

CHAPTER 24 — THE CHECK YOU DON'T MAKE

They did not sleep well.

Not because of nightmares.

Because the mind kept trying to schedule curiosity.

Mai caught herself twice drifting toward the thought—first thing in the morning, just a quick verification—and each time she killed it the same way: she rolled out of bed and did something aggressively mundane. Cold water on wrists. Count the tiles. Name the screws in the sink trap. Anything that broke the shape of next step.

Ace went for a run that made the gym staff nervous.

Shammy sat cross-legged on the floor and breathed until the air felt like air again.

No one mentioned the decoy.

That mattered.

Bright didn't call them in immediately either.

That mattered more.

Waiting without reinforcement was the hardest part. Waiting without being told to wait felt like standing on a trapdoor that might open if you shifted your weight wrong.

By mid-afternoon, Mai's hands stopped twitching when she thought about the root tangle.

By evening, the itch dulled into something like background radiation—present, measurable, survivable.

Only then did Bright appear, leaning against the same stairwell wall like he'd never left.

"Okay," he said. "We checked."

Mai felt the spike hit anyway.

Not relief.

Not fear.

Impact.

She didn't move. She didn't lean in. She didn't ask the question her body wanted to ask.

She waited.

Bright noticed. His grin flickered—approval, sharp and brief.

"Archive Integrity went," Bright continued. "Not you. Not your rhythm."

Ace's jaw flexed. "And?"

Bright lifted a finger. "Rules first. One: they approached from a different vector than yours. Two: no audio. Three: no reading. Four: they did not open anything."

Mai nodded once.

"Results," Mai said.

Bright's expression changed. The humor drained out, leaving something colder and more precise.

"The decoy was still sealed," he said. "Triple containment intact. No breaches. No obvious manipulation."

Mai felt a fraction of the pressure ease.

Then Bright continued.

"The exterior bag," he said, "had a new mark."

Ace's shoulders tightened. "Ink."

Bright nodded. "Ink."

Mai closed her eyes for exactly one second, then opened them again.

"Describe without adjectives," Mai said.

Bright complied.

"Single linear stroke," he said. "Approximately eight centimeters. No curvature. No recognizable character. Pressure uneven."

Shammy's voice was quiet. "A start."

Bright didn't answer that framing.

"The hard case mass changed again," Bright said. "By twelve grams. Single reading. No repeats."

Ace swore under her breath.

Mai felt her pulse slow instead of spike. That scared her more than panic.

"It didn't need us to look," Mai said.

Bright nodded. "Correct."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "So the bait worked."

Mai corrected gently but firmly. "The constraint worked. The phenomenon acted without reward."

Bright smiled thinly. "Which means it's not dependent on curiosity alone."

Ace's voice was low. "It's testing persistence."

Mai nodded. "And independence from observer behavior."

Bright folded his arms.

"Here's the part you're not going to like," he said. "The pen-scratch happened again."

Mai didn't flinch.

"Where," Mai asked.

Bright held her gaze.

"Inside Archive Integrity," he said. "Two hours after retrieval. Different floor. Different room."

The silence that followed wasn't dramatic.

It was surgical.

Ace broke it first. "So it can decouple location."

Bright nodded. "Seems so."

Shammy's voice was steady but tight. "Does it correlate with the decoy?"

Bright shrugged. "Timing aligns. Causation unproven."

Mai closed her notebook without writing anything.

Writing now would be reactive.

"Then Phase II just became Phase III," Mai said quietly.

Bright's eyebrows lifted. "You're naming phases now?"

Mai shook her head. "No. I'm discarding them."

Ace blinked. "What."

Mai looked at both of them.

"Phases imply progression," Mai said. "Progression implies completion. Completion is what it wants."

Bright stared at her for a long moment.

Then he laughed—not humorously, but with something like genuine admiration.

"You know," he said, "I've been doing this job a long time. Most people want to understand anomalies."

Mai's voice stayed flat. "Understanding is a form of intimacy."

Bright's grin sharpened. "Exactly."

Shammy spoke softly. "So what do we do now."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She listened to the stairwell. The real echo. The ordinary sound of shoes somewhere above them. The honest noise of a building that wasn't trying to teach anyone a lesson.

Then she spoke.

"We stop treating the phenomenon as site-bound," Mai said. "We stop treating objects as primary vectors. We stop treating curiosity as the only risk."

Ace nodded slowly. "We treat suggestion as the anomaly."

Mai met her eyes. "Yes."

Bright tilted his head. "And the cabin?"

Mai's mouth tightened.

"The cabin becomes background," Mai said. "We don't starve it. We demote it."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "It won't like that."

Mai didn't correct the intent-word this time.

"I don't care," Mai said.

Bright studied her like she'd just changed the rules of a game he thought he understood.

"So," Bright said slowly, "you're saying the bait wasn't about seeing if it would act."

Mai nodded. "It was about seeing if we could not."

Ace's jaw flexed. "And we passed."

Mai exhaled.

"We didn't fail," Mai said. "That's not the same thing."

Bright's grin returned, feral and impressed.

"Okay," he said. "Then here's your next constraint."

Mai waited.

"No more decoys," Bright said. "No more tests. No more controlled noise."

Ace frowned. "Then what."

Bright's eyes gleamed.

"Now," he said, "we watch people."

The word landed heavy.

Shammy's voice was low. "Internal monitoring."

Bright nodded. "Not surveillance. Behavioral drift. Micro-patterns. The stuff anomalies love because

humans hate admitting it exists.”

Mai’s chest tightened.

“Who,” Mai asked.

Bright didn’t hesitate.

“Everyone who’s been within two degrees of separation of ΔF-SRS-118,” he said. “Including us.”

Ace swore quietly.

Shammy closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them.

Mai felt the weight of it settle—not fear, not dread, but the ugly clarity of scale.

This wasn’t about a cabin anymore.

It was about whether a suggestion could propagate through a system without anyone noticing until it was everywhere.

Mai nodded once.

“Fine,” Mai said. “But we set the rules.”

Bright smiled. “Of course you do.”

Mai turned away from the stairwell and started walking—not ceremonially, not dramatically.

Ace and Shammy followed.

And as they moved, Mai felt something strange and unsettling:

The itch was quieter.

Not gone.

But quieter.

As if the file had noticed something too.

That the blank decision—the refusal to check, the refusal to complete—had changed the shape of the game.

Not ended it.

Just... forced it to adapt.

And that was worse.

Because now the phenomenon wasn’t asking Will you look?

It was asking something far more dangerous:

Who will you trust when someone else does?—

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