

CHAPTER 4 — THE CABIN IN DAYLIGHT

The back room was smaller than the first, but it wasn't the size that bothered Mai.

It was the fact that the room seemed to agree with them too easily.

A narrow bedframe sat against the far wall—bare wood, no mattress, no blankets—like a gesture toward the idea of sleeping rather than the act. A wardrobe stood beside it, door slightly ajar. The floorboards here were darker, as if they had held moisture at some point and then decided to let it go.

Nothing screamed anomaly.

Nothing demanded fear.

And that was exactly why Mai's pulse ticked a fraction faster.

Ace entered first, because she always did, but in the back room her movement was even slower. She wasn't creeping. She wasn't trying to be quiet. She was acting like loudness might be interpreted as intent.

Shammy followed, ducking slightly. Her shoulders almost brushed the doorframe. The room looked like it wanted to remind her she didn't belong here by scale alone.

Mai stood in the threshold for a heartbeat, cataloging the geometry without letting it become a story. She noted the distance from doorway to wardrobe, from wardrobe to bedframe, the way the window—if there was one—was absent. No outside reference. Just interior.

She stepped in.

The air felt the same. Scentless. Neutral. Held.

Ace crossed to the wardrobe and stopped with her fingers an inch from the wood. She didn't touch it. She waited.

Mai didn't have to ask why. The file had burned the caution into them: don't initiate contact out of habit.

Ace glanced back at Mai.

"You want eyes on this?" Ace asked.

Mai nodded once. "Only eyes."

Shammy's gaze stayed on the corners—where spiderwebs should have been. Where dust should have gathered. Where the evidence of time usually pooled.

The corners were clean.

Not scrubbed. Not new.

Clean like nothing had ever decided to settle there.

Ace hooked two fingers around the wardrobe door edge and pulled it open a few inches.

The wood made a sound—soft, almost reluctant. A normal sound made wrong by being too small.

Inside was empty.

No clothes. No boxes. No forgotten items.

But the interior wood was scuffed at one point, mid-height, like something heavy had been slid in and out repeatedly.

Mai's eyes locked onto the scuffing. Her mind reached automatically for a label—storage behavior; repeated placement; object class unknown—

She cut the thought off before it could finish.

Ace looked over her shoulder.

"You see it?" Ace asked.

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Shammy leaned in slightly. "It's like a scar," she murmured.

Mai's pen-hand twitched, but she didn't write. Not yet. Not about this.

Ace closed the wardrobe again, gently, as if shutting it too hard would be a kind of statement the cabin could take personally.

They moved back into the front room.

The daylight coming through the window still didn't behave like daylight. It didn't shift much. The angle seemed almost fixed. Not frozen, but... unbothered by time.

Mai made herself look at the simple things. The table. The chair. The shelf. The empty tin. The cracked cup.

Normal debris. Normal objects. Normal in the way a stage set was normal—arranged to suggest a life that had never truly occurred.

Shammy walked to the window and stood there, looking out.

"The clearing's too round," she said quietly.

Ace's gaze followed. She didn't respond immediately. She was feeling for something that wouldn't present itself as words.

"Yeah," Ace said finally. "It's like a cut."

Mai stepped closer to the window and studied the tree line. The circle of flattened growth was indeed too neat, as if the forest had stepped back politely to give the cabin room to exist.

Mai's mind tried to slot it into ritual logic. Sacred space. Clearing. Threshold.

Her stomach tightened.

She did not let the thought become a sentence.

Instead, she did something deliberate: she looked away from the clearing.

She looked down.

The floorboards near the table had shallow scrape marks, the kind made by chair legs being dragged, by footsteps repeating the same path.

But the pattern was inconsistent. It didn't look like natural wear. It looked like someone had tried to mimic natural wear and gotten the rhythm wrong.

Mai crouched and ran her fingers along the scrape marks without touching the wood. Hovering, feeling the air above it.

The scrape marks formed a subtle arc.

Like a circle that didn't complete itself.

Ace watched her.

"Does it mean something?" Ace asked.

