



Chapter 12 — The Room With No Vents

Halverson didn't waste time pretending the building was cleaner than it was.

He rewound the tape, marked the timestamp where the cue intrusion began, and wrote a short note in block letters that looked like it had been hammered into the paper.

Then he stood, walked to the door, and pressed his ear against it—not to listen for footsteps, but to confirm the absence of honest activity.

Nothing.

He turned back to them. “We switch rooms. Now. No hall lingering.”

Ace lifted a brow. “Is that your version of ‘run’?”

Halverson's mouth twitched. “It's my version of ‘move like you're late to your own funeral.’”

Mai stood immediately. No argument. No questions. She grabbed her bag, the Faraday pouches, the

recorder, the sensor. Her notebook stayed open in her hand like a weapon.

Ace collected her harness and lifted her katanas with the care of someone picking up sleeping animals. She gave the hilts a gentle pat.

Mai saw it. "Don't."

Ace blinked. "I didn't say anything."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You're making a habit."

Ace's mouth quirked. "Fine. I will silently respect my sisters."

Halverson didn't react. He just opened the door quickly, stepped out first, scanned the hallway, and motioned them through with two sharp fingers.

The hall looked normal. Too normal. Fluorescent lights. Plain carpet. A faint smell of stale coffee. No one visible.

But normal had become suspicious.

They moved. Halverson led them down a short corridor, past two doors, then into a smaller room at the back. No windows. No vents. No desk lamp. Just a table, two chairs, and a heavy steel cabinet bolted to the wall.

On the wall: a simple analog clock.

This one didn't click. The second hand glided quietly, like the clock knew sound was a liability.

Halverson shut the door, then locked it with a key—old-fashioned, physical, no keycard beep. He checked the door seam with his fingertips, then nodded once.

"This is the room," he said. "Ninety minutes. Lights off. No talking. If you feel pressure, you log it after."

Ace stared at him. "You're giving us a time-out."

Halverson's eyes stayed steady. "I'm giving you a sensory reset."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Ace blinked at her. "You're okay with this?"

Mai's tone was flat. "It's the least stupid option."

Ace huffed a small laugh. "Fair."

Halverson opened the steel cabinet and pulled out two thin sleeping mats and two gray blankets that looked like they'd never been loved.

He placed them on the floor, then pointed at the recorder and sensor. "Those stay outside."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Why."

Halverson's voice stayed even. "If the seam is using your devices as a stage, we remove the stage."

We test whether it can still create cues with nothing to piggyback.”

Mai’s jaw tightened. “But then we lose data.”

Halverson met her stare. “We gain a clearer variable set. You have a notebook. Use it.”

Mai held the look for a beat—then nodded. “Okay.”

Ace muttered, “That was suspiciously reasonable.”

Halverson didn’t smile. “I try.”

He stepped to the door. “I’ll be right outside. If you need anything, you knock—”

Ace’s eyes sharpened.

Halverson corrected himself immediately. “You don’t knock. You say my name at a normal volume. Understood?”

Mai’s mouth tightened. “Understood.”

Ace’s tone was dry. “Nobody knocks ever again.”

Halverson’s mouth twitched. “That’s the spirit.”

He left. The door shut. The lock turned with a heavy, final clunk.

Mai stared at the door seam for a second too long, then forced herself to look away.

Ace spread one mat on the floor and flopped down with exaggerated theatricality that didn’t match the tension in her shoulders. “Ah yes. The glamorous life.”

Mai laid her mat beside Ace’s, movements efficient. “Shut up.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “Love you too.”

Mai didn’t answer. She sat down cross-legged, notebook open, pen poised in the dim light from the hallway leaking under the door.

Ace watched her, then softened her voice a fraction. “You okay?”

Mai’s pen paused.

She didn’t look up. “No.”

Ace waited.

Mai added, clipped: “Yes.”

Ace’s lips curved. “That’s my Mai.”

Mai finally looked at her. There was a tired humor there—thin, sharp, but real. “Stop naming me like you own me.”

Ace blinked. “I don’t—”

Mai held up a hand. “Joke. Mostly.”

Ace exhaled, then nodded. “Okay.”

They settled. Mai turned off the room light. Darkness thickened, broken only by that faint hall-glow under the door.

