

CHAPTER 23 — THE BLANK DECISION

They built the decoy like you built a bomb you didn't trust yourself around:

Slowly. Quietly. With a kind of contempt for your own hands.

Bright didn't let procurement "source" anything for it. No recycled paper. No vintage stock. No leather binding. No anything that had ever sat near the word tome in somebody's mind.

He ordered inert, modern polymer sheets—smooth, blank, industrial. Not paper. Not even pretending.

Mai watched the materials arrive in a sealed tote and felt that familiar itch try to wake up—it's an artifact, it's a ritual, it matters—and she killed it by counting the tote's rivets until her pulse stopped trying to narrate.

They assembled the decoy in a windowless prep room under bright, dead lighting.

Gloves on. Wipes ready. Nothing spoken that didn't need to be spoken.

Mai wrote the external markings herself, in block letters, on the outermost container only:

DECOY / BLANK / DO NOT OPEN

No symbols. No jokes. No cleverness.

Ace held the container while Mai sealed it. Shammy stood at the door and watched the air like she was guarding the concept of "outside" itself.

Triple containment, as promised:

inner sleeve (opaque)

hard case (latched)

outer bag (opaque) with external mark

Then the wipe protocol. Then gloves changed.

Mai felt almost sick with how careful it all was.

Carefulness could become devotion if you weren't ruthless about it.

"Okay," Bright said when it was done. "You have your blank. Now you place it outside the radius. Far enough that the held-air boundary never touches it."

Mai nodded once. "And we don't check it."

Bright's grin was thin. "Not right away."

Ace's jaw flexed. "This is going to feel stupid."

Bright lifted his coffee cup slightly. "Stupid is what saves you."

They left in the late evening, when the sky was dim and the forest was a black mesh beyond the headlights.

Inconvenient. Irritating. Perfect.

They parked at a point that had nothing to do with the cabin—no line-of-sight, no “approach.” They walked a full kilometer on an angle that felt like it should have been the wrong way. Then Mai made them stop.

“Here,” she said.

Ace glanced around. “This place is nothing.”

Mai nodded. “Exactly.”

Shammy tilted her head, listening to ordinary wind. “No hold.”

Mai crouched and selected a depression under a root tangle—not neat, not symmetrical, not inviting. She didn’t “hide” it like treasure. She placed it the way you placed a toolbox you expected to pick up later.

Ace set the hard case into the depression. Mai covered it lightly with leaf litter—just enough to conceal, not enough to look meaningful.

No ritual. No sealing flourish. No “there.”

Mai stood and didn’t look at the spot again.

Ace’s voice was low. “We’re really not checking?”

Mai met her eyes. “If we check, we feed. We don’t feed.”

Ace nodded once, angry but compliant.

Shammy’s gaze lingered on the air above the depression for one second longer, then she forced herself to turn away.

They walked.

Not toward the cabin.

Past it—wide arc, perimeter pass only. A sweep path that took them near the held-air boundary without entering it, like skirting a quarantined spill.

Mai watched the tree line. She refused to look for the clearing.

She refused to look for the “second cabin,” too.

New structures were contaminated geometry. They had agreed.

For thirty minutes, the forest stayed honest.

Then the air changed.

Not full hold. Not that smothered, staged stillness.

A gradient.

The scent thinned. The wind became polite. Sound softened.

Shammy lifted her head.

“Edge,” she murmured.

Mai nodded once. “We keep walking.”

Ace’s shoulders tightened. “We’re close.”

Mai didn’t confirm. Confirming was a hook.

They continued along the arc.

And then, right as the held-air gradient touched the back of Mai’s neck like a cool hand—
—the pen scratch began.

Faint at first.

Dry.

Slow.

Like someone writing very carefully on a hard surface.

Mai’s lungs stopped for one beat.

She did not turn her head.

Ace’s body twitched, the predator reflex to locate the sound.

Mai’s voice came out flat, immediate.

“Shared?” she asked.

Ace’s answer was tight. “Yes.”

