

## CHAPTER 22 — THE OTHER CABIN

Bright didn't meet them in a room this time.

He met them at a stairwell.

Concrete. Cold. Echo. The kind of place where sound didn't feel safe, and that was the point. Bright had stopped trusting comfort the way Mai had—maybe he'd always distrusted it, but now he was weaponizing the distrust.

He stood on the landing with a paper folder in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, looking like a man who had slept exactly zero hours out of spite.

"Okay," Bright said as they approached. "I've got good news and bad news."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Give me the bad."

Bright sipped his coffee like he was tasting someone else's suffering.

"The pen-scratch? We had a different team hear it too."

Mai's throat tightened. "Shared."

Bright nodded. "Shared."

Shammy's gaze went distant. "It's exporting cues."

Bright's eyebrows lifted slightly, approving the phrasing. "Yes. And now the good news: you didn't turn."

Ace snorted. "Is that good news now? We're celebrating not being idiots?"

Bright grinned, sharp. "That's exactly what I'm celebrating."

Mai kept her voice flat. "What's the new variable?"

Bright didn't answer immediately. He opened the folder and slid out a single page. He didn't hand it to Mai. He held it at an angle where she could read without taking possession.

Mai scanned the header.

INCIDENT REPORT — SITE-Δ PERIMETER / OUTSKIRT STRUCTURE

Mai's eyes narrowed.

"Outskirt structure?" she said.

Bright's grin faded a fraction.

"Yep," he said. "Because the universe hates us and also has a sense of comedic timing."

Ace leaned in slightly. "Explain."

Bright flipped the page to the bullet list. His finger tapped once, not ceremonially—just to anchor the eye.

OBS: Secondary wooden structure located approximately 1.2 km from ΔF-SRS-118 clearing.

APPEARANCE: Cabin-like, single story, no porch. DISCOVERY: Found by perimeter sweep team during expanded exclusion enforcement. ANOMALIES:

Interior scent: old paper/leather.

Audio cue: faint pen-scratch (intermittent).

No visible objects present; no obvious entry signs. ACTION: Site-Δ containment expanded. Structure flagged "Do Not Enter."

Mai felt cold crawl up her spine.

"A second cabin," she said quietly.

Bright nodded once. "Or a 'second' cabin."

Ace's jaw tightened. "That's not good."

Bright's eyes flicked to her. "Correct."

Shammy's voice was low. "It's creating decoys."

Bright's mouth twitched. "Or mirrors."

Mai didn't like that word either. Mirrors implied intention. But she couldn't deny the practical risk: a second structure meant a second point of temptation, a second place where someone could do something stupid.

Mai asked the safe question.

"Has anyone entered," she said.

Bright's response was immediate. "No."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "Nobody?"

Bright lifted two fingers. "Nobody. Because the sweep team was—shockingly—competent. They heard the pen-scratch, they smelled the paper, and they backed away like they'd just seen a live grenade."

Mai exhaled slowly. "Good."

Bright's expression tightened. "But the existence of the structure is a problem."

Mai nodded. "Because it expands the radius."

"Because it expands the narrative," Bright corrected, then caught himself and rolled his eyes. "Sorry. Because it increases potential hooks."

Ace crossed her arms. "So what's the plan."

Bright's grin came back, thin and mean.

"Phase II gets a new rule," he said. "No exploration of newly discovered structures. Ever. You don't 'check it out.' You don't 'clear it.' You don't 'compare it.' You treat it as contaminated geometry."

Mai nodded once. "Agreed."

Shammy's eyes were distant, and when she spoke her voice had that quiet strain again.

"It's trying to give us choices," she said.

Mai felt her stomach tighten.

Choices were worse than threats. Choices made you feel responsible. Choices made you justify. Justification made story.

Bright pointed at Shammy as if she'd just hit the bullseye.

"Exactly," he said. "Choices. Two cabins. Two drops. Two ways to be curious. It's trying to branch your behavior."

Ace's jaw flexed. "So we pick none."

Mai nodded. "We refuse the branch."

Bright lifted his coffee cup slightly, mock-toast. "That's why you're my favorite headache."

Mai didn't react. She focused on the practical.

"Why tell us now," Mai asked, "instead of handling it as perimeter enforcement."

Bright's eyes held hers.

"Because it's not just perimeter anymore," he said. "It's a cognitive environment. And you three are the only ones treating it that way."

Mai felt the truth of that settle in her chest like weight.

Ace leaned forward slightly. "What do you want us to do."

Bright's grin disappeared completely.

"I want you to do something you're going to hate," he said.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

Bright looked at Mai, then at Shammy, then back at Ace.

"I want you to create a controlled pattern," he said.

Mai's blood went colder.

"No," Mai said immediately, flat. "Patterns are rituals."

