

CHAPTER 7 — NIGHT SETTLES

They didn't decide to stay overnight in the cabin.

That would have been a story.

A decision like that implied intention—we are here to endure the night, to see what happens, to force the site to reveal itself. The file had already taught them that intention was a kind of fuel, and ΔF-SRS-118 didn't need much.

So they did what they always did when the world got slippery: they made the most boring choice available.

They set up outside.

Not far. Not so far that the cabin could “change” without them noticing. But not inside, either. Not under its roof. Not in its curated air.

A temporary camp, practical and ugly: a thermal shelter tarp strung low between two trees, equipment cases stacked in a neat line, a small heating unit positioned with the care of someone who had learned not to make fire into a ritual. The clearing's too-perfect circle forced their layout into a strange geometry—every placement felt like it wanted to become symbolic.

Mai refused to let it.

“Straight lines,” she said quietly as they worked. “No circles.”

Ace looked at her once, then nodded, and shifted the equipment case a few inches so it didn't echo the roundness of the clearing. It was a small act. It mattered anyway.

Shammy watched the air around the heater with an expression that was half suspicion, half irritation. The warmth rose, the cold settled, the pressure should have shifted in predictable patterns.

It didn't.

The heat went up, but the air didn't carry it with the normal lazy movement. The cold didn't pool so much as remain present, like an idea refusing to leave.

“It's still held,” Shammy murmured.

Mai didn't ask her to explain. Explanations were how a feeling became a theory, and theories were how you fed a place like this.

Instead, she did something more useful: she kept her mouth shut and kept her hands moving.

They ran a perimeter check around the clearing. Ace walked it with her eyes and her posture, reading the gaps between trees the way she read alleys in a hostile city. Mai followed with a small handheld instrument that measured things that didn't measure what she wanted. Shammy followed with senses that refused to give her the comfort of wind.

Nothing changed.

Which should have been reassuring.

It wasn't.

They ate without ceremony.

Protein bars, lukewarm coffee, a bottle of water that tasted like plastic. The kind of meal you forgot the moment you finished. Mai deliberately chose to not let it become a "camp" with comfort. Comfort created narrative. Narrative created meaning.

Ace chewed slowly, gaze fixed on the cabin through the trees. The structure sat there like a fact someone had underlined too many times.

Shammy didn't eat at all—she didn't need to, not in the human way—but she held a cup anyway, letting the warmth of it soak into her hands like a borrowed ritual of normalcy.

As daylight thinned into evening, the forest did something subtle.

The soundscape didn't go silent.

It went selective.

Birdsong faded first, neatly, like a channel muted. The little clicks and rustles of insects didn't vanish so much as become unnoticeable, as if the forest decided those sounds were no longer relevant to the scene.

The wind didn't stop.

It simply lost its direction.

Mai sat on a folded blanket under the tarp, hands clasped around her mug, and listened. She wasn't listening for "voices." She wasn't listening for the dramatic.

She was listening for the absence that wanted to pass itself off as calm.

Ace noticed it too. She shifted, one knee up, elbow resting on it, posture loose in the way that wasn't relaxed at all.

"This is wrong," Ace said quietly.

Mai didn't look at her. "Define wrong."

Ace's mouth twisted.

"Normally," Ace said, "when something's wrong, you can feel the pressure building. Like a storm coming in. Like the world tightening around you."

She gestured vaguely toward the cabin.

"This is... nothing," she said. "No pressure. No storm. Just... waiting."

Shammy's eyes lifted to the tree line.

"It's not waiting," she said softly. "It's present."

Mai's throat tightened.

“Present like...?” Mai started, then stopped herself. She had caught the sentence mid-formation. Good. She didn’t want that sentence finished.

Shammy didn’t force her. She simply said, “Like a room that’s listening but refusing to breathe.”

Mai nodded once, as if that was enough.

Night came in slowly, and the darkness didn’t feel like darkness. It felt like a dimming of detail. Like the forest was reducing itself to the minimum necessary to remain convincing.

The cabin remained visible longer than it should have, its silhouette stubborn against the thinning light.

At some point the stars appeared overhead, sharp and cold. The sky looked normal. The sky didn’t care.

The earth did.

Mai opened her clipboard and wrote two lines by the light of a small red lamp:

Soundscape selective. Air directionless. Heat not carrying.

She stopped there.

She refused to write “held.” She refused to write “listening.” Those words were too close to meaning.

Ace watched her write.

“You’re doing good,” Ace said.

Mai’s pen paused. She looked at Ace, surprised by the directness. Ace rarely gave praise. Praise was too soft a weapon for her usual world.

