



Chapter 14 — Circle, Minimal Form

The secondary office was even more forgettable than the first.

A low concrete box behind a row of tired birch trees, tucked near an access road that looked like it existed only for delivery trucks and municipal secrets. No signage. No obvious cameras. No front desk with a smiling human whose whole job was to be a pattern.

Halverson parked, killed the engine, and sat for one second longer than necessary, listening to the silence like he didn't trust it.

"Inside," he said. "Fast."

Ace climbed out of the van and immediately scanned the windows—reflections, angles, the little lie of glass. Mai followed, bag on shoulder, notebook already open like the page would protect them if she kept it ready.

The door into the building was a plain steel slab with an old mechanical key lock.

Halverson unlocked it. Real key. Real click. No beep.

Ace's mouth quirked. "That sound is offensive now."

Halverson didn't look at her. "Everything is offensive now."

Mai muttered, deadpan, "Good."

The inside smelled like paper and cold air that hadn't been warmed by anything loving. Fluorescent lights. Beige walls. A small room with a table, two chairs, and a metal cabinet—again. Almost identical to the first, which was exactly the point.

"Same layout," Ace noted.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Different geometry."

Halverson raised a brow. "You see geometry."

Mai didn't blink. "Everything that wants to get in uses geometry."

Halverson's mouth twitched faintly, then he reached into the cabinet and pulled out a roll of white tape, a box of cheap chalk sticks, and a flat steel washer the size of a palm.

He set them on the table like ingredients for a ritual that also could've been a minor home repair.

"Minimal form," he said. "No theatrics. No poetry."

Ace stared at the chalk. "I don't do poetry."

Mai gave her a look. "You absolutely do poetry. You just pretend it's sarcasm."

Ace opened her mouth, then closed it, betrayed by accuracy.

Halverson kept moving, because stopping made room for the seam to practice. He cleared the center of the room and nodded at Mai.

"You draw," he said.

Mai crouched, chalk in hand. She didn't hesitate. She drew a circle on the floor—clean, measured, not too large, not too small. A boundary with intent. Then she reinforced it with tape over the chalk line, pressing it down in short, irregular lengths so it didn't become too neat.

Ace watched, fascinated despite herself. "You're randomizing the circle."

Mai's tone was flat. "I'm removing symmetry where it doesn't need to exist."

Halverson placed the steel washer inside the circle, dead center.

Ace frowned. "Why metal."

Halverson shrugged. "If the seam likes clean-metal smell, we give it metal with no warmth attached. We decouple the cue."

Mai's eyes flicked up. "Also the note says metal recommended. This is the simplest."

Ace nodded slowly. "So we give it a bone with no meat."

Halverson didn't correct her metaphor, which probably meant it was accurate.

Mai stood and stepped into the circle first, feet planted on either side of the washer. She kept her disruptor lowered. Weapon ready, but not presented. This wasn't a fight yet. It was refusal made physical.

Ace stepped in opposite her, inside the circle, close enough that Mai's presence sat in her peripheral vision like a lighthouse.

Halverson stayed outside the circle, leaning against the cabinet like he was guarding a ritual with bureaucratic boredom.

Mai looked at Ace. "Anchor posture."

Ace blinked. "What."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Stand like you mean 'no.' Not like you mean 'maybe.'"

Ace's mouth twitched. "I never mean maybe."

Mai stared.

Ace adjusted her stance anyway—feet set, shoulders squared, hands relaxed but ready. The katanas stayed strapped. No drama. No invitation.

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Halverson checked his watch. "We do ninety seconds. Spoken refusal in variable language. No names. No 'home.' No door references."

Ace exhaled. "So basically, we tell it to screw off, but creatively."

Mai's tone went razor-flat. "Yes. Creatively. Without repetition."

Ace nodded, solemn. "Understood."

Halverson held up a hand. "Go."

Mai spoke first, voice calm, precise, and cold enough to have teeth.

"You are not invited. You are not welcome. You do not get access to our bodies, our habits, or our attention."

Ace followed, voice dry and grounded—human, not mystical.

"We see you. We logged you. You don't get a reply beyond this. You don't get a pattern. You don't get a channel."

Mai continued, slightly different cadence.

"You will not borrow our sounds. You will not borrow our comfort. You will not borrow our language."

Ace added, almost conversational, like she was speaking to a rude stranger at a bus stop.

“Also, you’re not clever. You’re just persistent. Big difference.”

Halverson’s mouth twitched. He didn’t smile, but he didn’t disapprove.

For a few seconds, the room was simply a room.

Then the air thickened.

Ace felt it first—a subtle pressure settling in her bones, finger on the piano key again, testing.

Mai’s eyes sharpened. She didn’t flinch. She just kept her voice steady.

“This boundary is real because we decide it is. You do not get to negotiate it.”

Ace’s pulse ticked in her jaw. “You hear that?” she murmured, then corrected herself fast—no questions. No invitations. She changed it into a statement. “You do not get to answer.”

The pressure nudged harder.

The overhead light flickered once.

Halverson’s posture shifted—micro-ready, but still. He didn’t step in. He wouldn’t contaminate the test with his presence.

Mai continued, voice like a knife that didn’t need to swing.

“You do not learn us. You do not train us. You do not teach us what ‘safe’ sounds like.”

The room temperature dipped a fraction.

Ace’s skin prickled. The clean-metal scent tried to creep in, faint as a suggestion.

Mai didn’t react. Ace did one ugly, sharp little laugh—quiet, rude, human.

The scent faltered, like it had been slapped.

