



Chapter 1 — The Misread Signal

The place was too normal.

That was the first problem.

Warm lighting. Low music. Glassware that didn't hum with contained anomalies. People talking about things that didn't try to kill them halfway through the sentence. A restaurant designed for human comfort — not survival.

Ace sat slightly sideways in her chair, one foot hooked under the other, posture loose in a way that still somehow looked ready to move. Her eyes flicked across the room in short, efficient sweeps — not searching, just... mapping. Habit. Always.

Mai sat across from her, upright but not stiff, one elbow resting lightly on the table, fingers loosely around her glass. Her attention wasn't on the room.

It was on Ace.

Not overtly. Not in a way anyone else would notice. But present. Always present.

Shammy leaned back in her chair beside them, long frame relaxed in a way that made the air around her feel... settled. Not still. Just... cooperative. Like the room had agreed, quietly, not to escalate anything.

For once, nothing was escalating.

"Food is late," Ace said.

It wasn't a complaint. Just an observation.

Mai didn't look at the kitchen. "No, it isn't."

Ace blinked once. "Feels late."

"That's because nothing is trying to kill us," Mai said.

A pause.

Ace considered that.

"...right."

Shammy's lips curved faintly, almost invisible. "Time perception stabilizes when survival pressure drops."

Ace glanced at her. "Don't like it."

"I noticed."

The waiter arrived.

Young. Mid-twenties. Slightly too confident smile — the kind that usually came from not yet having encountered something that would permanently recalibrate it.

He set the drinks down first, careful, controlled.

Then he looked at Mai.

Not long. Not obvious.

But long enough.

"Can I get you anything else?" he asked.

The tone shifted half a degree.

Not inappropriate.

Not professional either.

Just... *aimed*.

Mai noticed.

Of course she did.

She smiled politely — measured, neutral. "No, thank you."

The waiter lingered for half a second longer than necessary.

Then left.

Silence.

Ace's gaze followed him for exactly one second.

Then snapped back.

"Why did he look at you like that?"

Mai didn't even blink. "Like what?"

Ace tilted her head slightly. "That."

"That is not a useful descriptor."

“He was—” Ace paused, searching for the word, then discarded precision entirely. “—interested.”

Shammy’s fingers tapped once against the table. A small shift in pressure. Curious.

Mai exhaled softly. “He was being polite.”

“No,” Ace said immediately.

Too fast.

Mai’s eyes flicked up.

Ace didn’t notice.

“He wasn’t,” Ace continued, tone flat, certain. “That wasn’t neutral.”

Shammy turned her head slightly, studying Ace instead of Mai now.

Interesting.

Mai rested her chin lightly against her hand. “You’re basing that on?”

Ace frowned.

“Timing,” she said. “Angle. Focus.”

“...angle.”

“Yes.”

Mai’s expression stayed calm.

But there was something underneath it now.

A small shift.

“You’re analyzing waitstaff behavior?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Ace opened her mouth—

Stopped.

Closed it again.

There was a pause.

A real one.

“...he was off,” she said finally.

Not as clean. Not as certain.

Shammy leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on the table now, attention sharpening.

The air adjusted with her.

“You reacted before you identified the variable,” she said gently.

Ace’s eyes flicked to her. “No.”

“Yes.”

Another pause.

Mai didn’t interrupt.

Ace’s fingers tapped once against the table.

“...I identified it.”

Shammy’s head tilted just a fraction. “Then say it.”

Ace looked at Mai.

Then away.

“...he was looking at you.”

Silence.

There it was.

Mai’s expression didn’t change.

But something in her posture did.

Not tension.

Focus.

“People look at me all the time,” she said.

“I know.”

“Then why—”

“He shouldn’t.”

That landed harder than it was meant to.

Ace froze for half a second after saying it.

Like she’d heard it too.

Like it had come out before she had time to filter it.

Mai’s gaze sharpened just a touch.

“...shouldn’t,” she repeated.

Ace shifted in her seat. “Not like that.”

“Like what?”

Ace exhaled, frustrated now — not at Mai.

At the lack of a clean answer.

“I don’t—” she stopped, then tried again, more force behind it. “It wasn’t neutral.”

“That’s not the same as ‘shouldn’t.’”

“I know.”

“Then explain the difference.”

Ace didn’t.

Couldn’t.

Shammy’s fingers stilled.

The air around the table tightened — not dangerously.

Just... attentive.

Ace’s jaw set slightly.

“I don’t like it,” she said finally.

There.

Clean.

Honest.

Unfiltered.

Mai blinked once.

That... was new.

Not the statement.

The way it was said.

No structure. No justification. No attempt to frame it logically.

Just—

A boundary.

Unmapped.

Unexplained.

