

CHAPTER 13 — THE DEAD-DROP WALK

They chose the extraction point the way you choose a route out of a burning building:

Not the shortest. Not the cleanest. The one that didn't feel like a story.

The Foundation had pre-marked three locations in the surrounding forest—quiet, boring coordinates where a team could hand off material without turning the act into a ritual. The original plan was simple: comms out, gear out, report in.

Now comms were poison, and “simple” was a luxury they didn't get to touch.

Mai stood at the edge of their tarp, clipboard tucked away, notebook sealed twice, eyes on the tree line.

“We do a physical handoff,” she said. “No transmissions. No replay. No openings. No debate.”

Ace nodded, already gloved, already irritated by the fact that the enemy here wasn't something she could cut.

Shammy looked toward the cabin through the trees and didn't blink.

“It's watching our choices,” Shammy murmured.

Mai didn't answer that sentence. She didn't want it to become a shared declaration. Instead she translated it into something procedural—something the cabin couldn't “enjoy.”

“It correlates with attention,” Mai said. “So we keep attention distributed.”

Ace's mouth twitched. “Meaning: don't stare.”

“Meaning: don't worship,” Mai said quietly.

Ace grunted, approval disguised as annoyance.

They packed only what they had to.

The quarantined hard case with the recorder inside stayed shut. It sat on bare earth like a dead animal nobody wanted to acknowledge. Mai didn't touch it. Ace did, because Ace was the one with the hands built for unpleasant things.

She lifted it with both palms, careful not to tilt it, careful not to treat it like something sacred. It was just weight.

Mai carried the sealed note and nothing else. Not in a pocket where it could rub against other things. Not in a bag where it could become part of a pile. She held it in her hand like a simple object that deserved no myth.

Shammy carried nothing visible. She didn't need to. She carried space—or at least she tried, even when space here refused to behave.

They stepped out from under the tarp.

And the first thing that hit them was wind.

Not much—just a faint, directioned movement across their faces, like the forest exhaled once as they left the clearing’s perfect circle.

Shammy’s shoulders dropped a fraction.

“Outside the cut,” she said softly.

Mai nodded. The contrast was sharp enough to make her teeth itch. Inside the clearing: held air, muted sound, curated stillness. Outside: an ordinary forest doing ordinary forest things.

That shouldn’t have comforted her.

It did, and she hated that it did.

Ace walked point, hard case held close to her body. Not defensive. Just practical. Mai walked slightly behind and to the right. Shammy behind and left.

Triangle. Not a line. Not a story of “leader, follower, tail.”

They moved.

The forest was dense, mixed pine and birch, the ground layered with damp leaves and needles. Here, their steps finally sounded right—crackle, soft snap, the honest noise of weight on old growth.

For ten minutes, nothing happened.

That was almost worse.

Because the mind, once it had tasted the cabin’s curated quiet, kept expecting the world to do something clever.

Mai forced herself to focus on simple anchors: the smell of pine, the ache in her calves, the cold bite in her nostrils.

Ace kept her eyes forward but her senses wide. She wasn’t hunting now. She was guarding them from habits.

Shammy watched the air around the hard case.

The air moved. It did not cling. It did not flatten. It behaved like air.

Which meant the clearing wasn’t a general effect.

It was a boundary.

They reached the first marker: a pale strip of plastic tied around a branch at shoulder height, dull enough to be invisible unless you knew where to look. Beneath it, a shallow depression in the ground where the Foundation had instructed teams to leave handoffs.

Mai stopped.

Ace set the hard case down carefully, not in the depression yet—just on the ground beside it.

Shammy didn’t step closer. Her posture changed, subtly, like she could feel a pressure line on the

map that the others couldn't.

Mai looked down at the depression. The soil inside it was slightly smoother than the surrounding forest floor.

Too smooth.

Not freshly disturbed. Just... unnaturally neat.

Mai's mouth went dry.

Ace saw her hesitation.

"Don't," Ace said quietly, and the word carried more weight than it should have. Not an order. A reminder.

Mai nodded once. "I'm not."

She kept her eyes on the depression anyway, long enough to confirm the fact without letting it become fascination.

Then she forced herself to look away.

She looked at Ace. She looked at Shammy.

"Shared?" Mai asked.

Ace glanced at the depression. "Yes."

Shammy nodded. "Yes."

Mai exhaled. If the "neatness" was shared, it wasn't only her mind trying to make patterns.

That didn't make it safer.

It made it real.

Mai held up the sealed note. "We place it and leave. No linger."

Ace nodded and lifted the hard case.

The moment Ace moved it toward the depression, Shammy's head snapped up.

Mai felt it too—a sudden, faint tug in the air. Not from wind. Not from weather.

Attention.

Ace froze mid-motion, hard case hovering.

Mai's voice came out low, flat—no panic.

"Stop," she said.

Ace stopped. The case stayed suspended in her hands.

Shammy swallowed, her throat working like she was forcing down an instinct she didn't want.

"The clearing," Shammy whispered.

Mai didn't turn around.

She didn't need to.

Ace's eyes flicked past Mai's shoulder, toward the direction they'd come from.

