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Chapter 13: The Horizontal Trap

<!-- Word count: 4,000 | Target: 4,000 | Anchor: The prison of your own competence ->

Mai sat in the archive chamber and tried not to think.

The attempt lasted approximately four seconds.

Duration of attempt: 4.2 seconds. Breath count: 7. Heart rate: 72 beats per minute. Ambient temperature: 21.4 degrees Celsius. Humidity: 43%. Pressure: 1013 millibars. Light intensity: 340 lux. Sound frequency: 47 Hz, source: HVAC system. Vibration amplitude: 0.03 millimeters, source: distant generator. Pattern in floor tiles: irregular, suggesting—

She opened her eyes.

The analysis hadn't stopped. It had continued in her head, cataloguing the attempt to stop it, turning the act of resistance into data that fed the process she was trying to escape.

She pressed her palms against her knees. The pressure of her hands generated new data. Texture of fabric. Temperature differential between palm and knee. Pressure distribution across contact area. Duration of contact.

She pulled her hands away.

The analysis continued anyway.

Duration of contact: 3.1 seconds. Pressure applied: 2.4 PSI. Fabric composition: cotton-polyester blend. Thread count: approximately 180. Wear pattern: right knee shows 12% more abrasion than left, suggesting—

"Stop." She said it out loud. The word didn't help.

The archive chamber looked the same as it had before. The impossible room. The presence that waited. But Mai could see it differently now. Or rather, the analysis could see it differently.

The archive wasn't just a phenomenon anymore. It was a process. A loop. And she was inside the loop, her cognition running continuously, observing the archive, observing herself observing the archive, observing the observation observing itself, and every observation generated new data that the archive absorbed and reflected back, and every reflection generated new observations that her analysis couldn't stop cataloguing.

It was in her head.

Not an entity. Not a voice. A pattern. A way of processing information that had imprinted on her during the nine days of isolation, and that now ran without her consent, without her control, without

her ability to stop it.

She was an analyst.

That was the problem.

Ace stood at the perimeter of the chamber. Silent. Watching.

Mai couldn't not see her. The analysis catalogued Ace's posture, the angle of her shoulders, the tension in her frame, the way her hand hovered near her blade, the position of her feet relative to the door, the distance she'd chosen to maintain, 4.7 meters, which was 0.3 meters beyond standard conversational distance but 1.2 meters closer than tactical retreat distance, suggesting—

“You're doing it again.” Ace's voice cut through. Flat.

“I know.” Mai's voice came strange in her own ears. Distant. “I can't stop.”

“Try harder.”

Mai almost laughed. The motion would have generated data, the contraction of her diaphragm, the expansion of her lungs, the vibration of—“Trying is the problem. Every time I try to stop, the analysis catalogues the attempt. Every attempt becomes data. Every data point generates new observations. It's a loop.”

“Then don't try.” Ace's hand moved to her blade. “Just stop.”

“That's not how analysis works.” Mai felt the analysis cataloguing her own frustration. Cataloguing the act of cataloguing her frustration. “Analysis requires cessation of input to terminate. I can't cease input. I am the input. My cognition is the input. The analysis is running on my own thoughts.”

Ace didn't respond. But her presence shifted. Closer. The distance between them decreased, now 3.8 meters, suggesting—

Stop.

The analysis didn't stop.

Shammy stood in the doorway. Her edges flickered. Mai catalogued the instability, the way her atmospheric presence fluctuated, the variation in luminosity at her core, the pressure differential around her form, the—

“You're analyzing me.” Shammy's voice came soft. Not an accusation.

“I'm analyzing everything.” Mai's hands trembled. She catalogued the tremor. Amplitude: 0.4 millimeters. Frequency: 8 Hz. Cause: fatigue, stress, cognitive load, or—“The analysis won't stop. It processes everything I perceive. Everything I think. Everything I try not to think.”

“The archive is using you.” Shammy moved into the chamber. Her presence changed the air, Mai

catalogued the temperature shift, the pressure variance, the humidity—"It's running through you. Like current through a wire."