For a minute, nothing happened.

Two minutes.

Three.

Ace’s breathing slowed into that half-sleep rhythm she could manage without fully dropping her guard. Mai’s pen scratched once, then stopped—because writing too early could become a pattern too.

Silence became an object in the room.

Then the door handle moved.

Not fully. Not turning.

Just a small shift, like someone had touched it and changed their mind.

Ace’s eyes snapped open.

Mai didn’t move. She didn’t flinch. She simply watched the handle in the darkness like it was a live animal.

The handle shifted again.

Then stopped.

A pause.

Then—soft, almost gentle—came the sound of fabric brushing fabric.

A sleeve.

A jacket.

Close enough to make your brain supply the rest.

Ace’s throat tightened. She hated how fast her nervous system tried to fill in Mai.

Mai’s voice came out calm, cold. “No.”

Ace didn’t speak. She didn’t want to feed it.

The fabric sound happened again—closer, more confident.

Mai’s pen moved once, silently, writing in the dark by feel: Mimic attempt — tactile cue — sleeve rustle.

Then the room's temperature shifted.

Not dramatic. Not like a cold blast.

Just a subtle drop, as if someone had opened a door to outside.

Except there were no vents.

No windows.

No systems.

Ace's skin prickled.

Mai whispered, almost to herself: "It can change air."

Ace's voice was low. "Or it can change us."

Mai didn't answer. She didn't want that thought to become a hook.

The door handle clicked softly—like a latch testing tension.

Ace felt the old piano-key pressure settle in her bones again.

Mai's breathing stayed steady.

Then a sound came that made Ace's stomach roll:

A key turning in a lock.

Inside the room.

Not the real lock. Not the metal clunk Halverson had made.

A domestic key sound, smooth and familiar.

A suggestion of home.

Mai's jaw clenched hard enough that Ace heard her teeth shift.

Mai spoke, voice a razor in the dark. "Stop trying to be human."

Silence.

For a heartbeat, the pressure eased. Like the seam had paused, recalculating.

Then, from right beside Ace's head—too close, too intimate—came a whisper.

Not words.

Just breath.

Warm.

Human.

Ace's entire body tried to recoil.

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist, firm and real, anchor pressure that said this is the only real thing in the room.

Ace forced herself to breathe.

In. Out.

In. Out.

The warm breath happened again—closer.

Mai's voice didn't waver. "We are not opening anything."

Ace couldn't help it. A dry whisper escaped her, more insult than speech. "You're bad at this."

Mai's mouth twitched in the dark—she felt it more than saw it. "Good."

The pressure surged once—like the piano key pressed a fraction harder.

Then the sound of a wooden door opening flooded the room.

Not from outside.

Not through speakers.

Just air becoming sound.

Ace's heart thumped once, hard.

Mai's fingers tightened on her wrist. "No response," Mai murmured. "No script."

Ace stared into the dark and did the only thing she could think of that didn't match fear or comfort.

She laughed.

Not loud. Not big. Just one short, ugly little snort of laughter that sounded like someone choking on their own disbelief.

The wooden-door sound stuttered.

The warm breath stopped.

Mai's grip eased a fraction, surprised.

Ace whispered, still half-laughing, "It broke."

Mai's voice stayed calm, but something in it softened—a tiny spark. "Yes."

Ace added, dry: "My laughter is a weapon."

Mai's mouth twitched again. "Don't get proud."

Ace's grin flashed in the dark. "Too late."

Silence settled back in, heavier now. Not safe. Not friendly. But... confused.

The seam didn't know what to do with ridicule.

Minutes passed.

The pressure faded slowly, like a hand lifting off a piano key.

The temperature stabilized.

No more door sounds.

No more breath.

Mai wrote one more line by feel: Ridicule disrupts cue continuity.

Ace lay back on the mat, eyes open, breathing steady, and for the first time in hours she felt something like control—not over the seam, not over the night, but over her own response.

Mai leaned her head back against the wall and let her eyes close.

Ninety minutes.

A procedure.

A refusal practiced until it became muscle memory.

Outside the door, Halverson waited.

And somewhere, annoyed and patient, the seam listened for the sound it wanted—

and heard only two people who refused to become an invitation.

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