



Chapter 17 — The Thing About Quiet

Quiet didn't feel like peace anymore.

Quiet felt like a hand hovering above a piano key—waiting to press, not yet committed.

Ace sat at the table with Mai's notebook open in front of her like a sacred object she wasn't allowed to touch incorrectly. She'd written three lines. They were ugly, angular, and entirely Ace:

04:58 — metal drag outside, single event

05:11 — “air tilt,” reflection anomaly, faint silhouette

06:02 — swap

Mai slept in that controlled way she did when she had to—body still, face calm, a level of discipline that made sleep look like an act of will. Ace watched her for a while, not romantically, not tenderly, just checking the most important variable in the room:

Mai is real. Mai is here. Mai is breathing.

Ace looked away before her brain could turn that into a comfort ritual.

She shifted her posture, changed how her shoulders sat against the chair, moved the notebook two centimeters to the left. Tiny randomness. Tiny refusal.

Outside, dawn kept bleaching the world, turning darkness into a gray that made everything look like it was being inspected.

Ace listened for a tap.

None.

She listened for a door sound.

None.

She listened for the hiss in her own head—the subtle pressure change that meant the seam was testing.

Nothing.

And that “nothing” dug its nails into her nerves.

Because the seam had been persistent.

Now it was... patient.

Ace muttered under her breath, so quietly it was more vibration than sound, “I hate learning curves.”

Mai’s eyes opened instantly.

Not startled. Just awake. Like she’d been waiting for the exact moment the world shifted.

She sat up, hair slightly disordered—one of the only times she looked less than engineered.

“You spoke,” Mai said.

Ace blinked. “Barely.”

Mai’s gaze was sharp. “Still.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “Are you scolding me for whispering now.”

Mai swung her legs off the cot and stood. “I’m reminding you that even our silence can become patterned.”

Ace stared at her for a beat, then nodded. “Okay.”

Mai walked to the table, looked at Ace’s three brutal lines, and nodded once.

“Good,” Mai said.

Ace narrowed her eyes. “That’s praise.”

Mai didn't blink. "That's classification."

Ace exhaled through her nose, half amused, half exhausted. "Sure."

Mai checked the door seam, then the room corners, then the framed print. She did it quickly—no lingering gaze that could become a ritual.

"Observer?" Mai asked, flat.

Ace shook her head. "Not during my watch."

Mai's jaw tightened. She didn't look relieved. She looked suspicious of relief.

Then Mai did something that made Ace's spine tighten for a different reason.

Mai reached into her bag and pulled out the duct tape.

Ace frowned. "What are we taping now?"

Mai didn't look up. "The framed print."

Ace blinked. "You're... censoring reflections."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace watched as Mai taped paper over the glass—first a strip, then another, then a third, unevenly, no symmetry. She left tiny gaps around the edges, because Mai didn't do perfect. Perfect was a pattern.

When she was done, the print looked like a hostage situation.

Ace stared. "That is aggressively un-aesthetic."

Mai's tone was flat. "Good."

Ace's mouth twitched. "If the observer is shy, it's going to be offended."

Mai glanced at her. "Everything is offended. That's our brand now."

Ace gave a short, quiet laugh that didn't become a routine because she cut it off halfway.

Mai checked the time. "We have two blocks left before Bright wants status."

Ace nodded. "We can ping him now."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "No. We vary timing."

Ace sighed. "Right."

They sat in that bare room again, running controlled chaos on their own habits: shifting positions, changing where they looked, avoiding repeated phrases. At one point, Ace stood and swapped which wall she leaned on for no reason other than to prove she could.

Then it happened.

A sound from outside.

Not a tap.

Not a drag.

A single, clean snap—like a small branch breaking under a shoe.

Ace's eyes sharpened. She didn't move, didn't rise, didn't go to the door.

Mai's posture went still, pen paused mid-air.

A second snap, farther to the left.

Not walking toward the building.

Walking around it.

Mai whispered, "Human?"

Ace listened—not with ears, with instincts. "Maybe."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "We don't investigate."

Ace's mouth went thin. "I know."

A soft, almost ridiculous sound followed: gravel crunching, then stopping, then crunching again—like someone was pacing, indecisive.

Ace's jaw clenched.

Mai's voice stayed calm and cold. "That's a lure. The sound is meant to trigger 'check.'"

Ace's hands tightened into fists, then loosened. "I hate that you're right."

Mai didn't answer.

Then the building's door handle moved.

Not from inside.

From outside.

A careful test. A human test.

The handle didn't open—locked, solid.

A pause.

Then came the worst possible thing:

A keycard beep.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Just that clean modern tone that said permission granted.

Except there was no keycard reader on this door.

Ace's stomach tightened.

Mai's eyes went hard. "It's using permission language."

Ace whispered, "We don't answer."

Mai didn't repeat it. She changed it.

"We do nothing," Mai said.

The beep came again.

Then a third time, faster, like someone getting annoyed.

Ace felt the piano-key pressure try to settle into her bones.

Mai stood up.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Mai."

Mai didn't go to the door. She went to the table, picked up the whistle, and didn't blow it yet.

She held it like a last-resort insult.

The beep stopped.

Silence.

Then, faintly, from somewhere outside—not at the door, but near the wall—

a single soft tap.

Like a knuckle on concrete.

Ace's pulse thumped once.

Mai didn't move.