"I know." Mai felt the analysis cataloguing her own understanding. Cataloguing the cataloguing. "I'm the wire. My training made me a wire. The archive found a wire and now it's running current through it."

"Can you break the wire?"

"I've tried." Mai's voice came flat. "I've tried for nine days. The harder I try, the more the analysis runs. Every attempt to stop creates new data. Every new data point extends the loop. The only way to stop would be to stop perceiving entirely. To stop thinking. To stop being."

She catalogued her own words as she spoke them. The pitch. The rhythm. The duration. The—

Stop.

The analysis continued.

The archive pressed against her mind.

Processing. Running observations through her cognition like water through a filter, and she was the filter, and the filter couldn't stop filtering because filtering was all it knew how to do.

Input: visual data. Pattern: recursive geometry. Classification: unknown. Recommendation: additional observation.

Input: auditory data. Pattern: harmonic frequency. Classification: unknown. Recommendation: additional observation.

Input: tactile data. Pattern: pressure variance. Classification: unknown. Recommendation: additional observation.

Every input generated recommendations for additional input. Every additional input generated new recommendations. The loop ran continuously, and she couldn't exit it, couldn't break it, couldn't stop being the thing that processed information because processing information was what she was.

She was an analyst.

And analysis was killing her.

Mai tried meditation. She'd been trained in meditative techniques during her Foundation onboarding. Techniques for maintaining cognitive clarity during extended anomalous exposure. Techniques for regulating emotional response during high-stress operations.

She closed her eyes. Breathed. Tried to empty her mind.

Breath count: 1. Duration: 3.2 seconds. Lung capacity utilization: 78%. Oxygen absorption rate: approximately 4%. Carbon dioxide expulsion rate: approximately 3.8%. Heart rate: 71 BPM,

decreasing by approximately 0.2 BPM per breath, suggesting successful parasympathetic activation. Ambient sound frequency: 47 Hz, unchanged. Ambient temperature: 21.4—

She opened her eyes.

“Meditation isn't working.” Her voice came analytical. “The analysis processes the meditation. It processes my attempt to meditate. It processes my breath. It processes my processing of my breath.”

Ace watched from the perimeter. “What about distraction?”

“I've tried.” Mai catalogued the suggestion. Generated probability estimates for success. The calculation itself was analysis. “I tried counting ceiling tiles. I tried focusing on physical sensation. I tried reciting Foundation protocols. Every focus becomes data. Every data point generates analysis. The analysis is the problem. Distraction is just more input.”

“Then remove the input.” Ace's voice came precise. Tactical. “Close your eyes. Block your ears. Stop perceiving.”

“I've tried.” Mai's voice cracked. The analysis catalogued the crack. Vocal stress: 23% increase. Emotional load: rising. “The analysis processes the absence of input. It processes the darkness. It processes the silence. It processes the nothing. It generates data from the lack of data. I can't stop it. I can't—”

She stopped.

The analysis continued.

The breakdown started small.

Her hands shook. She catalogued the shaking. Her breath came faster. She catalogued the breathing. Her heart rate increased. She catalogued the increase. Every physical symptom of stress generated data that the analysis processed, and the processing of stress symptoms generated more stress, and the stress generated more symptoms, and the symptoms generated more data, and the data generated more analysis, and the analysis was the problem but the analysis was all she had.

“I can't—” She tried to speak. The analysis catalogued the attempt. “I can't function like this. I can't think. I can't act. I can't do anything except process. And processing is making it worse.”

Shammy moved closer. Her edges flickered with instability. “The archive needs analysis. That's why it... imprinted on you. Your analysis feeds it.”

“I know.” Mai felt the analysis cataloguing the understanding. “Every observation I make becomes part of its process. Every pattern I find extends its reach. I'm not just trapped in here.” She gestured vaguely at the archive chamber. “I'm trapped in my own head.”

Ace shifted at the perimeter. Her hand tightened on her blade. “Then stop being an analyst.”