Mai leaned back slightly in her chair, studying her now.

"...interesting."

Ace frowned. "What?"

"You're reacting emotionally without building a model first."

"That's not—"

"It is."

Ace opened her mouth again—

Then stopped.

Because this time, she wasn't sure.

Shammy watched the exchange like someone observing weather patterns forming in real time.

No threat.

But... unstable in a very specific way.

She tilted her head slightly, voice softer now.

"You're not reacting to him," she said.

Ace looked at her.

Shammy met her gaze calmly.

"You're reacting to what his attention implies."

A pause.

Ace's brow furrowed.

Mai didn't speak.

She was watching Ace very carefully now.

"...which is?" Ace asked.

Shammy's expression didn't change.

"That Mai is visible to someone outside your system."

Silence.

That landed.

Harder.

Ace's fingers curled slightly against the table.

"That's obvious," she said.

Shammy shook her head once. "No. It's usually irrelevant."

Another pause.

Ace didn't answer immediately.

Because that was true.

It was irrelevant.

It had always been irrelevant.

Until—

"...it isn't," Ace said quietly.

Mai's breath hitched.

Just slightly.

Almost nothing.

But enough.

Ace noticed that.

Of course she did.

And that made it worse.

"I didn't say it *isn't* irrelevant," Mai said carefully.

"I know."

"Then why—"

"I don't know."

That came out sharper than intended.

Ace exhaled, running a hand through her hair, visibly irritated now — not at Mai.

At herself.

"I just—" she stopped, then tried again, slower. "I don't like it."

There it was again.

Same sentence.

Same weight.

No added logic.

No explanation.

Just—

A line.

Shammy leaned back slightly, letting the pressure ease.

The system was holding.

Barely.

Mai tapped her fingers once against the glass.

Thinking.

Reframing.

Then—

“...okay,” she said.

Ace blinked.

That wasn't the response she expected.

“What?”

Mai met her gaze evenly.

“You don't like it.”

“...yes.”

“That's fine.”

Ace frowned deeper. “That's it?”

“For now.”

“That's not a solution.”

“No,” Mai said calmly. “It's a variable.”

Ace stared at her.

That didn't help.

At all.

Shammy smiled faintly.

Very faintly.

“System update in progress,” she murmured.

Ace shot her a look. “Not helpful.”

“I disagree.”

The waiter returned.

Perfect timing.

“Your food—”

He stopped mid-sentence.

Just for a fraction of a second.

Because something at the table had... shifted.

Nothing visible.

Nothing obvious.

But enough to trip instinct.

He set the plates down a little faster than before.

“Anything else?” he asked.

This time, his eyes flicked to Mai again.

Reflex.

Ace saw it.

Mai saw Ace see it.

Shammy saw *everything*.

Ace’s fingers tightened slightly around the edge of the table.

Not aggressive.

Not overt.

But—

Noticeable.

The waiter hesitated.

“...no,” Mai said smoothly.

“Thank you.”

He nodded quickly.

Left.

Faster this time.

Silence settled again.

Ace stared at her plate.

Didn't touch it.

"...I still don't like it," she muttered.

Mai's lips twitched.

Just slightly.

Not amused.

Not exactly.

But—

Something.

"Noted," she said.

Shammy leaned back, eyes half-lidded, listening to the air settle again around them.

"Fascinating," she said quietly.

Ace groaned. "Don't start."

"I'm not starting anything," Shammy said.

A beat.

Then—

"You are."

Chapter 2 — Variable Testing

Ace didn't eat.

That, by itself, wasn't unusual.

What was unusual was that the food sat in front of her long enough to cool.

Mai noticed immediately.

She didn't comment.

Yet.

Shammy noticed too — not the food, but the *air* around Ace. It had shifted from neutral alertness into something tighter. Not unstable.

But... *contained*.

Like pressure building in a sealed space with no clear release point.

Ace picked up her fork.

Put it down again.

"...this is inefficient," she muttered.

Mai took a slow sip from her glass, eyes steady on her.

"You're not wrong."

Ace glanced up. "You're not helping."

"I'm observing."

"That's worse."

Shammy's fingers traced a small circle against the table, absent, thoughtful.

"Observation precedes intervention," she said.

Ace didn't look at her. "Don't intervene."

"I didn't say I would."

"You implied it."

"I implied awareness."

Ace exhaled sharply through her nose.

Mai set her glass down carefully.

Then — very deliberately — she shifted her posture.

Relaxed.

Just enough to be noticeable.

Ace's eyes flicked up immediately.

There.

Good.

Mai didn't smile.

Didn't push.

She simply... adjusted.

And waited.

The waiter passed by another table nearby.

Didn't stop.

Didn't look.

