

CHAPTER 9 — THE BOOK (FIRST GLIMPSE)

They didn't leave the site.

Not yet.

Leaving would have been clean. It would have been the kind of decision you could put in a report and have it behave. Baseline complete. Minor anomaly observed. Withdrawn without incident.

But the cabin had already shown them something that didn't want to behave: a shared observation that left no residue.

If they left now, the file would reopen again later with a worse kind of discoverable—civilians, cameras, curiosity packaged as content.

So they stayed, and they did it the only way that didn't feel like feeding the place:

They kept it boring.

They walked the perimeter of the clearing again, slower this time. Ace watched the tree line like it owed her money. Mai watched the ground for any sign the circle had been cut by human hands. Shammy watched the air and looked increasingly insulted by its refusal to move.

Nothing changed.

The cabin sat where it sat.

The porch creaked the same rehearsed sigh when they stepped onto it.

The door opened like a well-practiced gesture.

Inside, the room looked like the room.

Table. Chair. Shelf. Tin. Cracked cup.

No folded paper.

Mai let her gaze skim across objects without letting it hook. That was the trick. You couldn't stare at things here. Staring was a form of devotion. A slow sacrifice of attention.

She held her clipboard, but didn't write. Not yet.

Ace moved through the space with the same slow discipline she'd used all morning—no touching, no tapping, no pointless tests. Her hands remained visible, away from temptation.

Shammy stood near the center again, eyes half-lidded, the air still stubbornly flat around her.

Mai breathed once, steady.

Then it happened.

Not as a dramatic entrance. Not as a jump-scare.

As a peripheral certainty.

Mai's eyes were on the table—on the scars in the wood, the lack of dust—and for the briefest moment she saw something else there. Something that didn't belong to the room's usual props.

A thick book.

Not a paperback. Not a journal. Not the kind of notebook the Foundation printed by the thousand.

A bound volume.

Dark. Heavy-looking. The spine thick enough to suggest it didn't open easily. The cover had texture—too much texture—like skin that had forgotten what it used to be.

Mai froze so hard her muscles complained.

She didn't move her head.

She didn't lean in.

She didn't step closer.

She simply let her eyes remain where they were and tried to confirm whether she had actually seen it, or whether her mind—after reading the 2007 excerpt, after seeing the folded paper—was now inventing the shape it feared.

The book sat on the table.

It was there.

It was not subtle.

It was not shy.

It was just... placed.

Mai's mouth went dry. She felt the urge to do the most human thing on earth: name it.

She refused.

Her voice came out low, careful, almost flat—no drama, no invitation.

"Ace," she said.

Ace's attention snapped to her, then to where Mai's gaze rested. "What?"

Mai did not point sharply. She lifted her chin a fraction, a minimal cue.

"Do you see... that?" Mai asked.

Ace followed the line of her eyes to the table.

Ace's expression didn't change at first. Then her brow furrowed, the smallest crease of confusion.

Mai's stomach tightened.

Ace didn't see it.

Shammy's voice came from behind them. "See what?"

Mai forced her tongue to behave.

"A book," she said.

The word book tasted wrong in the cabin's air, like a shape that wanted teeth.

Ace stared at the table again. Her eyes narrowed, scanning the surface like it had insulted her. Her jaw tightened.

"I see a table," Ace said.

Mai's pulse kicked once, hard.

Shammy took a slow step forward, gaze sliding over the table. "No book," she said quietly.

Mai didn't argue.

She didn't say It's right there.

She didn't say Are you blind?

She didn't say Look harder.

That was forced consensus. That was tugging the thread.

Instead she did the only thing that didn't feed the case: she checked herself.

Mai blinked once, slow, and shifted her focus—deliberately—not like someone trying to "prove" something, but like someone resetting her own eyes.

She looked at the table again.

The book was gone.

Not moved.

Not slid to the edge.

Not hidden under something.

Gone, like it had never existed.

The table held only what it had held before: scars, clean air, the suggestion of domesticity without life.

Mai stood perfectly still for three full breaths.

She felt, in that stillness, the cabin's quiet patience.

It wasn't laughing.

It didn't need to.

It had done something worse than a prank: it had created a moment where Mai's perception diverged, then repaired itself before anyone could agree on what had happened.

Ace's voice came low, watching Mai more than the table now.

"You saw it," Ace said.

It wasn't a question. It was an acknowledgment.

Mai's throat worked once. She nodded, a small motion.

"Yes," she said.

Shammy's eyes narrowed, not skeptical—alert. "And now you don't."

Mai nodded again.

Shammy exhaled slowly. "It's testing edges."

Ace's gaze flicked to the shelf, then to the floor, then to the doorway—as if expecting the cabin to shift into violence now that it had shown them a different kind of teeth.

Nothing happened.

No pressure spike.

No wind.

No sound.

Just the same polite neutrality that made everything feel curated.

Mai felt the itch—stronger than before—to search. To look under the table, behind the shelf, inside the back room wardrobe. To confirm where the book had gone. To prove she hadn't hallucinated.

Her body wanted to move.

She didn't let it.

She heard her own voice, calm and controlled, speak the new boundary aloud so it could exist outside her head as shared discipline.

"We do not participate," Mai said.

Ace's jaw flexed once, like she was chewing frustration instead of words. "Agreed."

Shammy nodded, slow. "No thread pulling."

Mai's fingers tightened around her clipboard until the plastic edge bit her skin. She welcomed the pain. It was physical. It was real. It grounded her in something the cabin hadn't curated.

She uncapped her pen and wrote exactly one line, using words that refused to complete the story:

Observer (Mai) perceived bound volume on table; others did not; perception no longer present on re-check. No search initiated.

She capped the pen immediately, like leaving it open would invite more.

Ace stepped closer to Mai—not to the table—and lowered her voice.

“You’re not wrong,” Ace said. “This place is doing it on purpose.”

Mai didn’t flinch at the certainty. She didn’t accept it either.

“I’m not assigning intent,” Mai replied, and her tone was tight with effort. “I’m assigning boundary.”

Ace held her gaze for a beat, then nodded once, like she respected the discipline even if it irritated her instincts.

Shammy’s eyes were still on the table, but she didn’t move toward it.

“It wants us to make it real,” Shammy said softly.

Mai felt the word real hook at her chest.

“Then we don’t,” Mai said.

They stayed in the cabin for another ten minutes. Not because they expected more, but because leaving immediately would be a reaction. Reactions were also food.

They moved through the rooms with the same baseline discipline. No touching. No investigating. No performing curiosity.

The cabin offered nothing else.

No paper.

No book.

No light in the window.

Just the ordinary set dressing of a place that refused to become fully ordinary.

When they finally stepped back onto the porch, the boards creaked their rehearsed little sigh.

Ace paused at the top step and glanced back over her shoulder.

For a fraction of a second, Mai thought she saw it again—dark weight on the table, the suggestion of a spine—

She blinked, and the thought was gone.

Mai didn’t speak.

She didn’t even admit it to herself.

She had learned the first non-rule.

Now she was learning the second, harsher one:

Sometimes the cabin didn’t need to show you the thing again.

Sometimes it only needed to teach your mind how to reach for it on its own.—

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