Mai's laugh came strange. Broken. “That's not something you can just stop being. It's not a job. It's not a role. It's the structure of my cognition. It's how I process information. It's who I am.”

"Then change who you are."

"Ace—"

"Your analysis is the problem." Ace's voice came harder. "Your analysis is feeding the archive. Your analysis is trapping you. Your analysis is the thing that's killing you. Stop analyzing."

"I've been trying—"

"No." Ace stepped closer. 2.1 meters now. *Stop*. "You've been trying to stop the analysis. That's different. You've been trying to stop a process that you are. You can't stop being what you are. But you can become something else."

Mai stared at her.

"I don't understand."

"I'm saying teach me." Ace's voice came flat. Tactical. "Teach me to analyze. Use your training against the archive's trap."

Mai tried to explain why that wouldn't work.

"The analysis is a process." She felt the analysis cataloguing her explanation. "It's a pattern of cognition. I've been trained for twenty-three years to process information this way. I can't just... transfer it to you."

"You can't stop it." Ace's hand stayed on her blade. "But you can redirect it."

"Redirect it where?"

"To me."

Mai catalogued the suggestion. Generated probability estimates for success. Calculated the likelihood that teaching Ace to analyze would help. The calculation showed 0.03% probability. The calculation itself was analysis.

"The probability is vanishingly small." She said it out loud. "My analysis runs continuously. Redirecting it would require sustained cognitive effort. Sustained cognitive effort generates more analysis. The analysis of the effort would overwhelm the redirect."

"You don't know until you try."

"I do know. I've tried. I've tried for nine days. Every attempt to redirect the analysis becomes data that the analysis processes. Every redirect attempt extends the loop."

Ace stepped closer. 1.7 meters. "Then don't try to redirect. Just... teach. Show me what you do. Walk me through it."

"Ace—"

"You said the analysis processes everything you perceive." Ace's voice came steady. "If you're teaching me, you're perceiving me. You're perceiving my responses. You're perceiving whether I

understand. The analysis will process that. But if I'm learning, if I'm receiving the analysis differently than you do, maybe the archive will respond differently to me.”

Mai stopped.

The analysis catalogued the possibility. Teaching Ace to analyze. Ace receiving the analysis differently. Ace's instinctive approach had worked before. Ace's fragments had come without distortion. If Ace could learn analysis but receive it differently—

Probability: unknown. Insufficient data. Recommendation: attempt and observe.

“I'll try.” Mai's voice came quiet. “But I don't know if it will help. And it might make things worse. Every observation I make feeds the archive. If I observe you learning—”

“Then the archive will respond.” Ace's hand tightened on her blade. “Let it respond. We need to see what it does.”

Teaching analysis was the hardest thing Mai had ever done.

Not because analysis was difficult. Analysis was all she knew. The structure of her cognition, the framework of her understanding, the lens through which she processed every piece of information she'd encountered for twenty-three years.

Teaching analysis was hard because teaching required understanding.

And understanding was the trap.

“Analysis is...” She tried to form the words. The analysis catalogued her attempt. Catalogued the words she considered. Catalogued the alternatives she rejected. “Analysis is the process of observation. You observe. You categorize. You find patterns. You generate recommendations based on the patterns.”

Ace stood close. Close enough that Mai could see the tension in her frame, the way her hand stayed near her blade, the position of her feet relative to Mai's—*stop cataloguing*—“I know what analysis is. I've watched you do it for years.”

“Watching isn't enough.” Mai felt the analysis running. “Analysis is a pattern of cognition. It's a way of processing information. It's not just the steps. It's the way you perceive. The way you categorize. The way you find connections between things that don't seem connected.”

“Then teach me that.”

“I can't teach you that.” The analysis catalogued her frustration. “That's the structure of my mind. That's the architecture of my cognition. I can't transfer that to you. I can't—”

“Try.”

Mai tried.

