



Chapter 19 — Distance Is Also a Weapon

The further they got from the holding site, the more the city tried to pretend it was innocent.

Morning traffic thickened. People appeared with coffee cups and backpacks and the soft-faced denial of commuters who believed the world only had one layer. The gray sky brightened into something that looked like daylight and acted like a lie.

Mai drove as if the road was a hostile interface.

No direct routes. No clean repeats. She used roundabouts like dice, took the second exit once, the third the next, then looped back through a side street because “straight” had started to feel like agreement.

Ace watched reflections like they were windows into a second reality: storefront glass, car mirrors, bus panels, puddles. She didn’t stare too long at any of them. She refused to make her eyes predictable.

Halverson in the back seat remained quiet, but it wasn’t the quiet of a passenger. It was the quiet of

someone listening for the wrongness behind normal.

Ace broke the silence the way she'd learned to: not with comfort, not with ritual, but with a sharp edge of human annoyance.

"So where are we going," she asked, "besides 'away.'"

Halverson's answer was immediate. "Out of the city's rhythm."

Ace blinked. "That's poetic for you."

Halverson's mouth didn't twitch this time. "It's operational. You're in a place where everything has a schedule. Buses. Doors. Crosswalks. Radios. The seam is learning permission concepts by riding the city."

Mai's eyes stayed on the road. "So we go somewhere with fewer scripts."

Halverson nodded. "Somewhere that doesn't automate 'open.'"

Ace's mouth went thin. "Like a cabin in the woods."

Mai shot her a look. "No cabins."

Ace shrugged. "Fine. A sewer."

Mai's tone stayed flat. "Better than a cabin."

Halverson spoke, still calm. "We're going to an interim site with minimal infrastructure. Not romantic. Not comfortable. That's the point."

Ace muttered, "Everything we do now is 'that's the point.'"

Mai didn't disagree.

They drove on.

Ten minutes later, a billboard on the side of the road flickered as they passed it—LED panels swapping ads. Normal.

Except for one frame—one wrong frame—that held too long.

WELCOME HOME

Ace felt it like a thumb pressed into an old bruise.

Mai's hand tightened on the wheel.

Halverson's gaze went sharp.

No one said the words out loud. No one fed it.

Mai cleared her throat once, ugly and meaningless.

Ace made a small dismissive sound—half scoff, half laugh, cut short.

Halverson did something almost comically normal: he cracked the back window an extra centimeter and let cold air slap the cabin, as if temperature change could reset the universe.

The billboard returned to a normal ad: mattresses. Always mattresses. Comfort sold like a drug.

Ace's voice came out low. "It's escalating its vocabulary."

Mai nodded. "It's mining our anchors."

Halverson's tone remained hard. "And it's failing, because you're refusing to respond."

Ace stared ahead. "It's still learning."

Halverson didn't deny it. "Yes."

They hit a stretch of road that opened into a lighter industrial belt—less pedestrian traffic, more long fences and loading bays. The kind of place where you could drive for ten minutes and see the same forklift model four times.

Mai took a turn onto a service road and slowed. The interim site was supposed to be here.

Ace watched the perimeter, scanning for anything that looked like "invitation." Gates that opened too early. Doors that clicked before you touched them. Lights that turned on to greet you.

Nothing did.

Which was suspicious in a cleaner way.

Halverson leaned forward. "Third building. No sign. Short fence. Manual gate."

Mai nodded and rolled up to a chain-link gate with an old padlock. No keypad. No camera. No automation. The gate didn't move.

Good.

Halverson got out.

Ace's hand drifted toward her harness, not drawing anything, just touching the idea of readiness. Mai stayed in the driver's seat and watched him through the windshield like she was watching a bomb disposal tech.

Halverson walked to the gate, pulled a key from his pocket, and unlocked the padlock.

Real metal. Real resistance. Real click.

The gate didn't glide open on its own. It squealed when he pushed it, because it was an honest piece of neglected hardware.

Ace exhaled, almost amused. "That's the prettiest sound I've heard all morning."

Mai's eyes stayed sharp. "Don't compliment it."

Ace's mouth quirked. "I'm complimenting neglect."

Halverson waved them in.

Mai drove through, then stopped. Halverson shut the gate behind them and relocked it, turning the padlock so it sat at a different angle than before—because he'd learned, too.

Ace got out and let the cold damp air hit her face like reality slapping her awake. The building was a squat concrete box with a steel door and a small, grimy window that looked like it hadn't been washed since the last century.

Mai followed, bag on shoulder, eyes measuring angles.

Halverson opened the door with another real key.

Inside, the place smelled like dust and old paint. No vents. No hum. No fluorescent buzz. Just quiet and stale air.

There was a table, three chairs, a cabinet, and—Ace almost laughed—an analog clock.