Mai's first instinct was to say yes. Her second instinct was to say maybe. Her third—harder, cleaner—was to answer in the only way that didn't feed the cabin.

"It could," Mai said. "We don't decide yet."

Ace's jaw tightened, but she didn't argue. She was learning the discipline too. It was an odd thing to watch: Ace, who usually treated hesitation like an enemy, choosing restraint as a tactic.

Shammy shifted behind them, her gaze scanning the room again.

"I don't like the objects," she said.

Mai looked up. "Why?"

Shammy's eyes narrowed, as if she was trying to explain a sensation that didn't belong in human language.

"They're... too willing," she said. "They're like props waiting for someone to pick them up so they can become important."

Ace snorted once, almost a laugh, but it died on her tongue. "So we don't pick them up."

Mai rose slowly.

"Exactly," she said.

She moved to the shelf. On it sat the cracked cup, the empty tin, and something else she hadn't noticed before—a thin strip of paper, folded twice, tucked behind the tin like it was hiding.

Mai's body froze for a fraction of a second.

Not fear. Reflex.

Paper meant text.

Text meant voice.

Voice meant the handling note.

She didn't reach for it. She didn't even lean closer. She held her distance and stared.

Ace noticed her stillness instantly.

"What?" Ace asked.

Mai lifted a finger and pointed. Slowly, carefully, like pointing could be dangerous if done too sharply.

"There," she said.

Ace's gaze followed. Her eyes narrowed. She shifted her position to get a better angle on the shelf without closing the distance too fast.

Shammy leaned slightly too, staying back.

The strip of paper remained tucked behind the tin.

They all looked at it.

Mai felt her mind trying to sprint: Is it the markings? Is it the phrase? Is it a lure? Is it there for us?

She swallowed hard, forcing the questions down into her chest where they couldn't become sound.

Ace spoke first, voice low.

"It's new," Ace said.

Mai blinked. "New?"

Ace nodded toward the shelf, eyes sharp. "It wasn't there when we came in."

Mai's stomach dropped.

She didn't argue, because she didn't trust her own memory enough to contradict Ace—and contradicting was exactly the kind of forced consensus the file had warned about.

Instead she asked the only safe question.

"Are we all seeing it?" Mai asked.

Ace didn't hesitate. "Yes."

Shammy nodded once. "Yes."

Mai exhaled slowly. Relief and dread braided together in her lungs.

Shared perception. For now.

Mai kept her hands behind her back, away from the shelf as if her fingers might betray her.

"We don't touch it," she said.

Ace's eyes stayed on the paper.

"And we don't read it," Ace added, because Ace had read the file too, and because the file's fear had become their fear by proximity.

Shammy's voice was quieter.

"And we don't talk about what it might say," she said.

Mai's throat tightened again.

"Correct," Mai whispered.

They stood there, three of them, staring at a folded strip of paper that could have been nothing, could have been trash, could have been a trap.

The cabin didn't move.

The cabin didn't react.

It simply held the paper in place like a suggestion waiting to become a decision.

Mai's mind kept pushing: Photograph it. Document it. Catalog it. Confirm it.

She refused.

Instead, she stepped back from the shelf—one step, then another—pulling her body away from temptation like it was a physical force.

Ace watched her retreat and followed, slow, never taking her eyes off the shelf.

Shammy stayed between them and the doorway, tall, quiet, a presence that felt for the first time like a barrier rather than a stabilizer.

Mai's heart beat a little too fast.

"Daylight pass," she said, voice controlled. "We do the baseline sweep. No object engagement."

Ace nodded. "Baseline only."

Shammy's gaze flicked once to the shelf, then away, as if even looking too long might count as feeding it.

They moved through the cabin again, mapping with their bodies rather than their words. Step, glance, breath. A slow inventory of a space that wanted inventory to become obsession.

Outside, the clearing remained too round. The forest remained too polite. The world remained suspiciously normal.

Inside, the folded paper sat behind the tin, quiet and patient.

Not calling.

Not whispering.

Just waiting for someone to do the most human thing in the world:

Finish the sentence.—

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