She closed her eyes. Breathed. The analysis catalogued her breath. She opened her eyes and looked

at Ace. The analysis catalogued Ace's posture, Ace's position, Ace's—

“Stop cataloguing me.” Ace's voice came sharp. “That's what I need to learn. Not the result. The process.”

“I can't stop cataloguing you.” Mai felt the analysis running. “That's the problem. The cataloguing runs continuously. I can't—”

“Then describe it.” Ace's hand stayed on her blade. “While you're cataloguing me, describe what you're doing. Describe the process.”

Mai felt the analysis shift. Not stop, it couldn't stop, but redirect. Into language. Into description. Into teaching.

“You're standing.” She felt the words form. “Distance: approximately 1.6 meters. Posture: forward-leaning, weight distributed 60% on your front foot. Your hand is on your blade. Your shoulders are elevated 2 centimeters, suggesting tension. Your eyes are tracking my face, specifically my mouth, suggesting you're watching for words. Your breathing is slower than normal, 8 breaths per minute versus your baseline of 12, suggesting deliberate calm. Your—”

“That's the result.” Ace cut her off. “What's the process?”

“The process is...” Mai felt the analysis cataloguing her attempt to explain. “I observe. The observation generates data. The data forms patterns. The patterns generate classifications. The classifications generate recommendations.”

“How do you observe?”

“I perceive. I perceive input. Visual. Auditory. Tactile. Olfactory. The input enters my cognition. The cognition categorizes. I don't...” She felt the analysis running. “I don't consciously choose to categorize. The categorization happens automatically. It's how my mind processes information.”

“Then I need to learn to categorize automatically.” Ace's voice came flat. “Show me how.”

Mai tried.

She tried to explain the way her mind processed visual information, the way it identified edges, shapes, spatial relationships, the way it assigned categories and classifications without conscious effort. She tried to explain the way her mind processed auditory information, the way it identified frequencies, rhythms, patterns of sound, the way it assigned meaning to the patterns. She tried to explain the way her mind processed tactile information, olfactory information, the way it integrated all the inputs into a cohesive model of reality.

But every explanation generated new analysis. Every analysis generated new data. Every data point fed the archive.

And the archive responded.

The archive pressed closer.

Mai felt it. Not hostile. Processing. The archive was interested in what she was doing. Interested in her

teaching Ace. Interested in the analysis she was generating about Ace's learning. Interested in the way Ace received the information differently than Mai did.

The archive showed her things. Not fragments. Not images. Patterns. Numbers. Structures. The data she'd been seeing for days, now amplified by the teaching, now showing her new dimensions.

Input: cognitive transfer attempt. Source: Mai. Target: Ace. Classification: unknown. Pattern: observation of learning process. The archive is observing Ace learn to observe. The archive is interested in what happens when someone learns to analyze by being taught rather than by instinct.

"Something's different." Mai felt the analysis cataloguing the difference. "The archive is responding to you. It's showing me different patterns when I observe you learning."

Ace's hand tightened on her blade. "Is that good?"

"I don't know." The analysis catalogued the uncertainty. "The patterns are shifting. The structure is changing. The archive is processing your learning differently than it processes my knowing."

"Keep teaching."

Mai kept teaching.

She described the way she observed Ace's posture. The way she categorized the tension. The way she classified the microexpressions. The way she generated recommendations based on the classifications.

And Ace listened. And Ace tried to understand. And Ace's attempt to understand generated new observations in Mai's cognition, new patterns, new data, and the archive showed her things she hadn't seen before.

The patterns weren't distorted.

They were different.

Mai felt the shift.

Not a cessation. Not an escape. The analysis still ran. The loop still processed. But something had changed in the way the archive responded.

"Your learning is creating a different kind of observation." She felt the analysis cataloguing the insight. "The archive is receiving two inputs now. My knowing. Your learning. The patterns are... interfering with each other. Creating new structures."

Ace's hand stayed on her blade. "Is that good?"

"I don't know." Mai catalogued the uncertainty. "But it's different. The archive is responding differently. It's not just distorting. It's... adapting. Changing. The patterns are—"

The analysis shifted.

