

Chapter 1 — Absence of Signal

The report did not contain enough information.

That was the first thing Mai noticed.

Not that it was incomplete. Not that something had been redacted or lost in transmission. The structure was intact. Clean. Properly formatted. Every expected field present, every timestamp aligned, every signature verified.

It was... correct.

And that was the problem.

Mai read it a second time without moving her eyes.

Then a third.

She didn't scroll. Didn't annotate. Didn't even adjust her posture. Just sat there, perfectly still, letting the absence settle instead of trying to fill it.

Across the room, Ace shifted her weight from one foot to the other, the faint hum of her blades registering just below conscious hearing. Not impatience. Not yet. Just readiness without a target.

"How many?" Ace asked.

"Four," Mai replied.

"Status?"

Mai let the silence stretch half a second longer than necessary.

"Unresolved."

Ace's head tilted slightly. "That's not a status."

"No," Mai agreed. "It isn't."

That was the second problem.

There were no distress calls.

No escalation flags.

No automated containment triggers.

Four agents had walked into a space and then—nothing.

No termination signatures. No environmental collapse. No anomaly spike. Not even the quiet after-effect most anomalous spaces left behind, that faint distortion in recorded data that said something had passed through.

This—

This was clean.

Too clean.

Mai finally moved, sliding the report aside and pulling up the raw telemetry beneath it.

Still nothing.

Not empty. Not corrupted.

Just—

Flat.

Ace exhaled slowly. “So we go in.”

It wasn’t a question.

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, she opened a secondary channel.

“Dr. Gears,” she said.

The response came almost instantly.

“Yes.”

No greeting. No delay. Just presence.

Mai angled the display slightly, though she knew he didn’t need it.

“Reviewing Site ■■■, Level 3 anomaly report,” she said. “Four agents. No signal loss. No exit.”

Pause.

Not hesitation. Processing.

“Confirmed,” Gears replied. “Data integrity verified. No known interference.”

“No anomaly classification?”

“None registered.”

Ace let out a quiet breath that wasn’t quite a laugh.

“That’s convenient.”

Gears did not respond to that.

Mai leaned back slightly.

“Define the absence,” she said.

Another pause.

Longer this time.

“Absence of signal is not equivalent to absence of event,” Gears said finally. “However, without deviation, no classification can be assigned.”

Mai nodded once.

That tracked.

It also meant—

“We’re blind,” Ace said.

“Yes,” Mai replied.

The word settled into the room without resistance.

Blind.

Not in the sense of lacking information.

In the sense that the information present refused to differentiate.

Ace pushed off the wall, stepping closer.

“Then we stop pretending we’re not,” she said. “We go in, we see it, we deal with it.”

Mai looked at her.

Not to assess. Not to argue.

Just to align.

“You don’t have a target,” Mai said.

Ace’s expression didn’t change.

“I’ll find one.”

“That’s the problem,” Mai replied quietly.

A flicker of something passed through Ace’s posture—brief, contained.

Not disagreement.

Recognition.

Before it could settle further, the air shifted.

Subtle.

Barely measurable.

But present.

Shammy had moved.

She hadn't said anything yet. Hadn't needed to. She stood near the far wall, taller than both of them by enough that the room seemed to orient around her without quite realizing it. The faintest distortion moved through the air near her shoulders, like heat that didn't belong to temperature.

She was looking at the report.

Not reading it.

Listening to it.

"That's not empty," she said.

Her voice was quiet. Not soft. Just... unforced.

Ace glanced over. "There's nothing there."

Shammy shook her head slightly.

"No," she said. "There's no movement."

Mai's eyes narrowed just a fraction.

That was different.

Empty meant absence.

No movement meant—

"Stasis," Mai said.

Shammy tilted her head, considering.

"Not exactly," she replied. "Stasis implies control."

Another slight shift in the air. Pressure, but not enough to register as discomfort. Just enough to be noticed.

"This is..." She paused.

Searching, but not for words.

For alignment.

"...unreleased."

The word landed oddly.

Ace frowned. "That's not better."

"It's more accurate," Shammy said.

Mai leaned forward again, pulling the telemetry back into focus.

Unreleased.

A system that hadn't progressed.

A state that hadn't transitioned.

Something that—

"Didn't complete," Mai said.

Gears' voice cut in again, unprompted.

"Hypothesis consistent with data," he said. "No event progression detected."

Ace crossed her arms.

"So we're walking into something that started and then just... stopped."

"Yes," Mai said.

"And the four agents?"

Mai didn't answer.

Because there wasn't one.

Not yet.

The silence stretched.

Then—

A different voice slipped into the channel, lighter, almost amused.

"Well," said Dr. Jack Bright, "if four trained operatives vanish without a trace and your instruments say nothing happened, there are really only two options."

Ace didn't bother looking up. "We're listening."

"One," Bright continued, "your instruments are lying."

"Unlikely," Gears said immediately.

"Two," Bright said, ignoring him, "you're asking the wrong question."

Mai's gaze shifted slightly.

"Clarify."

Bright hummed, as if considering whether he should.

Then:

"You're looking for what it is," he said. "Try asking what it isn't allowed to do."

The channel went quiet again.

Gears did not interrupt this time.

Mai let the words settle.

What it isn't allowed to do.

Not structure.

Constraint.

She stood.

That was enough.

"We go in," she said.

Ace was already moving.

No hesitation now.

Direction restored, even if incomplete.

Shammy followed last, not rushing, not lagging—just maintaining that same impossible sense of equilibrium, like the space around her adjusted to keep pace.

As they moved toward the exit, Mai paused just long enough to glance back at the screen.

Four agents.

No signal.

No anomaly.

No exit.

She closed the file.

"Log entry," she said calmly. "Field investigation initiated."

A beat.

Then, quieter:

"Assume no external feedback."

Gears responded.

"Confirmed."

Bright, faintly, almost to himself:

"Try not to make it worse."

Ace didn't slow.

"Not planning to," she said.

No one corrected her.

The absence remained.

It waited.

And this time—

It would be observed.

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