



## Chapter 20 — A Map Made of Refusals

They treated the next two hours like a controlled burn.

Not rest. Not comfort. A window to do work while the seam wasn't actively throwing slogans at billboards and radios. Mai sat at the table with her notebook open, building a "toolkit" that refused to become a prayer. Halverson stood by the door like a sentry who had decided the universe was a hostile workplace. Ace drifted—chair to wall, wall to chair—keeping her body from choosing a favorite posture.

No one said anything that sounded like a lullaby.

No one made the room "cozy" by accident.

Every action had the same quiet intent: deny it leverage.

Mai wrote three columns and kept the headings blunt.

What it tries

What we do

What we do differently next time

Ace leaned over her shoulder, careful not to hover long. “You’re making a playbook.”

Mai didn’t glance up. “I’m making a map.”

Halverson’s voice from the door. “A map of what.”

Mai underlined a line once. “Of refusals. That’s all we’ve got that doesn’t become a door.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “Refusals are our new geography.”

Mai’s pen paused, then continued. She didn’t reward the phrase with a comment. She did, however, write it down—without quotation marks, without ceremony—as if language could be pinned like an insect.

They kept their eyes off the window slivers.

They kept their ears off the “maybe” noises outside.

They did not feed the tap.

When the urge to check became itchy, Ace scratched it by doing something deliberately pointless: she stood, moved the chair five centimeters, sat again. No narrative. Just randomness.

It was working.

Until it wasn’t.

A sound came from the metal case on the table—small, dry.

A piece of mesh shifting.

Mai’s head lifted instantly. “No one touched it.”

Ace didn’t move. Halverson didn’t move.

The mesh shifted again, like something in the air had pressed against it with curiosity.

Ace’s voice was low. “It’s testing barriers.”

Halverson’s gaze stayed flat, but his jaw tightened. “Or it’s testing our attention.”

Mai’s pen moved once: Barrier curiosity event — non-contact observed — no response.

They let the mesh settle. They didn’t adjust it. Didn’t “fix” it. Because fixing was a ritual, and rituals were hooks.

Halverson checked his watch again and made a decision without asking permission.

“Time,” he said. “We move.”

Mai shut her notebook with a clean snap and immediately regretted the crispness of it—too neat, too

repeatable. She corrected the error by reopening it, writing one messy line on a blank page, then closing it again without rhythm.

Ace watched, amused and tense at once. "You just sabotaged your own perfection."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

Halverson opened the door and paused, listening into the gray outside.

Nothing.

No pressure shift. No scent. No tap.

They stepped out anyway with the careful confidence of people crossing a minefield they couldn't see.

The sedan waited where they'd left it.

Mai did not head straight for it.

She walked a small loop first, as if circling a drain—checking fence line angles, scanning the ground for scuff marks, watching reflections in the vehicle glass without staring long enough to make it a habit.

Ace's gaze snagged on something near the building's corner: a thin line in the damp gravel, like something had been dragged there in a half-circle and then stopped.

A crude arc.

Not chalk. Not tape.

Just a mark in the ground.

Ace's throat tightened. She didn't point. She didn't narrate. She simply said, flat:

"Something drew."

Mai didn't ask "what." She came closer without stepping into the arc's curve, eyes taking it in like she was reading a hostile diagram.

Halverson crouched, careful. "Fresh."

Mai's voice was controlled. "It's copying the boundary concept."

Ace's mouth went thin. "Or mocking it."

Mai's eyes hardened. "Both are learning behaviors."

Halverson stood. "We do not stand here and interpret."

They left the mark behind, refusing to turn it into a shrine or a warning sign.

Mai got in and started the engine. No heater. Window cracked. Honest air.

They rolled out through the manual gate. This time it didn't open itself. It complained when Halverson

shoved it. Good. Honest.

They returned to the main road and let distance do its work.

The city thinned. Buildings lowered. Screens became fewer. The crosswalk signals grew simpler. The world lost some of its polished “permission” language and became more like old infrastructure: stubborn, dumb, physical.

Mai’s shoulders eased a fraction.

Ace noticed and didn’t comment, because comment could become a cue.

Halverson sat in the back with his eyes half-lidded, listening.

They drove for a long while with nothing dramatic happening.