Bright held up a hand. "I know. Listen."

Mai didn't soften. "Speak."

Bright exhaled.

“We have a problem,” he said. “The phenomenon is learning how to hook without props. Smells. Cues. Urges. If we keep only refusing, it learns what refusal looks like. It starts modeling that.”

Mai’s jaw tightened.

Ace’s voice was low. “So you want us to bait it.”

Bright nodded once. “Not bait. Test.”

Mai hated the word test too, but it was less poetic than bait.

“What kind of test,” Mai asked.

Bright tapped the page again.

“Pen-scratch,” he said. “We need to know if it’s purely auditory suggestion or if it correlates with an actual physical artifact being created nearby. Because if it’s creating paper outside the cabin, we have a propagation vector we can’t ignore.”

Mai felt the itch in her own skull jump at the word paper.

She didn’t say it. She grounded by counting the steps in the stairwell—eight, nine, ten—until the itch dulled.

Then she asked the safe question.

“How do we test without participating,” Mai said.

Bright’s grin came back, grim.

“By using something it can’t recruit,” he said.

Ace’s brow lifted. “Like what.”

Bright’s voice lowered.

“A dummy artifact,” he said. “Pre-marked, sealed, and meaningless. A decoy we create. We place it in a controlled location outside the radius, then we do a perimeter walk that passes near it—without touching, without reading, without speaking—and we see if the pen-scratch correlates with any change in the dummy.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “You want us to bring paper into the environment.”

Bright nodded. “Outside radius. Controlled. And the decoy contains no text, no meaning. Just blank stock, sealed in double opaque, with external markings only.”

Mai felt her spine tighten. This was exactly the kind of thing that could become the start of a ritual if handled wrong.

But it was also—annoyingly—sound logic.

Ace’s jaw flexed. “And if it changes anyway.”

Bright’s smile turned thin. “Then we have proof it can ‘write’ through containment without needing

our curiosity. Which means we adjust containment protocols again and expand the exclusion.”

Shammy’s voice was soft. “And if it doesn’t change.”

Bright shrugged. “Then the pen-scratch is purely cognitive cue. Which is... also bad, but it tells us where to focus.”

Mai stared at the incident page again.

Two cabins. Pen scratches. Smears. Urges.

A phenomenon building a second stage and asking them to choose which play to attend.

Mai looked at Ace.

Ace looked back, eyes hard. “I hate that he’s right.”

Mai looked at Shammy.

Shammy nodded once, slow. “Controlled noise.”

Mai exhaled slowly.

“All right,” Mai said. “We can do this, but we do it on our terms.”

Bright’s eyebrows lifted. “Talk.”

Mai’s voice stayed flat, procedural.

“1) Decoy artifact contains no text, no symbols, no recognizable materials associated with paper lore,” Mai said. “2) It is sealed triple-layered, exterior wiped, and handled with gloves at all times. 3) We do not place it inside the held-air boundary. 4) We do not return to it immediately. No check equals no reward.”

Ace nodded. “And if any of us feel Marker Zero itch during the pass, we call it and ground.”

Shammy added quietly. “And we do not look for the scratch. If we hear it, we keep walking.”

Bright’s grin widened, and for a second he looked almost pleased in a way that wasn’t cynical.

“Perfect,” he said. “You just built an experiment that refuses to be an experiment.”

Mai didn’t like that sentence, but she let it pass.

Bright tucked the report back into the folder.

“One more thing,” he said, voice lower now.

Mai’s chest tightened. “What.”

Bright’s gaze sharpened.

“The second cabin? It’s not on any satellite imagery older than three days,” he said. “It’s... new.”

Ace swore under her breath.

Shammy's eyes narrowed like the air itself had insulted her.

Mai swallowed and kept her voice neutral.

"Then we treat 'new structures' as active hazard," Mai said. "No approach. No curiosity."

Bright nodded. "Good."

He took another sip of coffee and looked at them over the rim.

"Welcome to Phase II," he said. "Where the monster is a suggestion and the battle is whether your brain wants to be helpful."

Mai stared at the concrete stairwell wall and felt the itch rise again—two cabins, two drops, one missing tape, one book, one hand, one scratch...

She killed the list.

Grounding. Immediately.

She counted the bolts in the stairwell railing.

One. Two. Three.

Then she looked back at Bright.

"We'll do your controlled decoy," Mai said. "Inconveniently."

Bright grinned. "I wouldn't expect anything else."

Ace rolled her shoulders like she was preparing for a fight she couldn't punch.

Shammy's posture steadied, like a stabilizer bracing itself.

And somewhere out in the woods, two cabin-shaped holes in reality waited patiently—one old stage, one new stage—

—both offering the same thing without saying it aloud:

Come choose. Come look. Come finish.—

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