



Chapter 16 — Sleep in Blocks

Mai didn't allow the tap to become a narrative.

She treated it like a data point with teeth.

"One tap," she said quietly, still seated, eyes on her notebook. "No follow-up. No escalation."

Ace leaned against the wall, arms folded, gaze fixed on the door like she could intimidate it by refusing to blink. "It's testing restraint."

Mai's pen scratched. "Yes."

Ace's mouth quirked. "That's new for it."

Mai finally looked up. "Or it's learning that obvious tricks don't work anymore."

Ace stared at her. "Which is worse."

Mai didn't hesitate. "Yes."

Ace exhaled—a short laugh that wasn't humor so much as disbelief at the universe's commitment to being rude.

Mai stood and walked to the door, not to open it, but to put her palm against the metal for a second—feeling vibration, temperature, any honest clue.

Nothing.

Mai stepped back. "No pressure. No odor."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "So it's... nearby. Not inside."

Mai nodded. "And it wants us to choose to investigate."

Ace's voice went flat. "We won't."

Mai's gaze hardened. "We don't reward taps."

Ace's lips curved faintly. "Good. Because I'm done rewarding anything."

Mai turned toward the cots and the bare table. She took in the room again—absence as architecture. Then she made another rule, because rules were how she stapled the world back together.

"We sleep in blocks," Mai said.

Ace blinked. "We were already—"

Mai cut her off, calm and cold. "We sleep in blocks with a watcher rotation and no pre-sleep ritual language."

Ace stared. "No 'goodnight.'"

Mai's eyes narrowed. "No 'goodnight.' No 'sleep well.' No 'I'll watch.' No repeated phrases."

Ace's mouth tightened. "That's... depressing."

Mai's expression didn't soften. "It's survival."

Ace held the look for a beat, then nodded slowly. "Okay."

Mai pulled her notebook closer and wrote:

Sleep protocol: 60 min blocks. One awake. One resting. No repeated comfort phrases. No consistent positions. Rotate cot use each block.

Ace read over her shoulder. "You're even randomizing which cot."

Mai's tone stayed flat. "Yes."

Ace sighed. "You're a monster."

Mai looked up, deadpan. "Says the demon huntress."

Ace's mouth quirked despite herself. "Fair."

Mai took the first awake shift without debate, because she was the kind of person who didn't trust sleep when the world was behaving like a con artist. Ace didn't argue, because she trusted Mai's judgment more than her own stubbornness.

Ace lay down on the left cot first—not because it mattered, but because if Mai had to choose for her, it would become a cue.

She kept her harness on, blades within arm's reach. She didn't close her eyes right away. She listened.

The building was quiet. No vents. No heater. No clock ticking. Just the faint distant hum of the world outside, and Mai's pen occasionally scratching a line.

Ace forced herself to breathe slower.

Mai sat at the table with the battery lantern unlit, relying on the faint gray light through the door seam. She was a silhouette of discipline—calm, still, sharp.

"Mai," Ace murmured.

Mai's head tilted slightly. "What."

Ace chose her words carefully. No comfort scripts. No routine phrases. She went for raw.

"If the seam starts using the observer," Ace said quietly, "that's a new tier."

Mai's pen paused. She didn't respond immediately. Then she said, low and controlled:

"We don't assume that. We log it if it happens."

Ace nodded. "Okay."

Mai added, almost reluctantly, because it was human: "You did well. Not turning."

Ace's mouth twitched. "That's praise."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "It's data."

Ace smiled faintly. "Right."

Mai looked down at the notebook again, and the conversation ended cleanly. No lingering. No ritual.

Ace closed her eyes.

Sleep didn't arrive like warmth.

It arrived like a cautious animal: one step forward, then a freeze, then another step, checking if the room would bite.

Ace's body started to drift.

Then—somewhere outside the building, in the lot—came a sound.

Not a tap.

Not a knock.

A slow metallic drag, like something being pulled across gravel.

Ace's eyes snapped open.

Mai didn't move, but her posture shifted—micro-ready. Her pen stopped.

The dragging sound continued for a second.

Then stopped.

Silence.

Ace whispered, "It's trying a different cue."

Mai's voice stayed calm. "Yes."

Ace swallowed once. "Do we—"

Mai cut in, quiet and sharp. "We do nothing."

Ace held her breath for a beat, then released it slowly. "Okay."

Minutes passed.

No further sounds.

Ace's eyelids grew heavy again. She forced herself back toward sleep.

Then her skin prickled—not because of sound, but because the air in the room seemed to... tilt.

Not temperature. Not pressure.

A subtle shift in orientation, like the concept of "behind you" had moved.

Ace's pulse ticked faster.

Mai's gaze lifted toward the framed print on the wall—the glass surface.

Ace didn't look at it. She didn't want her eyes to become a ritual response.

Mai watched it anyway.

Her voice came out low. "Observer."

Ace's throat tightened. "Is it in the reflection."

Mai didn't answer with certainty—because Mai did facts, not comfort.

"I see a third silhouette," Mai said, controlled. "Faint."

Ace's hands tightened on the blanket. She didn't turn. She didn't sit up. She stayed still and let her

breathing do the work of refusal.

Mai's pen moved once, writing in the dim: Observer present — reflection channel — low intensity.

Mai kept her eyes on the glass for two seconds longer.

Then she looked away on purpose, breaking the line of sight like cutting a wire.

The air tilt eased.

Silence returned.

Ace exhaled slowly. "It's like it wants us to know it's there."

Mai's voice stayed flat. "Or it wants us to react to knowing."

Ace swallowed. "Which is the same thing."

Mai didn't deny it.

Ace lay still, eyes closed, and forced her body back toward sleep. Not because sleep was safe—because sleep was necessary.

Mai stayed at the table, a quiet watchful presence.

At the 60-minute mark, Mai stood and walked to Ace's cot without making it a ritual. No touch. No phrase. She simply said:

"Switch."

Ace sat up, rolled off the cot, and took the other one. No "okay." No "got it." Just movement.

Mai lay down, eyes open for a second, then closed them with deliberate control.

Ace took the seat at the table, notebook in front of her. She didn't write much—Ace's handwriting was not a tool, it was an assault—but she noted times and cues in short brutal strokes.

The lot outside stayed quiet.

No taps.

No drags.

No door sounds.

The seam, if it was there, was behaving.

And that, more than any noise, felt like a warning.

Ace stared at the door seam and let her mind drift to the observer again—the tall silhouette in reflections, the stillness, the familiarity without lure.

Halverson had hesitated when asked.

He believed in patterns.

He'd seen it too.

Ace felt her jaw tighten.

Not fear.

Offense.

Good.

Stay offended.

Because if the seam wanted comfort or fear, then offense was the third option—the one with teeth.

And if the observer wanted anything at all...

Ace intended to learn what, before it learned her.

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