



Chapter 29 — Residual

The facility had the aesthetic of refusal.

No mirrors. No glass in places where you'd ever stand still. No humming vents you could mistake for breath. Even the lights were deliberately stupid—manual switches, uneven brightness, nothing that “welcomed” you when you entered a room.

Ace liked it.

Which made her distrust it.

They were given a small holding room—two bunks, a table bolted down, paper, pens, a sealed metal locker for blades when required. The lock was mechanical and ugly. It fought your fingers. It was honest.

A young agent—Lehto, according to the badge—ran them through the “analog behavior rules” with the tone of someone reciting a fire drill that had become religion.

Mai listened without blinking. Ace listened and mentally translated everything into: don't get tricked into agreeing to anything, ever.

Halverson stayed long enough to hand over his binder and his notes, then left without ceremony. No goodbye. No repeated phrase. Just a nod and a door that closed because a hand closed it.

Mai watched him go and wrote one line: Halverson = stable variable. Do not habituate.

Ace snorted. "You're even allergic to liking people."

Mai didn't look up. "Liking people becomes a pattern. Patterns become handles."

Ace sighed. "Fine."

The first hour was... almost boring.

Mai updated the playbook. The agents on site asked short questions. Ace answered with short data. Everything stayed cold, procedural, survivable.

Then the residual hit.

It wasn't a voice.

It wasn't a tap.

It was a sensation at the edge of thought—the way your mind slides toward an idea you didn't choose, the way a dream tries to continue when you wake up.

Ace was sitting at the table, watching her own hands like they belonged to someone else, when she felt it:

A gentle internal softening.

Not an order. Not "open." Not "enter."

More like: why not?

Ace's stomach rolled.

Mai noticed immediately—because she always noticed Ace when Ace tried to hide.

"Describe," Mai said, flat.

Ace swallowed once. "It's... not pushing. It's like... a suggestion that my boundaries are optional."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Residual."

Ace's mouth went thin. "It's like... the echo of the hairline. Like a tiny tear that wants to be a zipper."

Mai wrote: Residual cognitive compliance drift — non-verbal — "why not" impulse.

Ace stared at the words. "That's disgusting."

Mai's eyes stayed steady. "Good. Stay disgusted."

Ace's lips twitched in humor that didn't want to be humor. "Offense as medicine."

Mai didn't deny it. "Yes."

They tested it like professionals, not like victims.

Mai asked Ace to do the ugly training again: choose three sensory anchors, deliberately, slowly, and in different order each time.

Ace chose: the weight of the harness strap, the tightness of her boot laces, the taste of scorched coffee on her tongue.

She didn't choose Mai's presence as an anchor.

Not because Mai wasn't real.

Because making Mai an anchor in that way could become a comfort handle.

Instead, Mai did what she was supposed to do: she touched Ace's wrist once, brief, real, and then pulled away before it could become a ritual.

Anchor contact, not affection script.

The "why not" drift weakened.

It didn't vanish entirely.

But it stopped being a tide.

Ace exhaled slowly. "It's going to try this again."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace looked at the blank wall. "And if it gets through even a millimeter..."

Mai's voice stayed calm, but colder. "Then we tighten the protocol. You do not 'power through.' You report. Immediately."

Ace's jaw clenched. "I hate reporting."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "I love surviving."

Ace huffed. "Fine."

Outside the room, the facility moved with quiet competence. Someone walked past in the corridor. A door shut. A metal latch clicked.

All of it boring.

All of it precious.

Because boredom meant the seam wasn't winning.

And then—right when Ace felt herself settling, right when her body began to believe that this was stable—

she saw the watcher.

Not in glass.

Not in water.

In the steel faceplate of the bolted table, polished by years of use.

A faint, tall silhouette, slightly off-angle, as if the reflection plane itself had been tilted toward her.

Ace didn't stiffen. She didn't recoil.

She just said, flat and varied, "Presence."

