

## Chapter 5: Second Pass

The argument didn't explode.

It condensed.

That was worse.

The safehouse held the silence like a sealed container—no raised voices, no pacing, no wasted motion. Just three vectors pulling against each other without breaking formation.

Mai didn't sit.

Ace didn't lean.

Shammy didn't move.

For a while, that was enough.

Then:

"I need another pass."

Flat.

Not defensive.

Not asking.

Ace's answer came just as clean.

"No."

No buildup.

No justification.

Just a boundary.

Mai's gaze didn't shift.

"That wasn't enough data."

"It was enough," Ace said.

"To confirm risk," Mai replied. "Not to define it."

"Good," Ace said. "Then we don't define it."

Mai exhaled slowly.

"That's not how this works."

"It is now."

A beat.

Then:

“You’re treating this like a trap,” Mai continued. “It isn’t.”

Ace’s eyes sharpened.

“You’re treating it like a problem to solve.”

“It is.”

“No,” Ace said. “It’s a system that lets you decide it’s a problem to solve.”

The difference landed.

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

Didn’t dismiss it either.

Shammy’s voice came quietly from the side.

“What changes with a second pass?”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“Resolution.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Mai turned slightly toward her.

“I’ll know what it is.”

Shammy tilted her head.

“And if what it is... wants to be finished?”

Mai’s jaw tightened.

“It doesn’t *want* anything.”

“That’s not the question.”

Silence again.

The city outside shifted—some distant engine revving too high, then cutting out mid-sound.

Mai’s voice dropped a fraction.

“It doesn’t have intent.”

Ace moved then.

One step forward.

“That’s what makes it worse.”

Mai turned fully now.

“No,” she said. “That’s what makes it predictable.”

Ace stopped just short of her.

“Say that again.”

Mai didn’t.

Because now—

it didn’t sound as solid.

Shammy watched both of them.

Then, softly:

“You were faster this time.”

Mai frowned slightly.

“What.”

“In there,” Shammy said. “Your breathing didn’t change. Your focus did.”

Mai looked away.

“That’s normal.”

“No,” Shammy said. “It was cleaner.”

That word again.

It didn’t belong.

Not here.

Mai crossed her arms, not defensive—containment.

“I stayed within limits.”

Ace’s voice cut in.

“You *stopped* within limits.”

Another difference.

Smaller.

Sharper.

Mai didn’t like that one.

“...yes.”

Ace nodded once.

“That’s the only part that matters.”

Mai’s fingers tightened briefly against her arms.

“Stopping early doesn’t make the system less dangerous. It makes us less informed.”

“It makes you alive.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It is to me.”

That—

finally—

hit something.

Mai’s expression shifted.

Not anger.

Not frustration.

Something closer to recognition she didn’t want.

Shammy stepped forward then, just enough that the space between them changed again.

“Both of you are right,” she said.

Ace made a quiet sound.

“Great.”

Shammy ignored it.

“If the system completes through input, then more input means more risk.”

Mai nodded slightly.

“Yes.”

“If we don’t understand it, we’re blind.”

Another nod.

“Yes.”

Shammy’s gaze moved between them.

“So we choose how much risk we take... before we take it.”

Ace didn't respond.

Mai did.

"...we already did."

"No," Shammy said gently. "We chose a limit. Not an outcome."

That reframed it.

Just enough.

Ace exhaled slowly.

"Two minutes. One pass."

Mai held her gaze.

"That was before we knew it could be completed."

"That's exactly why it matters."

Mai's eyes flicked toward the terminal.

Dark.

Off.

Still.

She could turn it on in less than a second.

Pull the data back up.

Run the sequence again.

Cleaner this time.

Faster.

More controlled.

Finish the map.

Just the map.

Not the system.

Just—

"Mai."

Ace didn't raise her voice.

Didn't need to.

Mai's focus snapped back.

Annoyed.

At herself.

"Two minutes isn't enough," she said again, quieter now.

