



Chapter 24 — The Ugly Training

They didn't "sleep." They rotated, held short rests, kept their bodies from forming a bedtime religion.

Mai drafted a refusal drill on paper—simple, brutal, repeatable in meaning and varied in form:

Concept intrusion → respond with non-semantic noise (variable)

Permission language ("open/enter/turn") → respond with deliberate delay + deliberate choice

Reflection anomaly → respond with line-of-sight break (without ritual)

Door/voice cues → respond with zero engagement unless verified via HARD LINE

Ace read it and sighed. "So we become intentionally annoying."

Mai's tone was flat. "Yes."

Ace's mouth quirked. "I was born for this."

They practiced once. Then again. Not as a chant—more like physical therapy for the mind.

At one point, Mai stared at Ace and said, very calmly, “Choose.”

Ace blinked. “Choose what.”

“Anything,” Mai said. “But choose it slowly.”

Ace looked around, then pointed at the worst chair in the room. “That one.”

Mai nodded. “Good. Now sit somewhere else.”

Ace stared. “You’re bullying me.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “I’m teaching you to feel the moment the world tries to choose for you.”

Ace huffed a laugh. “Fine.”

Halverson watched without comment, which, from him, was approval.

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