And that, in itself, was the only kind of progress they could trust: boring movement.

Then the sedan’s interior changed.

Not the temperature.

Not the smell.

Something subtler—like the air density shifted by a fraction, as if the cabin had become slightly smaller without anyone touching the doors.

Ace felt the piano-key pressure try to return.

Mai’s knuckles whitened on the wheel.

Halverson leaned forward slightly. “Pressure event.”

Mai didn’t respond. She did something else: she changed lanes without reason, then changed again, then took an exit that wasn’t on the plan.

Ace shot her a look. “Improvising.”

Mai’s eyes stayed forward. “Yes.”

The pressure didn’t increase.

It hovered—testing.

Then, from the snapped-antenna radio in Halverson’s case (still shut, still dead), came a single soft click.

Like a relay trying to engage.

Halverson’s eyes narrowed. “It wants a voice channel.”

Ace’s jaw tightened. “Let it want.”

Mai cleared her throat once—ugly and brief. Then she tapped the steering wheel with her knuckle in an irregular pattern that wasn’t any pattern at all—two taps, pause, one tap, longer pause, three taps,

stop.

The pressure stuttered.

The radio case went still again.

Ace's mouth quirked, offended amusement returning. "So we bully it with nonsense."

Mai didn't smile. "We refuse to be readable."

They drove on.

They crossed a bridge over a narrow river, dark water moving slow under gray sky. The landscape beyond was flatter, more open—fields, scattered trees, fewer screens.

And then Ace saw it again.

Not in a window.

Not in a billboard.

In the river's surface.

A reflection plane that wasn't glass and didn't have edges.

A tall indistinct shape standing on the far bank where no person stood.

Still. Watching.

Ace did not turn her head toward the bank. She kept her eyes on the road, and her voice stayed flat enough to be a report.

"Observer," Ace said.

Mai's shoulders tightened by a millimeter. "Water surface."

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

Halverson's voice was low. "Duration."

Ace watched the water in peripheral vision—just long enough to count, not long enough to stare.

"Less than a second," Ace said. "Then gone."

Mai wrote nothing—she couldn't, driving—but she said, tight and clinical: "It uses any reflection plane with sufficient coherence."

Halverson exhaled slowly. "Which means you can't tape it all."

Ace's mouth went thin. "Which means it wants to be seen."

Mai didn't deny it. "Or it wants us to believe it wants to be seen."

Halverson's gaze moved to the side mirror, then away. "Unknown intent."

They drove for another half hour.

No taps. No slogans. No radios.

Then the sedan passed a roadside sign—an old metal one, not digital. Faded paint. No screen. No flicker.

And the sign did something impossible.

Not physically—no bending, no moving.

But the meaning in Ace’s head shifted, as if someone had leaned close and whispered a translation that wasn’t there:

ENTER

Ace felt her stomach twist. The word wasn’t on the sign. Her eyes confirmed it—faded numbers and directions only.

But the concept had been injected into the moment like a needle.

Mai’s breath tightened. She’d felt it too.

Halverson’s voice was controlled. “Concept insertion.”

Mai nodded once. “Not via screen.”

Ace’s mouth went cold. “So it’s not just devices. It’s... cognition.”

Halverson didn’t soften. “Yes.”

Mai’s grip tightened on the wheel. “Then distance is not enough.”

Ace stared ahead. “So what is.”

Mai’s voice was steady, hard. “We build a refusal that doesn’t rely on environment. Not tape. Not fences. Not broken clocks.”

Ace swallowed. “Inside us.”

Mai didn’t look at her, but her tone landed like a promise. “Inside us.”

Halverson watched both of them in the mirror, then spoke carefully: “Bright’s going to want a proper containment approach.”

Ace’s lips curled in a thin, angry almost-smile. “Tell Bright to bring a bigger binder.”

Mai’s mouth twitched, microscopic. “He will.”

They kept driving, deeper into a landscape with fewer automatic doors and fewer polite beeps.

Behind them, the city’s permission language faded.

But the seam had learned a new trick: if it couldn’t open a gate, it would try to open the mind.

And the observer—patient, silent—kept choosing moments to appear in whatever surface could carry a reflection, as if proving one cold fact:

You can flee a place.

You can't flee being seen.

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