



Chapter 25 — The Big Attempt

It happened on the move, of course.

It always did.

They left the interim compound in an older vehicle—nothing smart, nothing networked, no helpful little systems with polite beeps. A diesel box on wheels that looked like it had survived three different decades and resented all of them.

Mai drove. Halverson rode shotgun this time. Ace sat in back where the reflections were fewer.

For twenty minutes, it was almost boring.

Then the cabin did that tightening thing again—air compressing, space shrinking by a fraction you could feel in teeth.

Ace's skull prickled.

A thought slid in behind her eyes, clean and confident:

LET HIM DRIVE.

Not a voice. Not a suggestion dressed as a question.

A command wearing a sensible coat.

Ace's fingers curled, then relaxed. She did not look at Halverson. She did not look at Mai. She did not "consider."

She made a short, ugly sound—half laugh, half scoff—cut off quickly.

Mai cleared her throat once and slowed the vehicle by five kilometers per hour, then sped up again, then slowed again. No rhythm. No permission.

The thought smeared. Lost crispness. Became a weak itch.

Halverson's jaw tightened. "That was a direct push."

Mai didn't answer. She did something better: she took the next turn late, after passing the "ideal" point, forcing a second route.

The cabin pressure wavered.

Ace exhaled slowly. "It's trying to make our choices feel... automatic."

Mai's voice stayed steady. "It doesn't get automatic."

For the first time in hours, the pressure backed off cleanly.

Not defeated.

Just... forced to regroup.

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Last update: **18/03/2026 15:17**

