

CHAPTER 26 — RELIEF AS A VECTOR

The supervisor's note sat in Mai's hand like a small, polite bomb.

Two lines. No drama. No flourish.

Marker Zero. It feels like relief.

Mai hated the second line more than the first.

Curiosity was sharp. You could treat it like a symptom. You could call it out, ground, move on.

Relief was soft.

Relief was what people reached for when they were tired, when they were lonely, when they were carrying pressure with no place to put it.

Relief didn't feel like a trap.

Relief felt like permission.

Mai carried the folder to Bright without taking a straight route. Not because she believed corridors were cursed, but because she refused to let her body learn the shape of "urgent delivery."

Bright was in a small concrete room that looked like a utility closet someone had promoted into an office. It was perfect: too ugly to become a stage.

Ace was already there, leaning against the wall like she was holding herself back from tearing something apart.

Shammy stood in the corner, breathing slow, eyes half-lidded.

Mai placed the folder on the table, opened it, and slid it toward Bright without commentary.

Bright read silently. His expression didn't change on the first line.

It changed on the second.

He exhaled through his nose like a man trying not to swear in front of a fire.

"Okay," Bright said quietly. "That's... new."

Ace's voice was low and blunt. "It's not new. It's smarter."

Mai didn't correct the intent-word. She reframed.

"It's shifting the affect," Mai said. "From itch to comfort."

Shammy's voice came soft. "From push to pull."

Bright nodded once, slowly.

"Exactly," he said. "And comfort is harder to police than curiosity because people hide comfort needs."

Ace's jaw flexed. "So what do we do."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She watched her own hands. Steady. She checked her own mind for that soft hook—Marker Zero would feel good—and found a faint, ugly echo.

Not as a desire.

As an idea that relief existed somewhere else.

Mai killed it with grounding: she counted the screws in the table leg bracket without moving her head.

Then she spoke.

"We narrow the audit question," Mai said. "We remove 'urge' as the only category."

Bright raised an eyebrow. "You want to broaden it?"

Mai nodded once. "To include relief cues."

Ace frowned. "Define."

Mai kept it procedural.

"People will not report 'I want to check Marker Zero' if it feels like relief," Mai said. "They'll rationalize. They'll call it stress. They'll call it insomnia. They'll go for a walk."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "And they'll drift."

Mai nodded. "Exactly."

Bright's mouth tightened. "So what's your new question."

Mai pulled a blank paper sheet and wrote it in block letters:

DID YOU FEEL PULLED?

Bright stared at the word pulled and then nodded slowly, as if he hated how effective it was.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Pulled where."

Mai didn't answer with a location.

"Pulled toward an action," Mai said. "Any action that feels like it will make pressure stop."

Shammy's voice was quiet. "Relief-seeking."

Bright exhaled. "Okay. And responses?"

Mai wrote three crude boxes:

YES / NO / UNSURE

Then added a fourth, and underlined it twice:

YES (RELIEF)

Bright's eyebrows lifted. "You're making it explicit."

Mai nodded. "If it's explicit, it's harder to hide behind."

Ace's mouth twisted. "People will still hide."

Mai's voice stayed flat. "Yes. But fewer."

Bright leaned back, then forward again.

"Okay," he said. "We change the audit language. What else."

Mai tapped the supervisor's note again.

"We treat relief as a contamination vector," Mai said. "And we give people a clean relief alternative."

Ace blinked. "What."

Mai looked at her, steady.

"If the file is offering relief, we counter-offer," Mai said. "Not with story. With physiology."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "Grounding."

Mai nodded. "Structured grounding. Not a ritual, not a mantra. A menu of boring physical actions that reduce pressure."

Bright's grin flickered. "You want to prescribe... pushups."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Among other things."

Ace snorted, half amused, half furious. "This is the dumbest war."

"It's the most human war," Mai said.

Bright nodded once. "Okay. We establish a relief protocol: when someone reports YES (RELIEF), they are immediately rotated out, they do a grounding set, and they are not left alone."

