



Chapter 23 — Manual Everything

They reached the interim destination in the late morning—an old service compound that smelled like dust and tired paint and “nobody cares enough to update this.”

Perfect.

A single building. A fenced yard. A gate you had to shove. A lock that fought you. The sort of place where nothing opened unless your hands made it.

Halverson brought them in without ceremony.

Mai taped over any glass that tried to behave like a mirror. Not fully—just enough to ruin clean surfaces.

Ace didn’t tease her this time. She just watched and appreciated the hostility as an art form.

Inside, Halverson laid out a bare-bones plan on paper.

“Two phases,” he said. “Phase one: rest and recalibrate. Phase two: relocation to a site with no public infrastructure for your seam to ride.”

Ace raised a brow. “So, countryside wasn’t enough.”

Halverson didn’t blink. “Countryside still has roads. Roads still have decisions. Decisions are where it’s planting commands.”

Mai nodded once. “So we remove decision points.”

Ace stared. “How do you remove decision points from life.”

Halverson’s mouth twitched faintly. “You don’t. You make them yours again.”

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