Shammy’s answer was quieter. “Yes.”

The pen scratch continued.

Not from one direction. Not from “over there.”

It sounded like it was inside the air itself, ambient and unlocatable, as if the forest had learned the concept of writing and was trying to mimic it.

Mai felt Marker Zero itch surge hard enough to make her teeth ache.

Not the words. Not the phrase.

The destination.

The urge to pick a direction and go.

Mai swallowed it.

“One sentence,” she said.

Ace’s voice: “Marker Zero itch.”

Shammy’s voice: “Marker Zero itch.”

Mai’s own voice: “Marker Zero itch.”

Then Mai did the ugliest, smartest thing she could do:

She didn’t stop walking.

Grounding while moving.

She began counting her steps silently in her head—one to ten, repeat—forcing her mind into mechanical cadence that didn’t belong to the phenomenon.

Ace did it too, visible in the way her shoulders smoothed and her gaze stopped flicking.

Shammy’s grounding was different: she hummed internally, a silent rhythm that wasn’t audible, just a stabilizer pattern she used to keep her own attention from being seized.

The scratch continued for eight seconds.

Then stopped.

No flourish. No “final stroke.” Just an abrupt end like a pen lifted.

Mai kept walking anyway for another full minute.

No immediate retreat.

No “scratch equals exit.”

Anti-ritual.

When they were far enough that the air was fully normal again, Mai halted.

She didn’t look back.

She looked at the sky through branches and forced herself to see only darkening blue.

Ace exhaled slowly. “That was... timed.”

Mai didn’t like the implication, but she nodded. “It aligned with boundary gradient.”

Shammy’s voice was low. “It tried to turn us.”

Mai’s pen hand twitched, wanting to write.

She refused to write yet.

Writing immediately after the scratch would become a rhythm too.

They walked another twenty minutes, then stopped in a different spot—ordinary forest, no gradient.

Only then did Mai pull out the notebook and write exactly two lines:

Perimeter pass near held-air gradient. Pen-scratch cue (shared) for ~8s. No turn. No stop. Continued walking. Marker Zero itch (all). Grounding executed while moving.

She closed the notebook.

Ace stared at the trees like she wanted to punch them.

“So what about the decoy,” Ace said.

Mai’s voice stayed flat. “We don’t check tonight.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “But—”

“But nothing,” Mai cut in, calm but sharp. “If we check right now, the phenomenon learns the equation: scratch → curiosity spike → check decoy. That becomes a loop.”

Shammy nodded slowly. “Loops are food.”

Ace exhaled through her nose, angry and impressed at the same time.

“Fine,” Ace said. “No check.”

They returned to Site-Δ without discussing the decoy again. Mai forced them to talk about stupid things instead—inventory counts, non-relevant logistics, coffee quality—anything that kept the mind from circling the same hook.

When they got back, Bright met them in the same concrete stairwell, eyes sharper than before.

“Well?” he asked.

Mai didn’t dramatize.

“Pen-scratch at boundary gradient,” Mai said. “Shared. Marker Zero itch in all three. No turn, no stop, continued walking.”

Bright nodded, pleased. “Good.”

Ace’s voice was low. “Now we wait.”

Bright’s grin was thin. “Now you wait.”

Shammy’s eyes were distant. “And we see if the blank stayed blank.”

Mai didn’t like that sentence. It was too neat. Too story-shaped.

So she corrected it into something uglier and safer.

“We see if anything changed,” Mai said. “Without treating change as meaning.”

Bright’s grin widened slightly.

“Perfect,” he said. “Inconveniently, of course.”

Mai didn’t answer. She just felt the itch still simmering under her ribs—Marker Zero, the place you don’t say twice—

—and the deeper, nastier fear beneath it:

What if the decoy wasn’t a test of the cabin?

What if it was a test of them?

A blank object waiting in the forest, unlooked at, unconfirmed—

—daring the human mind to go make certainty.

And if the file had learned anything, it was that humans would do almost anything for certainty.

Even walk back to the first drop.—

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