

CHAPTER 18 — RETURN WITHOUT RHYTHM

They didn't leave immediately.

They didn't "gear up" in a neat sequence, either.

Mai made sure of that.

She sent Ace to fetch the non-audio kit first—gloves, opaque bags, secondary cases, light sources with no voice features, old-school compasses, paper maps. Then she had Ace stop and do something pointless: count the bolts on a wall-mounted cabinet. Not because counting bolts mattered, but because it broke the shape of "prep = ritual."

Shammy was told to walk two corridors down and back again—no reason, no destination. Just movement without meaning.

Mai herself did nothing useful for three minutes. She stood at a water fountain, watched the drip pattern, and refused to turn it into a symbol.

When it felt inconvenient enough to make even her itch, Mai nodded once.

"Now," she said.

Ace looked almost offended. "Finally."

Mai didn't apologize. "Inconvenience is the point."

They left Site-Δ with no comms powered on, no microphones, no body cams—nothing that could "argue" with reality later. Their only recording was Mai's handwriting and the shape of their discipline.

They drove toward the coordinates, but Mai forced a route change halfway—an unnecessary detour down a service road that added fifteen minutes and made Ace swear under her breath.

Swearing was fine. Swearing was human noise. Swearing wasn't myth.

They parked not at the obvious approach point, but at a secondary pull-off that forced them to enter the forest from a different angle. Then, after ten minutes of walking, Mai turned them again—sideways—so they weren't moving in a straight line toward the clearing.

Ace grumbled, but she obeyed.

Shammy stayed quiet, posture angled like she was keeping their triangle intact.

The forest behaved like a forest.

Wind moved.

Birds called with imperfect timing.

Leaves crackled honestly underfoot.

For almost an hour, nothing tried to be clever.

Mai didn't trust it.

When the air began to flatten—subtle, gradual, like a room being gently pressurized—Shammy’s head lifted.

“Boundary,” Shammy murmured.

Mai nodded once. She could feel it too: the scent thinning, the sound becoming selective, the world turning down its own volume as if preparing for an audience.

The clearing appeared between the trees, and it was exactly as round as it had been.

Too round.

Too deliberate.

They stopped at the treeline and didn’t step into it.

That pause was not hesitation.

It was protocol.

Mai looked at Ace. “Symptom check.”

Ace’s jaw flexed. “Anger. No curiosity.”

Mai nodded, then looked at Shammy.

Shammy’s eyes were on the clearing. “Held air. No drift.”

Mai checked herself. The itch was there, faint—more like a phantom sensation than a desire.

“I want to define,” Mai admitted, one sentence only. Then she turned away from the clearing and walked to a nearby rock and counted the lichen patches on it until the itch dulled.

When she returned, Ace and Shammy had not moved.

Good.

They entered the clearing without ceremony.

Not in a line, not in a perfect triangle. Mai made a small, deliberate disruption: she had Shammy take point for the first ten meters. Then Ace. Then Mai. No leader role repeated twice in the same pattern.

The cabin sat where it had sat before.

Same porch. Same window. Same door.

No smoke.

No movement.

No hint of the domestic window light.

They approached—slow, eyes distributed, no staring.

Mai felt the held air press against her skin like a polite hand.

They reached the porch steps.

The boards creaked.

Not randomly.

Identically.

Ace's mouth tightened. She didn't comment. Commenting would give the repetition a crown.

They climbed the steps. Ace did not touch the railing. Mai did not touch the doorframe. Shammy did not touch anything at all.

Mai spoke quietly, flat.

"Entry refusal window," she said.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Meaning we don't go in."

Mai nodded. "Not yet."

Ace's jaw flexed. She didn't like it. But she understood: forcing entry at every visit became a ritual, and rituals were feeding patterns.

They stood on the porch for three minutes doing nothing.

It was excruciatingly boring.

It was also effective.

On the third minute, Shammy's head turned slightly, as if hearing something that wasn't sound.

Mai watched her. "Symptom?"

Shammy's voice was soft. "Pressure. Not on skin. On attention."

Ace muttered, "Like being nudged."

Mai nodded once. "Then we refuse."

They stepped off the porch and walked the perimeter of the cabin instead—slowly, eyes on seams, foundation stones, any sign of human work.

The cabin's back wall was plain wood. The window in the rear room was grimy. The ground around it was too neat, leaves arranged like someone had combed them.

Mai didn't linger.

Ace's gaze flicked to the rear room window and held for half a second too long. Then she forced her eyes away.

"Curious," Ace said, one sentence only.

Mai nodded. "Ground."

Ace immediately squatted and began counting nail heads along the cabin's exterior boards, lips still, eyes narrow.

Shammy watched her do it, and a faint tension left her shoulders—like seeing the protocol applied was itself stabilizing.