Mai's pen paused. She didn't look down at the table. She looked at Ace's face and used that as the sensor.

Ace held her gaze steady. "Table reflection."

Mai nodded once. "Duration."

Ace counted without staring. "Less than a second."

Mai wrote: Observer recurrence — non-glass reflection — interior facility — table steel plane — brief.

Then she did the smartest thing in the room.

She slid a sheet of paper over the steel faceplate.

Not ceremonially. Not like a ward.

Like a clerk covering a glare.

The observer had nothing to ride.

Ace's pulse slowed by a fraction.

Mai's voice stayed flat. "It's probing how close it can get without triggering seam signatures."

Ace's mouth went thin. "It's showing us it can be here."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace stared at the paper covering the steel, and the bitterness in her chest sharpened into something that felt almost clean.

"Okay," Ace said quietly. "So it's not just 'watching us from outside.' It's stepping into our spaces."

Mai met her eyes. "And still not interacting."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Which might mean it wants us to interact first."

Mai didn't disagree. "Then we don't."

A knock came on the door.

One firm rap.

Ace's muscles jumped automatically—

and then stopped, because this facility had rules and people and you still had to function.

Mai held up one finger—not “wait,” not a ritual, just a signal—and moved to the door.

She didn't open it immediately. She listened.

A voice from the other side, normal, bored, human: “Lehto. Briefing room. Now.”

Mai opened the door.

Lehto stood there in plain clothes, face tired, eyes practical. No pressure shift. No scent. No “warm breath.” Just a man who wanted them somewhere else.

Mai nodded once and shut the door again so she could speak to Ace in private.

Ace's eyes narrowed. “We're sure.”

Mai's answer was clinical. “As sure as we can be without turning certainty into a ritual.”

Ace stood, adjusted her harness, and let offense settle into her bones like a brace.

They walked the corridor with Lehto leading, passing doors that stayed doors because hands made them open.

No screens.

No radios.

No billboards.

The seam had fewer toys here.

Which meant the attacks would be fewer—

and cleaner.

They reached the briefing room: a bare space with paper maps, a whiteboard, and a metal table with a cloth draped over it to kill reflections.

Someone here had learned the hard way.

Bright wasn't there in person. He never would be. Not for this.

But his presence was: a hard-copy protocol draft laid out on the table like a verdict.

Mai stepped in, eyes scanning the pages.

Ace followed.

And felt, immediately, that subtle internal drift again—the “why not” edge trying to appear like her own thought.

Not strong.

But persistent.

Mai looked at Ace's face and saw it.

Her voice stayed calm, almost bored. "Anchor."

Ace didn't argue. She chose.

Harness strap. Boot laces. Coffee taste.

Then she added something new, deliberately, because the seam didn't get to predict her.

The ache in her shoulder from sleeping wrong.

Pain as truth.

The drift weakened.

Lehto watched them with professional discomfort. He didn't ask. He didn't comment. He simply pointed at the paper protocol.

"Read," he said.

Mai read.

Ace read.

The draft was blunt, ugly, and exactly what they needed:

Breach Protocol — Interim

Treat all "permission concepts" (OPEN/ENTER/TURN) as hostile.

Do not respond to voices unless verified by HARD LINE.

Use variable non-semantic disruption.

Use variable physical boundary constructs (shape variation required).

If residual compliance drift occurs, immediate anchor procedure + report.

If observer appears, log only. No engagement. No staring. No pursuit.

Mai's pen moved, adding notes in the margins—tightening language, removing anything that could become a chant.

Ace stared at point five and felt a cold little grin.

Immediate anchor procedure + report.

Yeah.

They weren't "being brave."

They were being difficult.

And for the first time since the culvert, Ace felt a faint, brutal optimism:

If this was going to be a war of habits, then they had something the seam didn't.

They could change on purpose.

The seam could only imitate.

And imitation, when you stopped admiring it, was just desperation with good timing.

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