

Chapter 6 — Refusal

The pressure didn't spike.

It focused.

That was worse.

No explosion of force, no sudden shift that could be reacted to. Just a narrowing—like the entire street had decided exactly where to look.

At them.

Ace felt it settle across her shoulders first.

Weight without mass.

Attention without eyes.

Her instinct screamed to move.

To break it.

To *do* something.

She didn't.

That was the difference now.

"...there," she said quietly—not pointing, not turning—just acknowledging.

Mai didn't follow the word.

Didn't need to.

"I know," she replied.

Her posture adjusted a fraction—subtle misalignment, breaking any clean interpretive path between them and the pressure point.

Shammy stepped forward.

Just one step.

The air responded instantly—density rising, temperature dipping, microcurrents shifting like something alive but unwilling to commit to a direction.

A buffer.

Not a shield.

Never a shield.

"You don't fight it," Shammy said softly. "You don't meet it."

Ace let out a slow breath.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “Figured that part out.”

Because it was trying again.

Harder this time.

The edge of her vision *insisted*.

A line—

Curving.

Completing.

Her mind reached—

Stopped.

She forced it to stop.

No shape.

No name.

No—

The pressure pushed back.

Not physical.

Cognitive.

A demand.

Resolve me.

Ace’s lips curled faintly.

“...nah,” she said under her breath.

And let the thought die before it formed.

The shape collapsed.

Not defeated.

Just... unmade.

Mai watched the interaction without looking at it.

Tracking effects, not cause.

“It’s attempting forced completion,” she said. “Escalation confirmed.”

Ace huffed. “Yeah, I got the memo.”

The air shifted again—sharper now, more aggressive in its precision.

It wasn’t spreading anymore.

It was *testing*.

Angles.

Entries.

Weak points.

Shammy adjusted—micro-movements, barely visible, but the atmosphere around them warped just enough to disrupt clean lines.

“Stay uneven,” she said quietly.

Ace smirked faintly. “That’s my natural state.”

Mai didn’t react to the joke.

She was already moving.

Not forward.

Not back.

Sideways.

Breaking symmetry.

“Structured unpredictability,” she said. “Maintain it.”

Ace followed—mirroring without mirroring, offsetting just enough to keep the system unstable.

For a moment—

It worked.

The pressure stuttered.

Just a fraction.

Then—

It changed.

The approach shifted.

Not pushing for a full shape.

Too risky now.

Too easy to deny.

Instead—

Fragments.

Ace felt it immediately.

Not one image.

Multiple.

Half-formed.

Contradictory.

A reflection.

A shadow.

A silhouette that didn't align with anything real.

Her brain tried to sort them—

Dangerous.

Very dangerous.

“Don't pick one,” Mai said sharply.

Ace exhaled through her teeth.

“Wasn't planning to.”

But it was harder now.

Because fragments invited comparison.

Comparison invited conclusion.

Conclusion—

Finished the process.

Shammy stepped closer again—this time directly beside Ace, their proximity tightening the pressure field around them.

The air grew thick enough to feel.

Not choking.

Just... resistant.

“Let it stay broken,” Shammy said.

Ace nodded once.

“Yeah,” she said. “I can do that.”

Another fragment flickered.

Closer.

Sharper.

For a split second—

It almost *fit*.

Her mind reached—

Weapon.

Enemy.

Threat vector—

She cut it.

Hard.

The thought snapped mid-formation, leaving nothing behind but a hollow echo of what it *could* have been.

The pressure recoiled.

Not much.

But enough.

Mai caught it.

“Reaction confirmed,” she said. “Denial disrupts reinforcement.”

Ace’s grin was quick, sharp.

“Good,” she said. “Then we lean into that.”

The thing shifted again.

Faster now.

Impatient.

It didn’t like this.

Didn’t like being incomplete.

Didn’t like being—

Ignored.

The pressure surged—

Not outward—

Inward.

Targeting.

Ace.

Specifically.

Of course.

She was the easiest to push.

Fastest to act.

Closest to completion.

“Hey,” Ace muttered. “That’s rude.”

Mai’s voice cut in immediately.

“Stay with the rule.”

Ace’s jaw tightened.

“Yeah. I know the rule.”

The pressure intensified.

Fragments multiplied.

Not just visual now.

Conceptual.

Her brain started offering solutions automatically—

Predator.

Anomaly.

Object—

Each one a trap.

Each one a path to completion.

Her breathing slowed.

Deliberate.

Controlled.

“No,” she said quietly.

Not to Mai.

Not to Shammy.

To it.

“I’m not finishing that for you.”

The fragments stuttered.

Collapsed.

Reformed.

Pushed again.

Harder.

Shammy’s hand hovered near Ace’s shoulder—not touching, but close enough that the air between them thickened, stabilizing, preventing the pressure from locking cleanly.

“Stay with it,” she murmured.

Ace didn’t answer.

Didn’t need to.

Because something clicked.

Not in the environment.

In her.

A shift.

Small.

But real.

She stopped trying to resist actively.

Stopped pushing back.

Instead—

She let the fragments exist.

Unresolved.

Unchallenged.

Unfinished.

The pressure hesitated.

That was new.

Mai saw it immediately.

“Passive denial,” she said. “More efficient.”

Ace let out a quiet breath.

“Yeah,” she said. “Turns out doing nothing... works.”

The fragments flickered again.

Weaker now.

Less defined.

Struggling to anchor.

Shammy’s presence expanded slightly—not forceful, just reinforcing the instability, making sure nothing settled long enough to become real.

“It’s losing coherence,” she said.

Ace’s lips twitched.

“Good,” she replied.

Mai’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Not losing,” she corrected. “Failing to complete.”

“Same difference.”

“No.”

Ace didn’t argue.

Didn’t need to.

Because she felt it too.

It wasn’t going away.

It wasn’t dying.

It was just... stuck.

Unable to finish what it started.

Unable to become anything.

The pressure thinned.

Not gone.

Never gone.

Just... less.

The street breathed again.

Slightly.

Shammy exhaled, the air easing with her.

“Hold it there,” she said quietly.

Ace nodded once.

“Yeah,” she replied. “I’m not giving it anything.”

Mai adjusted her stance one last time, maintaining the broken geometry.

“Maintain non-resolution,” she said.

Ace smirked faintly.

“Easiest job I’ve had all day.”

A beat.

Then—

The pressure shifted again.

Subtle.

Different.

Not pushing.

Not probing.

Watching.

Learning.

Mai felt it first.

“Careful,” she said.

Ace’s eyes flicked—controlled, unfocused.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “I know that look.”

Because it wasn’t trying to win anymore.

Not here.

Not like this.

It was adapting.

Again.

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Last update: **21/04/2026 15:56**