Ace didn't argue.

Just watched her.

"Then say what is," she said.

Mai hesitated.

That was new.

"...three," she said finally.

Ace shook her head immediately.

"No."

"Two-thirty."

"No."

"Two-fifteen."

"No."

Each number landed softer.

Less certain.

Ace didn't move.

Didn't negotiate.

Didn't meet her halfway.

That was the point.

Mai exhaled sharply.

"This isn't rational."

"It's not supposed to be."

That—

again—

cut deeper than it should have.

Mai turned away, pacing once across the room before stopping herself.

Too much movement.

Too much energy.

She forced it back down.

Controlled.

Always controlled.

Shammy watched the shift.

Not the pacing.

The correction.

"You're already solving it," she said.

Mai froze.

"No."

"Yes."

Shammy's voice stayed calm.

"You're optimizing time, not limiting it."

Mai's jaw tightened.

"That's the same thing."

"No," Shammy said softly. "One finds the edge. The other pushes it."

That landed clean.

Mai didn't argue.

Because she couldn't.

Ace stepped in again, closing the distance just enough that the conversation couldn't drift.

"No second pass," she said.

Mai looked at her.

"And if that's wrong."

"It might be."

That wasn't what she expected.

Mai blinked once.

“What.”

Ace didn't flinch.

“It might be wrong.”

Silence.

For a second—

everything stopped.

Mai searched her face.

Found nothing there but certainty.

“You're... fine with that?”

“No,” Ace said. “I'm fine with you being here instead of in that chair wondering why you didn't leave.”

That line again.

Different angle.

Same weight.

Mai looked away.

Because this time—

it worked.

Not fully.

Not enough.

But it shifted something.

Shammy stepped closer, her presence settling between them—not breaking the tension, just holding it in place so it didn't snap.

“There's another option,” she said.

Both of them looked at her.

“Say it,” Ace said.

Shammy didn't hesitate.

“You don't go deeper.”

Mai's expression didn't change.

“That's the same as stopping.”

"No," Shammy said. "You change what you look for."

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly.

"How."

Shammy's gaze flicked toward the dark terminal.

"You already saw it," she said. "It doesn't pull. It doesn't push. It leaves space."

Mai didn't respond.

Not yet.

"So don't fill it," Shammy continued. "Watch what happens when you don't."

That—

was new.

Mai turned that over in her head.

Not instinctively.

Carefully.

"If I don't engage the gaps..." she murmured.

"They stay empty," Ace said.

"Or they collapse," Mai countered.

"Then you'll see it happen," Shammy said.

Silence again.

But different this time.

Not resistance.

Consideration.

Mai's gaze shifted back to the terminal.

Still off.

Still quiet.

Still—

waiting.

"...a passive pass," she said slowly.

Ace frowned.

“Explain.”

“I go in,” Mai said. “But I don’t resolve anything. No structural completion. No filling gaps. Just observation.”

Ace’s expression didn’t soften.

“That’s harder.”

“I know.”

“That’s why it might work,” Shammy said.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Ace watched her for a long second.

Measuring.

Not the plan.

Her.

“Two minutes,” she said finally.

Mai met her gaze.

“And no extension.”

“No extension.”

A beat.

Then:

“...and you cut immediately if I drift.”

“I was going to anyway.”

Mai almost smiled.

Almost.

She turned toward the terminal.

Stopped.

Looked back at them both.

“Then we do it now.”

Ace pushed off the wall.

“Yeah.”

Shammy’s hand brushed lightly against the counter as she moved—static snapping once, then fading.

“Now is better,” she said.

Mai powered the terminal back on.

The screen came alive instantly.

No delay.

No resistance.

The system was still there.

Exactly as they had left it.

Unchanged.

Unfinished.

Waiting.

Mai didn’t let herself pause this time.

Didn’t give the thought room to grow.

She keyed the connection.

Set the timer.

02:00

Bright.

Final.

“Mark,” she said.

And went back in.

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