



Chapter 34 — Forty-Eight Hours

The facility didn't celebrate wins.

It audited them.

Ace hated that, but it was also the first thing that made her shoulders drop by a fraction. Celebrations were patterns. Audits were boring. Boring was survival.

They put her on monitoring like Bright said: forty-eight hours, no field movement, no improvisation beyond what the protocol explicitly allowed. The room they gave them was the same kind of hostility as before—manual switches, paper logs, no reflective surfaces that weren't already killed with cloth or tape.

Mai made it better by making it worse.

She ruined every remaining clean line.

A paper cover over the steel panel. A cloth drape skewed so it didn't sit square. Chairs moved just

enough that the room never felt “set.” Every now and then she changed which side of the table she sat on as if she could feel the seam measuring, recalculating, waiting for something to become predictable.

Ace watched, half amused, half relieved.

“You’re redecorating,” Ace said.

Mai didn’t look up. “I’m contaminating.”

Ace’s mouth quirked. “Same thing.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t make jokes into rituals.”

Ace lifted two fingers in surrender. “Noted. No comedy schedule.”

They did the ugly training again, on purpose, with no mysticism and no drama.

When Ace felt the faint “why not” drift, she didn’t wrestle it. She didn’t argue. She didn’t negotiate.

She chose.

Harness strap. Boot laces. The ache in her shoulder. The taste of bad coffee. Different order each time. A deliberate internal roll call of truth.

Mai anchored with brief wrist contact and withdrew immediately, like a clinician tapping a reflex point.

It worked.

Not perfectly. But enough.

The seam, if it was listening, learned another disappointing fact:

Their refusal could be practiced.

Not performed.

Practiced.

That made it harder to steal.

The observer showed itself three times in the first day.

Always in something that wasn’t glass: the dull sheen of a cabinet handle, a polished bolt head, once in the dark screen of a powered-off monitor someone had forgotten to remove. A tall subtraction. A stillness that didn’t belong.

Ace reported it each time with different words.

Mai logged it without turning it into a pattern.

No one chased.

No one stared.

No one spoke to it.

If the observer wanted a greeting, it was going to starve.

That night, in their second block of rest, Ace woke with a jolt she couldn't explain.

No sound.

No pressure spike.

Just a sudden certainty that she wasn't alone in her own skull.

Mai's eyes opened immediately, already too awake. "Residual?"

Ace swallowed. "Not exactly."

Mai sat up, posture razor-straight. "Describe."

Ace stared at her hands in the dim light. "It felt like... a finger on the inside of my thoughts. Not pushing. Just touching. Like checking if the door is still there."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Hairline sensitivity."

Ace's mouth went thin. "Yeah."

Mai reached out, wrist contact—brief, real—then withdrew. "Choose."

Ace breathed in.

Breathed out.

Chose pain. Chose weight. Chose gravity.

The inside-touch receded.

Mai didn't soothe her with words. She just wrote one line on paper in the dark:

Residual: tactile cognitive probe — nonverbal — stopped by anchor + deliberate choice.

Ace watched the pen move and felt something hard settle into her bones.

Not fear.

Not comfort.

A rule.

Because rules were how you stayed human when the world tried to turn "inside" into a negotiable contract.

They switched blocks without talking.

They slept in broken pieces.

They refused to become readable.

And the seam stayed quiet—wounded, offended, learning.

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