And then, as if the night wanted to remind them that the universe had a sense of humor, the tap was followed by something almost... polite:

A pause.

And then two more taps.

2-1.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It's using the tap protocol on the building."

Mai's voice was quiet, lethal. "It's broadening the channel."

Ace's mouth went thin. "So it can knock anywhere."

Mai didn't correct her wording this time.

The door handle shifted again, gently, like someone trying not to scare a pet.

Then—soft and domestic and absolutely wrong—came the sound of a wooden door opening.

Not here. Not real. Not physical.

Just air becoming suggestion.

Ace felt her skin crawl.

Mai lifted the whistle.

Ace's voice was low. "Wait."

Mai glanced at her, sharp.

Ace held her gaze. "If we whistle every time, that becomes a pattern."

Mai froze for half a beat.

Then she lowered the whistle and did something colder.

She cleared her throat once—deliberate, ugly human noise.

Not a whistle. Not a phrase. Just a sound that said I'm not scared and I'm not comforted.

The wooden-door sound stuttered.

Mai's lips tightened in grim approval.

Ace stared at her. "That was... efficient."

Mai's tone was flat. "It's meaningless."

Ace nodded slowly. "Meaningless is our new weapon."

The pressure eased by a millimeter.

Outside, footsteps—real ones, maybe—shifted away from the door.

Then stopped.

Then resumed, moving around the building again.

Mai didn't chase the sound with her eyes. She looked at the taped-over framed print instead, as if daring the observer to complain.

Ace watched Mai's face for a crack.

"Mai," Ace said quietly.

Mai didn't look at her. "What."

Ace chose raw again. "If it can do keycard beeps and footsteps, it can impersonate staff. Halverson. Bright."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Yes."

Ace's voice went flatter. "If it does Bright, we do not respond."

Mai finally looked at Ace, and there was a hard tenderness there—steel wrapped in silk.

"If it does Bright," Mai said, "we verify through HARD LINE only, and we never answer a door sound."

Ace nodded once. "Okay."

They held still. No rituals. No comfort phrases. Just two people refusing to become a channel.

Minutes passed.

The footsteps outside faded.

The air thickening eased.

The room became simply a room again.

And then—the part that made Ace's stomach knot—something else happened.

The taped-over framed print made a tiny sound.

Not a tap.

Not a creak.

A soft crinkle, like tape shifting under pressure.

Mai's eyes snapped to it.

Ace's breath went shallow.

Mai stepped toward it—careful, controlled—and stopped a meter away. She didn't touch it.

The tape crinkled again, subtle.

Like someone on the other side of the reflection was pressing a fingertip against the glass.

Mai's voice was very quiet. "Observer."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's trying to use the reflection anyway."

Mai didn't look away. She didn't lean in. She spoke once, clean and cold, not a repeated phrase.

"You don't get visuals either," Mai said.

The tape crinkled a third time.

Then—silence.

Mai backed away from the framed print without turning her back on it, then returned to the table and picked up the HARD LINE brick.

Ace watched her hands. "Now?"

Mai nodded once. "Now."

She tapped it on.

"Bright," Mai said.

Static, then Bright's voice, immediate. "Status."

Mai spoke fast, precise, raw data first. "Holding site maintained. No pressure baseline. External cue attempts: keycard beeps at door with no reader, door-handle test, tap protocol on exterior wall—2-1—followed by domestic door sound suggestion. We did not respond. Disruption via meaningless throat-clear; avoided whistle to prevent pattern. Observer activity: reflection channel attempted through taped glass—tape crinkle events, no visual confirmation."

Bright was silent for a beat—processing, recalibrating.

Then: "Good. You're doing exactly what you should."

Ace muttered, "She hates praise."

Bright ignored it. "Two instructions. One: you're leaving the holding site in twenty minutes. Halverson will meet you with a different vehicle. Two: if anything uses my voice outside of HARD LINE—ignore it. Even if it sounds like me begging."

Mai's eyes went cold. "Understood."

Ace's mouth went thin. "That's cheerful."

Bright's voice tightened. "This is not about cheer. It's about denying it leverage."

Mai's tone stayed clinical. "Any new intel on the observer."

Bright exhaled. "Not yet. But Halverson... yeah. He's seen it. You're not imagining it. It's separate from the seam in signature—so far."

Ace stared at the taped print. "Separate doesn't mean friendly."

Bright replied instantly. "Correct. Treat it as unknown."

Mai nodded once. "We will."

Bright's voice softened a fraction—tired human under sarcasm and procedure. "Stay alive. No scripts."

Mai turned the brick off.

Ace sat back and exhaled slowly.

"Okay," Ace murmured. "So it's upgraded. And the watcher is pressing fingerprints through

reflections.”

Mai’s eyes stayed steady. “Yes.”

Ace’s mouth quirked, offense returning like a weapon she could hold without it holding her.

“Good,” Ace said quietly. “Let it learn we’re difficult.”

Mai looked at her for a beat, and her expression—just for a second—warmed.

Not comfort.

Not softness.

Something sharper.

“Difficult,” Mai agreed.

Outside, somewhere in the gray dawn, something listened and recalculated.

And somewhere else—quiet, patient, and not yet defined—the observer did what it always did:

It watched.

It didn’t blink.

Not because it didn’t need to.

Because blinking was a human habit.

And it was done borrowing human habits.

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