Mai stared at the clock like it had personally come to mock her. "They really love clocks."

Halverson shrugged. "Clocks are honest."

Ace deadpanned. "So is a punch in the mouth."

Halverson's mouth twitched faintly. "Also honest."

They moved inside and closed the door. No automatic latch. No keycard beep. Halverson locked it from the inside with a mechanical bolt that sounded like a prison being satisfied.

Mai immediately went to the window and taped over it—not fully, just enough to break clean reflection planes.

Ace watched. "You're going to start taping the world."

Mai's tone was flat. "Yes."

Halverson set the metal case on the table and popped it open. Inside: paper forms, a basic analog recorder, a cheap handheld radio with the antenna snapped off, and—Ace squinted—three little strips of metal mesh.

Mai noticed. "Faraday."

Halverson nodded. "Portable. Not perfect, but better than letting the seam practice on your surfaces."

Ace stared at the snapped antenna radio. "That's adorable."

Halverson glanced at her. "It can't pick up broadcasts."

Ace nodded. "So if it speaks through it, it's definitely not a broadcast."

Halverson's eyes hardened. "Exactly."

Mai opened her notebook and wrote: Interim site: manual access, low automation, reflection mitigation applied.

Ace leaned back against the wall, arms crossed, and felt the absence of pressure like a suspicious gift.

No tapping.

No scent.

No “open.”

Just quiet.

And quiet had become a trap.

Halverson looked at both of them. “We’ve got a window. Use it.”

Mai didn’t ask what he meant. She took the time. “We need to refine countermeasures into a toolkit, not a ritual.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “Mai, say it without sounding like a policy memo.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “We need three disruptors that can’t become a pattern.”

Ace nodded slowly. “Okay. Three types.”

Halverson watched, approving without showing it.

Mai held up one finger. “Type One: meaningless noise. Not consistent. Not always whistle. Cough. Snap. Tap own knee. Anything non-semantic.”

Ace lifted a brow. “My ugly laugh.”

Mai’s gaze flicked to her. “Yes. But don’t do it every time.”

Ace sighed. “Fine.”

Mai raised a second finger. “Type Two: temperature and airflow change. Window crack. Move seats. Open door only when we choose. Never let warmth become a cue.”

Ace muttered, “I hate that warmth is now suspicious.”

Mai didn’t soften. “We adapt.”

Third finger. “Type Three: cognitive boundaries. The circle works as a tool. But we vary the physical implementation. Tape one time, chalk another, string another. Same meaning, different form.”

Halverson nodded. “Good.”

Ace exhaled. “So we fight it like it’s a phishing attempt.”

Mai looked at her. “Yes.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “That’s actually comforting.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t say comforting.”

Ace raised both hands. “Observation.”

Halverson checked his watch. “You’ll rest here for two hours. Then we move again. Longer travel after

that.”

Ace frowned. “Longer how.”

Halverson’s tone stayed even. “Farther than you’d like.”

Mai’s eyes sharpened. “Out of metropolitan automation.”

Halverson nodded. “Yes. Fewer smart lights. Fewer screens. Less ‘open’ as a reflex.”

Ace stared at the locked door. “And the seam.”

Halverson didn’t lie. “It will follow if it can. The point is to make following expensive.”

Mai’s pen scratched: Distance as countermeasure: increase energy cost for cue generation.

Ace watched her write and felt a sting of something that wasn’t fear.

Pride. Maybe. Or just the relief of seeing a plan that didn’t involve panic.

Then Ace’s attention snagged on the window she’d taped over.

Because tape wasn’t perfect. It left slivers of glass.

And in one of those slivers—just for half a heartbeat—Ace saw a shape that didn’t belong.

Tall-ish. Indistinct. Still.

Not in the room.

In the reflection plane that Mai hadn’t fully killed.

It didn’t blink.

Ace didn’t flinch. She didn’t turn her head. She didn’t give it the satisfaction of “caught.”

She spoke in the flattest tone she could manage, like a person reading out a temperature.

“Observer,” Ace said.

Mai’s pen paused. She didn’t look at the window. “Reflection.”

Ace nodded once. “Yes.”

Halverson didn’t ask where. He just tightened his posture by a millimeter, and his voice went low.

“Log.”

Mai wrote without lifting her head: Observer recurrence — window sliver reflection — noninteractive — persists despite mitigation gaps.

Ace kept her eyes forward, away from the window.

And then, from somewhere outside the building—distant enough to be uncertain—came a single soft metallic tap.

One.

A pause.

Then nothing.

Mai didn't move.

Ace didn't move.

Halverson didn't move.

No one rewarded it.

The room remained a room.

The city remained a lie.

And their little triangle of refusal held—thin, human, stubborn.

Because the matka really was reippaasti vielä.

And every kilometer was now a weapon—if they used it right.

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