Ace tracked him anyway.

Then looked back at Mai.

Then away again.

"...this is stupid," Ace said.

"Probably," Mai replied calmly.

Ace frowned. "You're not going to argue?"

"No."

"That's also not helpful."

"I'm not trying to help yet."

Ace blinked. "Yet?"

Shammy's lips curved faintly.

Mai ignored her.

"For now," she continued, "I'm collecting data."

Ace stared at her.

"...on me."

"Yes."

"That's rude."

"That's accurate."

Ace leaned back slightly in her chair, arms crossing without her fully realizing she'd done it.

Defensive.

Subtle.

But there.

Shammy shifted her weight, watching the two of them like a slow-moving pressure front forming

between land and sea.

Still stable.

Still.

But interesting.

Mai tapped her finger once against the glass again.

Thinking.

Then—

She tilted her head slightly.

“Let’s test something.”

Ace narrowed her eyes. “No.”

“You don’t know what it is yet.”

“I don’t need to.”

“That’s inefficient.”

“I don’t care.”

Mai’s expression didn’t change.

That was expected.

“Still doing it,” she noted.

Ace blinked. “Doing what?”

“Reacting before modeling.”

Ace opened her mouth—

Closed it.

“...fine,” she said finally. “What.”

Mai leaned forward just slightly, resting her forearms on the table.

Controlled.

Intentional.

“Hypothesis,” she said. “Your reaction is tied to perceived exclusivity.”

Ace’s expression flattened instantly. “No.”

“That was fast.”

“Because it’s wrong.”

“Then we test it.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Shammy tilted her head.

The rhythm of that exchange was... familiar.

Almost comforting.

“Compromise?” she offered mildly.

Both of them ignored her.

Mai continued.

“I’m going to replicate the condition.”

Ace froze.

“...what.”

Mai’s tone stayed neutral.

“I’m going to create a similar interaction and observe your response.”

Ace stared at her.

“You’re going to what.”

“Replicate.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Ace leaned forward now, tension sharpening.

“That is not happening.”

Mai met her gaze evenly.

“Why?”

Ace opened her mouth—

Paused.

“...because it’s unnecessary.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It is.”

“It isn’t.”

“It is.”

“It avoids the question.”

Ace’s jaw tightened.

Shammy watched the pressure spike — not dangerously, but faster now.

Oh, this was very interesting.

Mai didn’t push harder.

She didn’t need to.

The silence did the work.

Ace broke first.

“...because I don’t like it,” she said again.

Same words.

More force this time.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

“And?”

Ace blinked.

“...and what.”

“And why.”

Ace’s fingers curled slightly against the table again.

“I already said—”

“You said *what*. Not *why*.”

Ace looked away.

That... was not a question she had a clean answer for.

Shammy leaned in just a fraction, voice soft.

“You don’t need a model to answer that.”

Ace shot her a look. “Yes, I do.”

“No,” Shammy said gently. “You need honesty.”

Ace didn’t respond.

Because that was worse.

Mai watched her carefully.

Then—

She shifted again.

This time, it was smaller.

But sharper.

She turned slightly toward the open space beside their table — just enough to be visible from the aisle.

Just enough to be... approachable.

Ace noticed instantly.

Her head snapped up.

“What are you doing.”

“Testing.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Mai—”

Too late.

Another waiter passed by.

Different one.

Older.

More professional.

He glanced at Mai.

Paused.

Just briefly.

“Everything alright here?” he asked.

Neutral tone.

But open.

Available.

Mai looked at him.

Then — just slightly — smiled.

Not warm.

Not inviting.

Just... present.

“Yes,” she said. “Thank you.”

The waiter nodded.

Moved on.

Nothing happened.

Objectively.

Nothing.

Ace stared at the space where he'd been.

Then at Mai.

Then back again.

“...you did that on purpose.”

“Yes.”

“That was unnecessary.”

“Yes.”

“Stop doing that.”

“No.”

Ace leaned forward fully now, hands flat against the table.

That got Shammy's attention.

Not because it was aggressive.

But because it was *direct*.

"Mai."

Single word.

Weight behind it.

Mai didn't move.

"Data point confirmed," she said calmly.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "What data point."

Mai tilted her head slightly.

"Your reaction intensified when I initiated the interaction."

"That's not—"

"It is."

"That's not what—"

"It is."

Ace's breath caught — just slightly — as the realization hit a fraction of a second before she could block it.

Shammy saw it.

Of course she did.

There it was.

Clean.

Unavoidable.

"...you're doing this on purpose," Ace said, quieter now.

"Yes."

"Why."

Mai held her gaze.

Because this mattered now.

Because this wasn't just observation anymore.

"...because you don't understand your own boundary," she said.