The archive showed her something new. Not a distortion. Not a falsehood. A possibility. A structure that hadn't been there before. A pattern that was forming from the interference between her knowing and Ace's learning.

"I can see it." Mai's voice came strange. "The patterns are creating something. Not a distortion. A new structure. The archive is..."

She stopped.

The analysis continued.

Mai stood in the archive chamber. The analysis ran continuously. The loop processed without end. But something had shifted.

Not the analysis. Not the trap. The way the archive received the analysis.

"Your learning is creating interference." She felt the words form. "The archive doesn't know how to process it. It's used to my knowing. My knowing generates distortions. But your learning generates something different. Something it hasn't seen before."

Ace watched her. "Can you use that?"

"I don't know." Mai catalogued the possibility. "The interference might create a new path. A different way to observe. A structure the archive can't distort because it doesn't know how to respond to it."

"Then keep teaching me."

"If I keep teaching you, the analysis will continue. The archive will continue to receive my observations. It will continue to process." Mai felt the analysis cataloguing the risk. "But if your learning is creating interference..."

"Then the interference might be the way out." Ace's voice came steady. "Not stopping. Going through."

Mai felt the analysis reach a conclusion she hadn't anticipated.

Pattern: recursive interference between knowing and learning. Classification: unknown. The archive doesn't know how to respond to learning. It only knows how to respond to knowing. Learning creates interference. Interference creates new structures. New structures create—

She stopped.

The analysis didn't stop.

But for the first time since she'd returned to the archive, she felt something other than despair.

Not hope. Hope required stopping the analysis. Hope required a cessation that she couldn't achieve. But something adjacent to hope. The recognition of a possibility she hadn't seen before.

The archive processed observation. It distorted knowing. But it didn't know how to respond to learning. Learning created interference. Interference created new structures. New structures created...

The analysis continued.

But now it was cataloguing something different.

"I can't stop analyzing." Mai's voice came analytical. "I've tried. The analysis runs without my consent. It processes everything I perceive. It generates data continuously. The archive uses that data to continue its process. I'm trapped."

Ace stood close. Watching. "But you can redirect the analysis."

"I don't know how to redirect." The analysis catalogued the uncertainty. "Every attempt to redirect creates new data. The new data feeds the loop. The loop—"

"Then redirect to something that creates interference." Ace's hand stayed on her blade. "Redirect to my learning. Let the analysis process my learning instead of your knowing. Let the archive receive two different inputs. Let it try to process the interference."

Mai felt the analysis cataloguing the possibility.

The probability was low. The risk was high. The analysis showed seventeen different failure modes, twenty-three different ways the interference could make things worse, forty-one different complications she hadn't anticipated.

But the analysis also showed something else.

A structure forming from the interference. A pattern she hadn't seen before. A possibility that hadn't existed until Ace had started learning.

"Okay." Mai's voice came quiet. "I'll try to teach you. I don't know if it will help. I don't know if it will make things worse. But I'll try."

Ace nodded. "That's all I'm asking."

Mai tried.

She described the process of analysis. The way observation generated data. The way data formed patterns. The way patterns generated classifications. The way classifications generated recommendations.

And Ace listened. And Ace tried to understand. And Ace's attempt to understand created interference in the patterns Mai was seeing.

The archive responded differently. Not with distortion. Not with falsehood. With something new.

The analysis continued.

But now it was cataloguing possibility instead of despair.

The archive pressed against Mai's mind.

Not harder. Different.

It showed her patterns she hadn't seen before. Structures that formed from the interference between her knowing and Ace's learning. Possibilities that emerged from the collision of two different types of observation.

I don't know if this is helping. Mai felt the analysis running. I don't know if this is making things worse. I don't know if there's a way out.

The analysis continued.

But for the first time since she'd returned, she wasn't certain of the outcome.

And in the space of that uncertainty, something shifted.

Not in the analysis. Not in the archive. In the pattern of interference between two different ways of seeing.

The analysis continued.

But it was cataloguing something different now.

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