Mai’s lips pressed together. “So are you,” she said quietly.

Ace’s gaze dropped to the cabin again. “Not sure I am.”

Mai didn’t ask what she meant. She understood: Ace’s instinct was to push, to test, to force resistance so she could fight it.

This case offered no resistance.

It offered politeness.

And politeness was harder to cut.

Shammy shifted her weight and stepped away from the tarp, walking a few paces into the clearing. Her boots made almost no sound on the leaf litter. The leaves were damp, but not with dew; damp as if they had been pre-softened.

She stopped near the center of the circle and closed her eyes.

Mai watched, uneasy. Not because Shammy might be hurt, but because Shammy might do what Shammy always did: stabilize. Smooth. Hold.

Shammy didn't.

She just listened.

Her shoulders rose with a slow inhale. Fell with an even slower exhale. She was trying to feel a current that wasn't there.

When she opened her eyes again, her expression was tight.

"It's still held," she said.

Ace stood and joined her, not touching her, just standing beside her in the center of the clearing. Ace's presence was a challenge by nature. Here, it became a test just by existing.

Mai remained under the tarp, a deliberate choice: one of them anchored to "non-action," one of them to "presence," one of them to "listening."

A triad posture. Balanced.

For a long time, nothing happened.

That was the third most frightening thing that could occur.

The first would have been violence.

The second would have been a voice.

Nothing was the third, because nothing gave the mind room to start making its own noise.

Mai felt it happening in her own head: the urge to fill the quiet with explanation, with story, with patterns.

She squeezed her mug harder, grounding herself in heat, in weight, in simple physicality.

The cabin sat in the trees, waiting to be interpreted.

They refused.

The night deepened.

The forest's selective quiet became more pronounced. Even the distant sounds of animals—those vague, far-off calls that usually reminded you you weren't alone—seemed to thin.

Mai's eyes kept drifting to the cabin, then away, then back, like her mind was testing its own obsession.

Ace's posture remained loose, but Mai could see the tension in her neck. Ace wasn't scanning for threats anymore. She was scanning for temptation.

Shammy's hands flexed once. Her hair lifted in a tiny motion—then settled again with no direction.

Then, near midnight, the cabin did something so small it almost didn't count as a thing.

A single rectangle of pale light appeared in the cabin's front window.

Not bright. Not flickering. Just... there. Like someone inside had turned on a lamp and then stood still.

Mai's breath caught.

Ace and Shammy both saw it at the same time. They didn't speak. They didn't move.

Mai forced her lungs to work quietly.

They were outside. They hadn't turned on lights inside. Nobody had gone back in.

The light was wrong.

But it wasn't dramatic wrong.

It was domestic wrong.

Ace's voice was a whisper, barely audible.

"Did we leave anything on?"

Mai shook her head slowly. She didn't trust speech; she trusted motion.

Shammy's gaze stayed fixed on the window.

"It's not... electrical," she murmured.

Mai's mouth went dry.

Ace took a step forward, then stopped herself. The instinct to approach was powerful, a hunter's reflex. She strangled it in its cradle.

"We don't chase it," Ace said, voice low. Half to them, half to herself.

Mai nodded once.

They stood there in the clearing, staring at a quiet, steady light in a cabin that was supposed to be empty.

The light did not brighten.

It did not dim.

It did not flicker like a signal.

It simply existed, like an invitation dressed as normality.

Mai felt her mind strain toward the image: lamp, table, someone reading, book—

She cut the thought off so hard it almost hurt.

She did not finish the sentence.

Ace's jaw clenched, then loosened on a slow exhale.

Shammy's shoulders lowered a fraction, as if accepting that the air would not give her answers.

The light stayed in the window for exactly as long as a human mind could tolerate it without trying to justify it.

Then, without any visible change—no flicker, no fade—it was gone.

Darkness returned to the cabin, complete, unbothered.

Mai realized her fingers were numb from gripping the mug.

Ace realized she'd been holding her breath.

Shammy realized she hadn't stabilized anything—and that, tonight, was the only correct move she had.

Mai set the mug down carefully.

No one spoke for a long time.

Because to speak would have been to make the moment into a thing.

And ΔF-SRS-118 loved it when moments became things.

Finally, Ace said the only sentence that didn't add meaning.

"Noted," she whispered.

Mai nodded once, and wrote—only when her hand stopped shaking:

Window light observed. No source. No pursuit.

Then she closed the clipboard.

Outside, the forest remained selectively quiet.

Inside, the cabin remained patient.

And the night settled over them like a blanket that didn't quite belong to the world.—

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