Mai’s eyes flicked to Ace for half a beat—approval, then back to focus.

Ace spoke again, changing the words, keeping the meaning.

“We’re not your interface. We’re not your doorbell. We’re not your little science project.”

The pressure paused.

And then—softly—came the sound.

Not a wooden door this time.

A keycard beep.

Just one.

Halverson’s gaze snapped to the room’s actual door.

It stayed still.

The beep came again—two beeps this time—like a someone outside trying twice.

Mai's jaw tightened. "Infrastructure mimic."

Ace kept her eyes forward. "Or just a lie."

Mai changed tactics instantly—variable language, same meaning.

"Your signals are irrelevant. Your imitation is irrelevant. This boundary remains."

Ace added, deadpan, "Your customer service remains terrible."

The keycard beep stuttered—cut off mid-tone, as if something had choked on its own attempt.

The pressure eased by a hair.

Then came something worse.

A soft fabric rustle, close enough to be intimate. Not exact, but near the sound of Mai's sleeve.

Mai's eyes went cold. Not fear-cold. Ownership-cold.

"No," Mai said, voice quiet and final. "You don't get that."

Ace felt Violet inside her go still—not hungry-still this time, but alert-still, like it had lifted its head to listen.

The fabric sound happened again.

Ace answered with ridicule again, but changed it—no repetition.

She made a small, dismissive tch sound. Not a word. Not a phrase. Just contempt.

The rustle stopped.

The pressure thinned.

And then—like a child learning the rules of a game—something knocked.

Not on a device.

Not on an intercom.

A single, soft tap on the floor.

Inside the circle.

Right beside the steel washer.

Ace's breath caught.

Mai didn't move. She didn't step back. She held her ground like gravity.

Halverson's voice was low, from outside the circle. "Don't look down."

Ace's eyes stayed forward. "I'm not."

Mai's voice was a blade. "That is not permitted."

The air thickened again, irritated.

Ace spoke, keeping it plain, no poetry.

"This is as close as you get. You don't cross."

Mai followed, her language shifting again, still refusal.

"You do not enter our interior. You do not enter our sleep. You do not enter our rituals."

Another tap, faint.

Then silence.

The pressure eased like a hand reluctantly lifting off the piano key.

The temperature stabilized.

The clean-metal scent faded, leaving only stale office air.

Halverson checked his watch and lifted a hand. "Stop."

Mai stopped immediately. Ace stopped a beat later.

They stayed inside the circle for one more breath—holding the boundary after the words ended, because humans were stupid like that and stupid sometimes worked.

Halverson broke the stillness. "Result?"

Mai's voice was controlled. "It tested. It didn't escalate into a full 'door' cue. It attempted infrastructure mimicry, then tactile mimicry. Both disrupted by refusal + contempt."

Ace swallowed once. "It tapped inside the circle."

Halverson nodded slowly, eyes hard. "That's new."

Mai's jaw tightened. "It's probing the boundary directly."

Ace's mouth quirked, brittle. "It's offended."

Halverson exhaled. "Good. Let it be."

Mai stepped out of the circle first, careful not to treat the line like a sacred object—but also careful not to casually scuff it, like disrespecting it would feed the seam in some symbolic way.

Ace stepped out second. She didn't look down at the washer until she was outside the circle.

Then she did.

The steel washer sat dead center.

Ordinary.

Except there was a thin smear beside it, barely visible in the fluorescent light—like condensation had pooled on the floor in a shape that didn't match humidity.

Mai crouched, eyes narrowing. "That wasn't there."

Ace's voice went flat. "It left a signature."

Halverson leaned in, but didn't cross the taped line. "Chalk reacts to humidity. Could be the air shift."

Mai didn't deny it. She just wrote: Circle test — contact attempt — condensation smear near metal object.

Ace stared at the smear, then glanced up at the door.

In the small window of the door's glass—just a rectangle meant for safety checks—she saw a reflection.

Not hers.

Not Mai's.

A figure in the hallway beyond, standing still.

Tall-ish. Indistinct. Watching like it had all the time in the world.

Ace's stomach tightened.

The figure didn't move.

Didn't approach.

Didn't knock.

Just... observed.

Ace didn't say "door" or "home" or "who are you."

She didn't give it that.

She simply murmured, more to herself than anyone:

"I've seen you before."

Mai's head snapped up. "Where."

Ace didn't look away from the little window. "There."

Halverson followed her gaze, then his posture shifted—subtle, but sharp.

The hallway outside the door was empty.

No footsteps. No shadow.

Just beige walls and fluorescent hum.

Ace blinked once, hard.

The reflection showed only three people in a room. Nothing else.

Mai watched Ace's face closely, then wrote a single line without commentary:

Observer recurrence — visual-only — nonpersistent.

Halverson's voice was low, controlled. "We're done here."

Ace swallowed. "Yeah."

Mai stood and gathered their things. Halverson peeled the tape circle up fast—no reverence, no ritualism—balling it into a tight wad like garbage. Chalk dust smeared. The line vanished.

"Don't leave artifacts," Halverson muttered. "Not for it. Not for anyone."

Ace nodded once. "Burn the script."

Mai's eyes flicked to her, surprised at the phrase.

Ace's mouth quirked. "What. I can do language too."

Mai's lips twitched. "Yes. Unfortunately."

They moved again—because movement was refusal, and dawn was just another procedure.

But as they left the room, Ace couldn't shake one thought:

The seam was learning how to knock.

And something else—something quieter—was watching them learn how to refuse.

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