



Chapter 13 — Halverson's Coffee

When the door finally opened, it wasn't the seam.

It was Halverson, and the difference was almost insulting.

Real hinges. Real latch. Real human weight in the motion. A faint squeak that sounded like neglect, not seduction.

He flicked the overhead light on with a decisive snap.

Ace blinked up at him from the mat, eyes bright and too awake. Mai sat with her notebook open, pen poised, like sleep was an optional feature she'd uninstalled.

Halverson's gaze flicked over them, assessing: breathing steady, posture controlled, no visible tremor. Then his eyes landed on the notebook.

"You got data," he said.

Mai nodded once. "Yes."

Ace sat up and stretched like she was in a hotel instead of a pressure experiment. "It tried door sounds again."

Halverson's eyes narrowed. "Infrastructure?"

Mai shook her head. "None. No devices in the room. It generated cues anyway: latch testing, domestic key turn, fabric rustle mimicry, warm breath proximity. Pressure increased. Temperature dropped. Ridicule disrupted continuity."

Halverson paused. "Ridicule."

Ace nodded solemnly. "I laughed at it."

Halverson stared for half a beat, then—unexpectedly—his mouth twitched into the closest thing to a smile. "Good."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Don't encourage her."

Halverson shrugged. "I'm encouraging survival."

Ace pointed at him. "See? I like him."

Mai sighed, the sound sharp and tired. "We're not adopting him."

Halverson ignored that and stepped aside. "Debrief room. Then sleep cycle. Then we move you again. Bright's orders."

Ace stood and rolled her shoulders. "More rotation."

Halverson nodded. "More rotation."

As they stepped into the hallway, Ace felt the pressure try to return—just a whisper of the piano key—but it didn't land. Not fully. Like it had lost confidence in the hallway as a channel.

Mai noticed Ace's micro-pause and murmured, almost without moving her lips, "It's weaker."

Ace's mouth quirked. "Offended."

Mai's eyes stayed forward. "Good."

They entered the debrief room again, the one with the analog clock that didn't click. The devices were waiting exactly where Mai had left them, sealed and untouched.

Halverson set three paper cups on the table. Coffee. The smell was immediate: scorched bitterness with a hint of plastic lid.

Ace sniffed it like it was a threat. "That smells like regret."

Halverson's voice was flat. "It's institutional coffee. It tastes like policy."

Mai didn't hesitate. She took a cup, sipped, and didn't react. Her face remained composed, but her eyes tightened by a fraction, which for Mai was the equivalent of swearing.

Ace watched her. "It's bad."

Mai nodded once. "Yes."

Ace took a sip, then made a face like she'd licked a battery. "Oh. That is... wow."

Halverson's mouth twitched. "Welcome to the Foundation."

Mai opened her notebook to a clean page. "We need to map the cues."

Halverson slid a blank sheet toward her. "Do it."

Mai drew a clean list, writing like she was drafting blueprints:

Cue Class A: Taps/knocks (device, metal skin, intercom)

Cue Class B: Domestic door sounds (wood hinge, key turn, lock click)

Cue Class C: Comfort channels (heater warmth, "home" emotional template)

Cue Class D: Identity hooks (names, voice mimicry, presence mimicry)

Cue Class E: Proximity illusions (warm breath, fabric rustle, footsteps)

Observed Behavior: Adaptive sequencing + pattern testing (2-1, 4-2-1, 1-2-1)

Countermeasure: Disruption via meaningless noise + ridicule + controlled chaos

Ace leaned over her shoulder. "You're filing a complaint form to reality."

Mai didn't look up. "I'm building a counter-protocol."

Halverson nodded once. "Good."

Mai underlined that word: counter-protocol.

Ace frowned slightly. "I hate that it's becoming a protocol fight."

Halverson's gaze stayed on the paper. "That's exactly what it is. If it can establish a handshake, it can establish a channel. If it can establish a channel, it can establish persistence."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Meaning it doesn't have to be near the culvert."

Halverson met her eyes. "Meaning it could ride you."

Ace's mouth went thin. "Like a parasite."

Halverson nodded. "Like a parasite."

Mai tapped her pen once—one time only, no pattern. "Then we need something stronger than chaos."

Ace's eyebrows lifted. "What, like... anti-parasite medicine."

Mai's eyes flicked to her. "Like a hard boundary."

Halverson reached into his binder and pulled out a thin sealed envelope. He set it on the table.

Mai stared at it. "What's that."

Halverson's voice stayed even. "Bright sent it. A containment advisor note. Not official yet, but he wants you to see it."

Ace stared at the envelope like it might hiss. "Why is it in an envelope."

Halverson's gaze didn't waver. "Because we're not giving the seam more digital surfaces to practice on."

Mai's fingers moved to open it, careful.

Inside was a single folded sheet with tight handwriting and a couple of printed diagrams—something like geometric shapes, concentric circles with annotations.

Mai read silently.

Ace waited, impatient.

Halverson watched Mai's face change—not much, but enough. The calm tightened into something sharper.

Mai looked up. "He wants us to try a barrier ritual."

Ace blinked. "A what."

Mai's tone was clipped. "A boundary construct. Old school. Physical. Symbolic. It doesn't matter what we believe—what matters is consistency of meaning."

Ace frowned. "We just said 'no routines.'"

Mai pointed at the paper. "No routines that create access cues. This is a routine that creates a refusal cue."

Halverson nodded. "Exactly."

Ace stared at the diagram. "What's it called."

Mai read the title out loud, voice flat as stone: "Circle of Denial — Minimal Form."

Ace squinted. "That's dramatic."

Halverson took a sip of his coffee without flinching. "Everything is dramatic at two in the morning."

Mai scanned the instructions again, then summarized without emotion:

"Chalk or tape circle. Two-person anchor. Spoken refusal in variable language. No names. No 'home.' No door references. One object inside the circle—metal recommended. The circle is not a magic wall. It's a cognitive boundary with physical reinforcement."

Ace stared. "So... it's weaponized psychology."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Halverson's eyes stayed steady. "And sometimes psychology is the only thing between you and something that wants to live in your habits."

Ace's mouth quirked, dry. "So we're going to draw a circle and tell the seam to get lost."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "We're going to draw a circle and tell ourselves what 'no' feels like."

Ace blinked at her. Then, quietly, she nodded. "Okay."

Halverson checked his watch. "We have thirty minutes before the building's shift change. I don't want you here when bodies start moving through halls. Too many variables."

Mai gathered her things. "Where."

Halverson tapped the binder. "A secondary office. Smaller. No hallway traffic. We'll do the circle there and see if the cue generation changes."

Ace grabbed her harness and her blades. "More rotation."

Halverson nodded. "More rotation."

As they stood, Mai paused and looked at the coffee cup in her hand.

She stared at it like it had personally insulted her lineage.

Then she did something Ace didn't expect.

Mai took a marker from Halverson's desk, wrote on the side of the cup in neat block letters:

NOT A DOOR.

Ace stared.

Halverson stared.

Mai put the marker back, expression unchanged.

Ace's mouth spread into a grin. "Okay. That's hilarious."

Mai's tone stayed flat. "It's documentation."

Halverson's mouth twitched. "I like her."

Ace pointed. "See? We're adopting him."

Mai exhaled through her nose. "We're not."

But the humor—thin, sharp, human—went with them as they moved out into the dawn-gray world, carrying bitter coffee, paper protocols, and the first hint of something that might become a real countermeasure:

A boundary that wasn't a lock.

A refusal that could be practiced until the seam learned the only answer it would ever get.

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