

Chapter 8: No Endpoint

The terminal came back on slower this time.

Not because the system lagged.

Because Mai did.

Her hand hovered just above the activation surface, fingers still, not trembling—but not as certain as before either. The motion that had been automatic now required intention.

That alone told her enough.

Good.

It meant she was aware of it.

Bad.

It meant it had already changed something.

Behind her, Ace didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Didn't rush it.

That was new.

Shammy shifted slightly near the window, watching the reflection instead of the screen itself. Not the data. The people interacting with it.

"Say it," Ace said finally.

Mai didn't look back.

"No objective."

Ace's voice came immediately.

"Say it again."

"No objective," Mai repeated. "No resolution target. No defined outcome."

Shammy's gaze flicked to her hands.

"They're already slower," she said quietly.

Mai didn't deny it.

"Yes."

Ace stepped closer.

“That’s good.”

Mai exhaled once.

“Or I’m hesitating.”

“Same thing,” Ace said.

“No,” Mai replied. “Hesitation creates gaps.”

A beat.

Then she corrected herself.

“...and I don’t fill them.”

That landed.

Better.

Cleaner.

Ace nodded once.

“Two minutes.”

“No extension,” Mai said.

“I cut,” Ace replied.

“Yes.”

Shammy’s voice came softer.

“I watch.”

Mai didn’t respond.

Didn’t need to.

She engaged the interface.

“Mark.”

The overlay didn’t feel easier this time.

It felt... incomplete.

Not the system.

Her.

The structure appeared again, threading through the corridor in that same impossible

alignment—lines where none should exist, connections that made sense only when she stopped trying to measure them.

But this time—

she didn't reach for them.

Didn't define them.

Didn't map them.

She let them sit.

"Thirty seconds."

Ace's voice anchored the space.

Mai nodded once.

"Entry stable."

The system didn't react.

Didn't expand.

Didn't clarify.

It simply remained.

Unresolved.

That felt wrong.

Her mind moved automatically—

identifying edges, predicting connections, anticipating completion points—

She stopped it.

Hard.

Not suppressing.

Redirecting.

Observation.

Only observation.

The structure held.

"Sixty seconds."

Shammy shifted slightly behind her.

“The air’s... uneven now.”

Mai almost turned.

Didn’t.

Focused.

The gaps were still there.

Clear.

Defined.

Empty.

Her thoughts brushed against one—

not entering, not completing—

just... touching the boundary.

Nothing happened.

No alignment.

No sharpening.

No pull.

Just—

nothing.

That was worse.

Her breathing changed.

Not faster.

Less stable.

The lack of response was... unnatural.

Systems did something.

Even broken ones.

This—

did nothing at all.

“Ninety seconds.”

Ace’s voice was closer now.

Mai's focus tightened.

The structure began to degrade.

Not collapse.

Not vanish.

Just... lose definition.

Edges softening.

Connections fading.

The entire overlay becoming—

irrelevant.

Like a puzzle she wasn't trying to solve.

It stopped being a puzzle.

It stopped being anything.

Mai's mind resisted.

Harder than before.

This wasn't danger.

This was loss.

Information slipping away because she refused to engage it.

"...it's fading," she said quietly.

"Good," Ace replied.

"No," Mai said immediately. "That's not—"

She stopped.

Because it was.

The system wasn't degrading.

Her interaction with it was.

Without intent—

there was nothing to resolve.

Without resolution—

there was nothing to see.

“Time.”

Ace didn't wait this time.

“Pull.”

Mai didn't hesitate.

Not this time.

She disconnected cleanly.

The overlay vanished.

No snap.

No collapse.

Just absence.

02:00 → 00:12

She had pulled early.

On purpose.

Mai blinked once, grounding herself back in the corridor.

Concrete.

Metal.

Air that moved.

Normal.

“...nothing,” she said.

Ace stepped back slightly.

“That's the point.”

Mai shook her head.

“No. That's not a system. That's—”

She stopped.

Because she didn't have a word for it.

Shammy stepped closer.

“The air dropped when it faded,” she said.

Mai looked at her.

“How.”

“Like something stopped holding shape.”

That...

fit.

Too well.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“It only exists when you’re trying to finish it,” she said.

Ace’s gaze sharpened.

“Say that again.”

Mai met her eyes.

“It’s not there unless you’re completing it.”

Silence.

Then Ace:

“Then we walk.”

Mai didn’t move.

Because that—

was the answer.

And she hated it.

“...we learned nothing,” she said.

“No,” Ace replied. “We learned exactly what it is.”

Mai’s jaw tightened.

“And what’s that.”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

“A problem that doesn’t exist unless you make it one.”

That—

landed.

Hard.

Shammy didn’t interrupt.

Didn't soften it.

Just let it sit.

Mai looked back at the port.

At the place where the system had been.

Still was.

Technically.

But not—

present.

Her mind reached for it automatically—

trying to reconstruct the structure, rebuild the connections, reassemble the logic—

It slipped.

Gone.

Not erased.

Just... inaccessible.

Because she wasn't solving it.

"...it disappears," she said quietly.

Ace nodded once.

"Good."

Mai's fingers flexed once at her side.

"That's not good."

"Why."

"Because it means we can't track it. Can't measure it. Can't predict it."

Ace stepped closer again.

"We don't need to."

"Yes, we do."

"No," Ace said. "We need to not build it."

Silence.

That one—

stuck.

Shammy's voice came softer now.

"It's not a system we interact with," she said. "It's a state we create."

Mai looked at her.

"...yes."

Ace exhaled slowly.

"Then we're done."

Mai didn't argue.

Didn't push.

Didn't ask for another pass.

Because now—

she understood the limit.

And why it mattered.

But that didn't make it easier.

"...if someone else goes in," she said.

Ace's expression didn't change.

"They make it real."

Mai nodded once.

"Yes."

Shammy stepped back slightly, the air settling again around them.

"Then the job isn't to finish it," she said.

Mai's gaze shifted.

"Then what."

Shammy looked at both of them.

"To make sure no one else tries."

Ace nodded.

"Now that sounds like a job."

Mai didn't smile.

But something in her posture shifted.

Not resolution.

Not comfort.

Just—

acceptance.

For now.

“Let’s go,” Ace said.

This time—

Mai didn’t look back.

The city hit harder on the way out.

Louder.

Messier.

Real.

Exactly what she needed.

Mai walked without speaking, hands in her pockets now—not because she was cold, but because she needed to keep them still.

Ace stayed close.

Not hovering.

Not watching.

Just there.

Shammy drifted slightly behind, her presence smoothing the space between them in ways that didn’t need explanation.

They reached the street.

Stopped.

Not because they had to.

Because the moment needed it.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“It’s not incomplete,” she said.

Ace didn't react.

"We know that."

Mai's voice dropped.

"It's not unfinished either."

That—

was new.

Ace turned slightly.

"Then what."

Mai looked out at the city.

At the endless movement.

The noise.

The chaos that didn't try to resolve into anything.

"...it's optional," she said.

Silence.

Then Ace:

"Good."

Mai shook her head.

"No."

A beat.

Then:

"That's worse."

And for the first time—

Ace didn't argue.

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