is included here because it has reappeared in the file after deletion attempts. This extract may be considered “persistent.” Staff are reminded that persistence is not permission.

Then, in pen, one last line—small, almost embarrassed:

If you’re reading this, the file found you again.

When Dr. Havel had handed the current team the reopened folder, he hadn’t said much about the 199X audio.

He hadn’t needed to.

Mai had seen the warning stamps and felt her throat tighten.

Ace had read “speech-like modulation” and narrowed her eyes, as if offended by the idea of a voice that couldn’t commit to being a voice.

Shammy had read “wind (faint, inconsistent)” and frowned, because inconsistency in air was always a message.

Now, standing inside the cabin with the world too quiet around them, those old pages didn’t feel like history.

They felt like a hand reaching forward through time, offering a temptation that the Foundation had already learned to fear:

listen. interpret. complete.

Mai didn’t say the thought out loud.

Ace didn’t ask for the tape.

Shammy didn’t try to feel the sound in the air.

Outside, the trees remained politely still.

Inside, the cabin remained neutral.

And somewhere in the file, a missing tape stayed missing—unaccounted for, unspoken for, like a loose tooth the world refused to stop worrying with its tongue.—

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