

## CHAPTER 25 — DRIFT AUDIT

They called it an “audit” because the Foundation loved words that pretended a problem was paperwork.

Bright called it a drift audit because he was trying—barely—to keep it from becoming a witch hunt.

Mai hated the concept anyway.

Not because she disagreed with monitoring.

Because monitoring was a story engine.

People watched differently when they knew they were watched. They performed. They hid. They over-corrected. And over-correction was its own kind of ritual.

Still, the file had already proven it could travel without feet.

So they built the audit the way they built everything now: with constraints that made it ugly, boring, and hard to mythologize.

Bright assembled a small team under Archive Integrity. No psychologists with clipboards. No big interviews. No “tell me how you feel.” Just factual check-ins, micro-log changes, and a single question asked once per shift:

Did you experience an urge?

Not why. Not what it meant. Just whether it existed.

And the answer options were crude by design: YES / NO / UNSURE.

Mai insisted on one more rule.

“Anytime someone answers YES,” she told Bright, “they do one grounding action immediately and the supervisor signs off. No follow-up questions in the moment.”

Bright had stared at her like she was insane.

Then he’d nodded.

Because she was right.

They started with a tight circle: everyone who had been to the clearing, to the dead-drops, or to isolation storage. Then expanded one ring: people who handled reports, who moved containers, who supervised rotations, who walked the corridors near the isolation door.

Two degrees of separation.

It sounded neat.

It wasn’t.

Within twelve hours, the first YES came from a technician who’d never been outside Site-Δ.

A storage clerk. Mid-thirties. Quiet, competent, forgettable in the way the Foundation preferred.

His supervisor filed the report without commentary.

Mai read it later.

SUBJECT: T-119 (isolation logistics) EXPOSURE: indirect (transport paperwork, corridor adjacency)  
URGE: "check the old drop" (verbatim) RESPONSE: symptom callout, grounding (counted ceiling tiles), rotation out

Mai stared at the word verbatim and felt her teeth ache.

Language copy. Phrase fidelity.

It wasn't random human curiosity anymore.

It was a replicating snippet.

Ace read over her shoulder and said, low, "It's a meme."

Mai didn't correct her. She didn't have a better word that wasn't more dangerous.

Shammy stood behind them, eyes distant.

"It's a hook," she said. "A hook that doesn't need bait."

Mai nodded once.

"Bright?" Mai said.

Bright, sitting across the table with coffee that was more habit than pleasure, looked up.

"Yeah," he said. "We got three more."

Mai's stomach dropped.

"How fast," Mai asked.

Bright didn't embellish.

"Twenty hours," he said. "All indirect. All never been to the forest."

Ace's jaw tightened. "So it's already on-site."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "It's already in the system."

Mai felt something in her chest go cold and heavy.

If the urge could replicate through paperwork adjacency and corridor proximity, then the cabin wasn't a location. It was an informational hazard.

A thing that could travel with procedures.

That was... manageable.

It was also horrifying.

Because it meant the threat wasn't claws.

It was a policy document that wanted to be completed.

Mai opened her notebook and wrote the ugliest sentence she could force:

Phrase fidelity suggests propagation through exposure chain.

Then she stopped writing.

No spirals.

Bright leaned forward. "Okay. Here's what we do next."

Mai held up a hand. "No."

Bright blinked. "No?"

Mai's voice stayed flat. "You're about to propose an intervention."

Bright's mouth twitched. "Yes."

Mai shook her head. "Intervention becomes ritual. Ritual becomes feed."

Ace leaned in, eyes hard. "So we do nothing while it spreads?"

Mai met her gaze. "We do something that isn't a ritual."

Shammy's voice was quiet. "We reduce contact."

Mai nodded. "Exactly."

Bright's eyebrows lifted. "Okay. How."

Mai's answer came clean.

"Quarantine the concept, not the building," Mai said. "We collapse the exposure chain."

Ace frowned. "Meaning."

Mai listed it like a checklist:

"1) Isolation corridor becomes sealed zone. No casual foot traffic. 2) Paperwork gets mirrored outward—no staff walks paperwork inward. 3) Anything associated with the file is moved off-site under silent, opaque protocol. 4) Staff rotation is hard reset: anyone who has had 'YES' is removed from all proximity and paperwork. Not as punishment. As prevention."

Bright stared at her for a long moment.

Then he nodded slowly.

"That's... ugly," he said.

Mai's mouth twitched. "Good."

Ace's voice was low. "And what about the cabin."

Mai didn't hesitate.

"The cabin becomes irrelevant," she said. "For now."

Bright's grin flashed, sharp and impressed.

"That's the first sentence today that didn't feed it," he said.

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "It will try to drag us back."

Mai nodded. "It will. But we stop making the cabin the center of the world."

Ace's jaw flexed. "I still want to burn it down."

Mai looked at her. "That's a story. We don't do stories."

Ace's nostrils flared. Then she exhaled.

"Fine," Ace said. "We do boring bureaucracy warfare."

Bright laughed quietly. "Welcome to my life."

They implemented the collapse overnight.

Barriers went up. Routes changed. People were rerouted like water around a spill. Isolation storage was shifted deeper into silent handling protocols, and certain pages in certain folders stopped moving through certain hands.

The audit continued.

The YES count stopped climbing.

Not immediately.

But it slowed.

Enough to prove something.

Not that they'd beaten it.

But that exposure chain mattered.

That proximity, even indirect, was a vector.

And that meant they had one tool that wasn't a blade, wasn't a gun, wasn't even a theory:

They could change the architecture of contact.

Still.

On the third day, a new report landed on Mai's desk.

Not from a technician.

Not from a clerk.

From a senior supervisor who had been nowhere near the file.

The single question, answered with a trembling box tick:

YES.

Mai read the attached note, and her blood went cold.

Two sentences. Only two.

URGE: "Marker Zero." ADDITIONAL: "It feels like relief."

Mai stared at the words until they stopped trying to become a story in her head.

Relief.

Not curiosity.

Not completion itch.

Relief.

The file had shifted its hook again.

From go check to go soothe.

Mai looked up at Ace and Shammy.

Ace's face was hard.

Shammy's eyes were distant.

Mai closed the folder and spoke quietly.

"It's evolving," she said.

Ace's voice was low. "It learned empathy."

Mai didn't like the word. But she couldn't deny the direction.

"It learned what humans do when they're tired," Mai said. "They seek relief."

Bright, behind them, exhaled slowly.

"Okay," he said. "Now the stakes really are hard."

Mai didn't respond with bravado.

She responded with the only thing that had kept them alive so far.

"Then we get uglier," Mai said.

And somewhere in the system, a suggestion waited—no longer whispering like a temptation, but like

comfort.

Which was worse.

Because people could resist a dare.

People struggled to resist something that promised to make the pressure stop.—

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