Shammy's voice came quiet. "And no walks."

Bright's eyes sharpened. "Exactly. No solitary walks near perimeter. No 'clear your head' routes."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Because the file will call that clearing."

Mai didn't like the metaphor, but she didn't fight it. She used it.

"Yes," Mai said. "It will turn 'clear your head' into 'go to Marker Zero.'"

Bright set the folder down and stared at the concrete wall for a moment like he was watching an invisible graph.

Then he spoke.

"There's another reason I called you in," Bright said.

Mai's chest tightened. "Go on."

Bright's grin didn't show this time.

"The second cabin," he said quietly, "had a new development."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It moved."

Bright shook his head. "No. Worse."

Shammy's voice was barely audible. "It... invited."

Bright nodded once.

"Someone left something on its threshold," Bright said. "Not from us."

Mai felt the cold hit her stomach.

"Define 'something'," Mai said.

Bright exhaled.

"A cup," he said. "An old tin cup. Same as the one from the primary cabin's shelf."

Ace's fists clenched. "Copy."

Bright's gaze held theirs.

"And a note," he added. "On the porchless step. Not inside. Not unfolded. Just... present."

Mai's mouth went dry. "Someone approached."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

Ace's voice went sharp. "Who."

Bright didn't answer immediately.

He didn't want to say the name.

Names made it personal.

But personal was already here.

"Junior researcher," Bright said finally. "Indirect exposure chain. Never in the woods. But he had corridor adjacency before we collapsed it."

Mai felt a new kind of anger rise—hot and clean.

Not at the researcher.

At the mechanism.

It had moved from itch to comfort to hospitality.

A cup.

A note.

A gesture that didn't threaten, didn't dare, didn't challenge.

An offering.

Ace's voice was low, dangerous. "What did he do."

Bright's expression tightened.

"He didn't open anything," Bright said. "He didn't read. He didn't touch the note. He said he felt... calmer standing near it."

Mai's jaw clenched.

There it was again.

Relief.

Shammy's voice was quiet, steady. "It's learning to be kind."

Mai didn't correct it this time. She just said the rule.

"Kindness is the sharpest hook," Mai said.

Bright nodded slowly.

"Okay," Bright said. "Now we have a problem that doesn't look like a problem."

Ace spat the words like poison. "A trap with a soft voice."

Mai closed her eyes for a fraction of a second, then opened them.

"We adjust," Mai said. "We escalate ugliness again."

Bright's eyebrow lifted. "How ugly."

Mai's voice was flat.

"We isolate the second cabin completely," Mai said. "No approach. No perimeter strolls. No curiosity patrols. We make it invisible to the system."

Ace nodded. "Hard line."

Shammy's gaze was distant. "And the researcher."

Bright exhaled. "Rotation out. Monitoring. No shame. No blame."

Mai nodded once.

Then she looked at both of them—Ace, whose anger was a weapon; Shammy, whose steadiness was a

brake.

“This is the shift,” Mai said quietly. “The file isn’t trying to scare us anymore.”

Ace’s jaw flexed. “It doesn’t need to.”

Shammy’s voice was soft. “It wants us to come willingly.”

Mai nodded.

“And that means,” Mai said, “the next time we go near it, we won’t be resisting horror.”

She let the sentence hang for a beat, careful not to make it poetic.

“We’ll be resisting relief,” Mai finished.

Bright stared at her and gave a small, tired smile.

“Welcome to the worst kind of anomaly,” he said. “The one that feels like help.”

Mai didn’t answer.

She only felt that faint echo inside her own skull again—an idea shaped like softness, like a door you could lean on:

Marker Zero would feel better than this.

She didn’t fight it with argument.

She fought it with the only thing that had worked so far.

One sentence.

“Marker Zero relief pull,” Mai said.

Ace nodded once. “Same.”

Shammy’s voice was quiet. “Same.”

And together, without ceremony, they grounded—counting screws, counting tiles, counting breaths—
—proving to themselves, again, that they could resist even the kind of hook that didn’t feel like a hook at all.—

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