Mai saw the change in Ace's face first, that tiny tightening around the eyes.

Mai turned her head slowly, controlled, and looked back through the trees.

The cabin was visible.

It shouldn't have been.

They had walked long enough that the structure, positioned deep within the clearing, should have been swallowed by distance and trunks.

But there it was—between the trees like a photograph pinned to the forest. Same silhouette, same porch, same single window.

Too close.

Not "moved closer" in the cinematic way—no footsteps, no snapping branches, no obvious slide.

Just... present in a line-of-sight that shouldn't exist.

Mai's pulse kicked once, hard.

Ace's voice was a quiet growl. "It's following."

Mai forced herself not to say yes. Agreement would make it a shared story.

Instead she said the only safe thing.

"Line-of-sight anomaly," Mai corrected. "Noted. No interpretation."

Ace's jaw flexed. "Fine. It's cheating."

Mai didn't correct that either. It was too human, too sharp, and oddly helpful: thinking of it as cheating kept it from becoming myth.

Shammy's eyes stayed on the cabin, and her voice had a thin strain.

"The air is trying to fold," she said.

Mai didn't ask how. She didn't ask why. Those were questions that tried to complete the sentence.

She made a decision instead.

"Plan change," Mai said quietly. "We do not place anything in that depression."

Ace blinked once. "But it's the drop."

Mai's eyes didn't leave the cabin. "It's also a shape. And it's too neat."

Ace looked down at the depression again, then at the cabin. Her instincts fought for a second—procedures versus danger.

Then she nodded.

"Alternative?" Ace asked.

Mai lifted the sealed note slightly. "We hand-carry to Marker Two. We don't leave objects unattended in a curated space."

Shammy's voice came tight. "And we don't stand here long enough to make this place... comfortable."

Mai nodded once.

Ace picked up the hard case again.

They moved away from the depression without placing anything.

As they stepped back into the forest's ordinary mess, the cabin remained visible through the trees for another ten seconds.

Then it wasn't.

Not faded. Not hidden.

Just... absent from the angle again, like the forest snapped back into being a forest.

Mai swallowed hard.

They walked faster now, but not in a run. Running would have been a reaction. Reactions were food. They kept the triangle. They kept their breathing controlled. They kept their mouths shut.

After five minutes, Ace spoke, voice low.

"I don't like that it can do that," she said.

Mai answered with discipline, not comfort.

"Neither do I," she said. "So we adjust. No dead-drops in 'neat' spaces. No assumptions about distance."

Shammy's fingers flexed once.

"It doesn't need to move," she murmured. "It just needs to... be seen."

Mai felt the sentence trying to become a theory in her mind and slammed it shut.

They reached Marker Two: a fallen log with a carved notch that only mattered to people trained to care. Beside it, a hollow under tangled roots—messy, organic, imperfect.

Not neat.

Mai felt her shoulders loosen by a millimeter.

Ace set the hard case down beside the roots.

Mai held the sealed note over the hollow and paused.

A quiet check, the one they'd learned to survive by.

"Same?" Mai asked.

Ace's gaze swept the hollow. "Yes."

Shammy nodded. "Yes."

Mai placed the sealed note inside the hollow. Ace placed the hard case beside it, not on top—nothing stacked, nothing symbolic.

Mai covered both with a small layer of leaf litter—just enough to hide, not enough to look like a deliberate burial.

No ritual.

No "sealing."

Just concealment.

The moment the leaves settled, the wind shifted—real wind, ordinary, directioned. It didn't feel like attention. It felt like weather.

Shammy exhaled, long and shaky.

"That's better," she said.

Ace stood and rolled her shoulders once. "So the first drop was a trap."

Mai didn't respond to the word trap. She didn't want it to become the official narrative in their heads.

"It was... an opportunity," Mai said, carefully neutral.

Ace snorted. "Opportunity to get us killed."

Mai looked at her. "Opportunity to get us to participate."

Ace's expression tightened. Then she nodded, slow.

"Yeah," Ace said. "That."

Mai glanced back through the trees—not toward the clearing, not toward where the cabin had been seen improperly, but just... back.

Nothing.

Only forest.

But she could still feel the cabin in her nervous system like a foreign rhythm.

They stood there for ten seconds more—enough to confirm nothing immediately changed, not enough to invite the world to get clever.

Then Mai spoke, voice quiet, clean.

“Now we leave the handoff and do not return,” she said. “We don’t check it. We don’t look back.”

Ace nodded.

Shammy’s eyes stayed on the air for a heartbeat longer, then she turned away.

They walked.

And as they moved, Mai felt something brush the edge of her awareness—so faint she almost dismissed it as the mind’s own hunger.

A flicker-image: a thick, dark book sitting on that first depression, waiting like it had always been there.

Mai did not turn around.

She did not confirm.

She did not share it with the others.

She swallowed the thought whole and kept walking, because she finally understood the cruelty of ΔF-SRS-118 in a clean, practical way:

It didn’t need to manifest monsters.

It only needed to offer a single, perfect thread...

...and wait for the human need to pull.—

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