Mai waited until Ace's breath changed—until the itch passed.

Then Mai spoke.

"Now entry," she said.

Ace stood and nodded.

They returned to the door.

Mai didn't open it.

Ace did, gloved, controlled, no flourish.

The latch clicked with that rehearsed normalcy again.

They entered.

The cabin's air was the same curated neutrality—no scent, no dust, no life.

The table sat in its place.

The chair.

The shelf with the tin and the cracked cup.

Mai's eyes slid over the table without hooking.

She did not look for a book.

She did not look for a paper strip.

She refused to "search" even with her gaze.

Ace stood near the door, scanning.

Shammy stood in the center, eyes half-lidded, listening to nothing.

For two minutes, nothing happened.

Then—so quietly it was almost polite—the chair moved.

Not dragged. Not scraped.

It shifted a centimeter on the floor.

No sound.

Just a changed position, as if someone had nudged it gently while holding their breath.

Mai's lungs stopped for a beat.

Ace's gaze snapped to the chair.

Shammy's eyes opened fully.

Mai forced her voice into procedural flatness.

"Shared?" she asked.

Ace's answer was immediate. "Yes."

Shammy nodded. "Yes."

Mai did not stare at the chair.

She did not step toward it.

She did not "check behind it."

She spoke the boundary out loud, because boundaries were the only thing that lived longer than fear.

"We do not correct," Mai said. "We do not reset objects to 'normal.'"

Ace's jaw flexed. Her instincts wanted to move it back, to assert dominance, to deny the cabin's tiny victory.

She didn't.

Shammy's voice was low. "It wants us to fix."

Mai nodded. "Yes. That's participation."

Ace's hands clenched once, then relaxed.

Mai wrote a single neutral line on her paper—not a story, just a fact:

Chair position shifted (shared). No engagement. No reset.

Then she stopped writing.

Because writing too much was also a ritual.

The cabin sat in silence.

It had crossed another line—now it wasn't only placing objects. It was moving them without noise, without pressure, without drama.

It was trying to provoke the smallest human reflex:

Put it back.

Mai refused.

Ace refused.

Shammy refused.

For a long moment, nothing else happened.

Then, like a patient host offering tea, the cabin gave them one more thing—

A scent.

Faint, sudden, impossibly specific.

Old paper.

Leather.

Ink.

Mai felt her throat tighten.

She didn't look for the source.

She didn't name it.

She didn't let her eyes run to the table.

Instead, she said one sentence—symptom callout only.

"I smell paper," Mai said.

Ace's voice came hard. "Same."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "Same."

Shared.

Which meant it was no longer only in Mai's head.

Mai felt the itch spike in all three of them at once, like a muscle twitching in sync.

The cabin wasn't showing them the object.

It was showing them the hint.

And the hint was worse.

Mai did the only thing she could do.

She broke the moment.

"Exit," Mai said, flat.

Ace didn't argue.

Shammy didn't hesitate.

They walked out—no rush, no sprint, no dramatic retreat—just a clean refusal to sit in the scent long

enough for it to become narrative.

They stepped onto the porch.

The air outside was held too, but less intimate.

Mai exhaled slowly.

Ace's jaw was tight. "It's getting braver."

Mai didn't correct the intent-word. She was too busy keeping her own mind from completing the obvious sentence.

Shammy's voice was quiet. "It wants us to open."

Mai stared at the trees and forced herself to see bark and leaves and sky.

"Then we don't," Mai said.

They walked off the porch and stopped at the edge of the clearing again, letting the cabin remain in sight without letting it become the center.

Mai didn't feel triumphant.

She felt... clean.

They had seen a chair move.

They had smelled what the cabin wanted them to think about.

And they had left without fixing, without searching, without completing.

Phase II wasn't about collecting evidence.

It was about proving, again and again, that they could refuse the smallest human reflexes.

Because in the end, ΔF-SRS-118 didn't need gore.

It didn't need demons.

It didn't need a voice.

It only needed a disciplined person to slip once, in a moment that felt harmless:

Just move the chair back. Just look under the table. Just open the cover.

Mai stared at the clearing's perfect circle and felt the itch settle back into a low simmer.

Not gone.

Never gone.

But managed.

"Rotate," Mai said softly. "We leave. We return later. Different route. Different time."

Ace nodded, breathing out slow. “Anti-ritual.”

Shammy’s eyes stayed on the cabin a heartbeat longer than she should have—then she turned away.

“Unrepeatable,” she murmured.

They walked back into the forest, and the held air eased behind them like a hand finally lifting from skin.

The cabin remained in the clearing, silent, patient—

and for the first time, it had stopped offering objects and started offering something more dangerous: the feeling of almost knowing.—

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