

## CHAPTER 27 — HOSPITALITY PROTOCOL

The Foundation had a word for what happened next.

They called it hospitality risk.

Mai hated that word more than almost anything else they'd used so far, because it implied manners. Social contracts. A space where refusing felt rude.

Hospitality was where humans lowered their guard on purpose.

Bright convened the response in a room that used to be a storage bay. Bare walls. No windows. No tablecloths. The chairs didn't match. It was aggressively unwelcoming, which meant it was perfect.

The tin cup sat in triple containment on the far end of the room.

No one approached it.

No one stood closer than necessary.

The note was in a separate container, sealed, unread, its very existence already more dangerous than its contents could ever be.

Bright spoke first, voice stripped of humor.

"Let's be clear," he said. "The second structure is no longer just a site. It's an invitation mechanism."

Ace crossed her arms, jaw set. "It's pretending to be polite."

Mai corrected, softly but precisely. "It's exploiting politeness."

Shammy nodded. "And reciprocity."

Bright's eyes flicked to her. "Explain."

"When something offers you relief," Shammy said, "your body prepares to give something back. Attention. Time. Presence."

Mai felt that land hard.

Reciprocity wasn't just social.

It was neurological.

Bright exhaled. "So we can't just say 'don't go.'"

Mai shook her head. "No. That makes it a test of willpower. Willpower fails."

Ace's voice was low. "Then what do we do."

Mai answered without drama.

"We make refusal easier than acceptance," Mai said.

Bright leaned forward. "Operationalize that."

Mai thought for a moment—not conceptually, but mechanically.

“Hospitality protocol,” Mai said. “If anyone encounters an unsolicited ‘comfort gesture’—objects, seating, warmth cues, drinks, notes—they disengage immediately and report without shame.”

Ace nodded. “No punishment.”

Mai nodded back. “No punishment. Shame drives secrecy. Secrecy feeds it.”

Bright made a note. “Continue.”

Mai held up one finger.

“We also ban politeness,” Mai said.

Ace blinked. “What.”

Mai kept going.

“No ‘just in case.’ No ‘thank you.’ No verbal acknowledgement of the object or gesture,” Mai said. “No speaking to it, even internally.”

Shammy’s voice was quiet. “No reciprocity loop.”

Bright’s mouth twisted. “That’s going to be hard to train.”

Mai’s tone stayed flat. “Yes. That’s why we train it.”

Ace cracked her neck. “And the cup.”

Bright looked at the container. “Still sealed.”

Mai nodded. “Good. It’s not the object that matters. It’s the offer.”

Shammy’s gaze was distant. “It’s learned human kindness shapes.”

Mai felt that echo again—come sit, come rest, you’ve done enough—and she cut it down with grounding so hard she almost laughed at herself.

Count the rivets. Count the breaths. Stay ugly.

Bright cleared his throat.

“There’s another data point,” he said. “The junior researcher.”

Mai’s spine tightened. “Go on.”

Bright consulted his notes.

“He reports no urge to return,” Bright said. “No curiosity. No itch.”

Ace frowned. “That’s... good?”

Bright shook his head. “He reports a sense of gratitude.”

The word hit the room like a quiet detonation.

Mai closed her eyes for exactly half a second.

Gratitude.

Not desire. Not relief.

Debt.

Shammy's voice was steady but cold. "That's worse."

Mai nodded. "Gratitude creates obligation."

Ace swore softly. "It's building social leverage."

Bright looked at Mai. "What do we do."

Mai didn't hesitate.

"We break the narrative," Mai said. "Immediately."

Bright leaned forward. "How."

Mai's voice was firm.

"We tell him the truth," Mai said. "Not the story. The mechanism."

Ace raised an eyebrow. "You want to brief him?"

"Yes," Mai said. "Fully. No mystery. No awe. We explain that the calm he felt wasn't kindness—it was a hazard response."

Shammy nodded slowly. "You remove the romance."

Bright considered it, then nodded. "Okay."

Mai continued.

"And we do something else," she said. "We give him relief that isn't associated with the site."

Ace smirked. "Gym."

Mai nodded. "Gym. Food. Sleep. Human contact."

Bright chuckled darkly. "We're fighting an anomaly with snacks."

Mai met his eyes. "We're fighting it with grounded relief."

Bright sobered. "Approved."

They implemented the hospitality protocol that same night.

Signs went up—not warnings, but permissions:

YOU ARE ALLOWED TO WALK AWAY. YOU ARE NOT RUDE FOR REFUSING. REPORTING IS NOT FAILURE.

It felt ridiculous.

It worked.

The next forty-eight hours brought fewer reports—not zero, but fewer.

No new objects appeared.

The pen-scratch did not return.

The itch remained, low and simmering, but it didn't spike.

And that worried Mai more than escalation ever had.

Because quiet didn't mean gone.

Quiet meant waiting.

On the third night, Mai woke up before her alarm.

No nightmare.

No sound.

Just the sense of being... done.

Finished.

The pressure she carried every day—procedures, vigilance, restraint—felt suddenly unnecessary.

She sat up in bed, heart steady, mind calm.

Too calm.

You could rest, the thought offered gently. You've earned it.

Mai didn't move.

She didn't reject the thought outright.

She labeled it.

"Relief offer," Mai whispered.

The word broke the spell just enough.

Her heart rate ticked up.

Good.

She swung her legs off the bed and stood, grounding herself by touching the cold wall with her palm.

She stayed there until the softness retreated.

When she walked into the corridor later, she found Ace already awake, pacing.

Ace met her eyes.

“Don’t say it,” Ace said.

Mai nodded. “Same?”

Ace’s jaw flexed. “Yeah. Calm. Too calm.”

Shammy joined them a moment later, eyes sharp despite the early hour.

“I felt finished,” Shammy said quietly. “Like the work was done.”

Mai exhaled slowly.

“That’s the next hook,” Mai said.

Bright appeared at the end of the corridor like he’d been summoned by the word hook itself.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You all slept like angels.”

Ace barked a humorless laugh. “Yeah. Like something wanted us to.”

Bright’s grin didn’t show.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we’ve crossed another line.”

Mai looked at him, cold clarity settling in.

“It’s not offering relief anymore,” Mai said.

Bright nodded.

“It’s offering closure.”

And that—

—that was the most dangerous offer yet.

Because humans would endure almost anything for closure.

And they would walk anywhere to feel like something was finally over.—

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