

## Chapter 5 — Breaking the Frame

The crowd was thinking.

That was the real problem.

Not the bodies.

Not the statues.

Not even the thing that wasn't there.

People.

Trying to make sense of it.

You could feel it in the way they stood now—less scattered, more aligned. Eyes drifting back to the same invisible points, trying to triangulate something that refused to exist properly.

Building a picture.

Ace exhaled slowly.

"Yeah," she muttered. "We're out of time."

Mai didn't disagree.

"Agreed."

Her gaze moved across the crowd—not faces, not identities—just vectors. Lines of sight. Angles forming, breaking, reforming again.

"They're converging," she said. "Not physically. Cognitively."

Ace rolled her shoulders once, grounding herself in motion.

"Then we break it."

"How?" one of the bystanders snapped. Same corporate badge. Same edge of panic. "People are dying—what are you even doing?"

Ace didn't look at her.

Didn't engage.

"You want to live?" she said flatly. "Stop trying to understand it."

"That's not—"

"Do it," Ace cut in.

Something in her tone—sharp, final—shut the rest down.

Not compliance.

But hesitation.

And hesitation was enough.

For now.

Mai stepped slightly forward—not toward the crowd, but into the space between them and the street.

“Listen carefully,” she said, voice calm but carrying. “There is no creature. No entity. No consistent form.”

A ripple moved through the group.

Disbelief.

Resistance.

Good.

“The more you try to identify what you’re seeing,” Mai continued, “the more likely you are to—”

She stopped.

Not because she didn’t know what to say.

Because saying it wrong mattered.

Ace caught it.

“...to finish the process,” Ace said instead. “Yeah. We’ve seen that part.”

Mai nodded once.

“Therefore,” she continued, adjusting, “you must not complete the pattern.”

Blank stares.

Of course.

Wrong language.

Too abstract.

Shammy stepped forward.

Not into the center.

Just enough.

Her presence shifted the air again—cooler now, denser, like a pressure front settling over the group.

“Don’t decide what it is,” she said softly.

That landed better.

Not logic.

Instinct.

The crowd quieted.

A little.

“Look away,” Shammy added. “Move. Don’t stay still. Don’t... focus.”

A beat.

Someone actually took a step back.

Then another.

The pattern loosened.

Slightly.

Mai exhaled—almost imperceptibly.

“Temporary disruption,” she murmured.

Ace nodded. “I’ll take it.”

She turned slightly, keeping her gaze low, sweeping the space without locking onto anything.

“Okay,” she said. “We need noise.”

Mai glanced at her. “Clarify.”

“Chaos,” Ace replied. “Movement. Light. Anything that keeps the brain from settling.”

Mai considered it.

Tested it.

“...valid,” she said.

Of course it was.

Because the alternative—

Precision.

Clarity.

Understanding—

That was killing people.

Ace reached down, grabbing the fallen chrome shard with the toe of her boot, flicking it up just enough to catch it in her hand.

She didn't look at it.

Didn't angle it.

Just held it.

Then—

She threw it.

Hard.

Not at anything.

Just *away*.

It clattered across the pavement, spinning, reflecting fractured light in chaotic bursts.

Eyes followed it instinctively.

Good.

Break the focus.

"Keep doing that," Ace said. "Anything that moves. Anything that distracts. Don't let your brain settle."

A few of them started shifting.

Not coordinated.

Not clean.

But enough.

A bottle hit the ground somewhere behind them.

Someone kicked over a crate.

Light fractured differently.

Shadows broke.

The street lost its clean lines.

Shammy's presence amplified it—subtle pressure variations, just enough to keep everything slightly off-balance.

Mai adjusted position again, constantly recalculating angles.

"Stability decreasing," she said. "But not eliminated."

Ace smirked faintly. "Didn't think it would be that easy."

Something shifted.

Closer again.

Not toward the crowd.

Toward them.

Of course.

Ace felt it brush the edge of her awareness—stronger now, more defined, like it was *trying* to complete itself.

Trying to become something.

Her mind pushed back automatically this time.

No shape.

No name.

No story.

Just—

Nothing.

It resisted.

She felt that too.

A pressure against absence.

“...it doesn’t like this,” Ace muttered.

Mai nodded. “We’re denying it resolution.”

“Good.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“It’s focusing,” she said.

Ace’s lips thinned. “Yeah. I got that.”

Because now—

It wasn’t diffuse anymore.

Not spread across the crowd.

It was *narrowing*.

On them.

On the only three people in the street actively refusing to understand it.

“Of course it is,” Ace said. “We’re the only ones not playing along.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

“Then it will attempt to force alignment.”

Ace huffed. “Let it try.”

Bold.

Reckless.

Very Ace.

But not stupid.

Not this time.

Because she didn’t step forward.

Didn’t chase.

Didn’t engage.

She waited.

That alone was new.

The air tightened.

Shammy’s presence pushed back—pressure equalizing, resisting the invisible pull.

A flicker—

Stronger than before.

Ace’s vision twitched—

And this time—

Something almost held.

A silhouette.

Not clear.

Not stable.

But closer.

Her brain reached for it—

Weapon.

Enemy.

Target—

Wrong.

She cut it off.

Hard.

Her teeth clenched.

“Yeah, no,” she muttered. “Not today.”

The shape collapsed.

Not gone.

Just... denied.

Mai watched her closely.

“Good,” she said quietly.

Ace shot her a quick glance. “Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

“It is a big deal.”

“Later,” Ace said. “We survive first.”

Shammy’s eyes narrowed slightly—not in focus, but in pressure.

“It’s adapting faster now,” she said.

“Of course it is,” Ace replied. “Everything here does.”

Mai’s posture shifted again.

Decision point.

“We cannot outpace adaptation,” she said. “We need to break the feedback loop.”

Ace tilted her head slightly. “Meaning?”

Mai met her gaze.

“We make the pattern unusable.”

A beat.

Ace’s grin flashed—brief, sharp.

There it was.

The angle.

“Yeah,” she said. “Now that I can work with.”

Behind them, the crowd had shifted further back.

Less focused now.

Less aligned.

Safer.

For the moment.

But the thing—

Whatever it was—

Had already made its choice.

The pressure centered.

Locked.

Not on the city.

Not on the crowd.

On them.

Three points.

Stable.

Recognizable.

Dangerous.

Shammy inhaled slowly.

The air responded.

Heavy.

Charged.

“It’s going to try again,” she said.

Ace rolled her shoulders, settling into that quiet, coiled readiness.

“Good,” she said softly. “Let’s see how it likes getting it wrong.”

And somewhere—

right at the edge of perception—

something leaned in.

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