Ace froze.

"And I need to know where it is," Mai continued.

"...why."

That came out softer than Ace intended.

Not defensive.

Not sharp.

Just—

Confused.

Mai's expression shifted.

Not much.

But enough.

"Because I don't want to cross it accidentally."

Silence.

That hit differently.

Ace blinked.

Once.

Then again.

"...oh."

Shammy leaned back slightly, letting the pressure ease.

That... stabilized things.

Fast.

Ace's hands relaxed against the table.

Not fully.

But enough.

"...you could have just asked," she muttered.

Mai shook her head slightly. "You didn't have an answer."

"...I still don't."

"I know."

Another pause.

This one... quieter.

Less sharp.

Ace exhaled slowly, running a hand through her hair again.

"...I still don't like it," she said.

Mai nodded.

"I gathered that."

Shammy smiled faintly, watching the system settle back into equilibrium.

Messier than before.

But... richer.

"Working theory?" she asked lightly.

Ace groaned. "No theories."

Mai ignored that.

"Working theory," she said, "is that this is not about exclusivity."

Ace looked at her.

"...then what."

Mai held her gaze for a moment longer.

Then—

"...still incomplete."

Ace blinked.

"That's not helpful."

"I know."

Shammy's voice slipped in, soft, almost amused.

"It's not supposed to be."

Ace dropped her head back slightly, staring at the ceiling.

"...this is worse than fighting something."

“Yes,” Mai said calmly.

“It is.”

Shammy tilted her head, listening to the air settle once more.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

Then—

“It’s just different.”

Chapter 3 — External Interference

The system had almost stabilized.

Not fully.

But enough that the air around the table had stopped tightening with every exchange. The pressure had redistributed — still there, but no longer building.

Ace finally picked up her fork.

Took a bite.

Paused.

“...this is actually good.”

Mai didn’t look surprised. “Yes.”

“You knew that.”

“Yes.”

Ace frowned slightly. “Why didn’t you say that earlier.”

“You weren’t in a state to process it.”

“...rude.”

“...accurate.”

Shammy exhaled softly through her nose, almost a laugh.

The moment held.

Quiet.

Almost normal.

Then—

“Mai?”

The voice came from behind them.

Male.

Confident.

Familiar.

Mai’s posture didn’t change immediately.

That was the first sign.

Ace’s did.

Her shoulders tightened just a fraction before she even turned.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

The man standing behind them was... well put together.

Late twenties. Clean lines. The kind of composure that came from knowing exactly how to occupy space without asking permission.

And he was looking directly at Mai.

Recognition.

Clear.

Unmistakable.

“...I thought that was you,” he said, smiling.

Mai turned her head slightly.

Looked at him.

There was a pause.

Small.

But real.

“...Daniel,” she said.

Not warm.

Not cold.

Just—

Acknowledged.

Ace's grip tightened around her fork.

Not enough to bend it.

Enough to register.

Shammy straightened slightly in her chair.

Atmospheric shift.

External variable introduced.

Interesting.

"You look—" Daniel started, then caught himself mid-sentence, recalibrating into something more neutral. "—well."

Mai inclined her head slightly. "I am."

Ace didn't move.

Didn't speak.

But her gaze had locked onto him now.

Sharp.

Focused.

Mapping.

Daniel glanced at the table.

At Ace.

At Shammy.

Back to Mai.

"Didn't expect to see you here," he said.

"That's usually how that works."

A faint smile flickered across his face. "Still the same."

"Yes."

A beat.

Then—

“Mind if I—” he gestured vaguely toward the table.

He didn’t finish the sentence.

Didn’t need to.

Ace’s response was immediate.

“Yes.”

Flat.

Clean.

Absolute.

Silence dropped.

Daniel blinked.

“...I was just going to say hello.”

“You did,” Ace said.

Mai closed her eyes for half a second.

Just one.

Shammy’s lips pressed together, holding something that might have been amusement.

Or anticipation.

Daniel shifted slightly, recalibrating.

His attention moved fully to Ace now.

Assessing.

“...and you are?”

Ace didn’t look away.

“Ace.”

Nothing more.

No elaboration.

No softening.

Daniel waited.

Nothing followed.

“...right,” he said slowly.

His gaze flicked to Mai again.

“...friend of yours?”

There it was.

The question.

Simple.

Normal.

Loaded.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because there wasn't a single correct answer.

Because any answer would be... incomplete.

Ace noticed the pause.

Of course she did.

And that—

That made something spike.

“He doesn't need classification,” Ace said before Mai could speak.

Daniel's brow lifted slightly.

“...I was asking her.”

“I answered.”

“You didn't.”

“I did.”

“You avoided it.”

“I simplified it.”

“That's not the same thing.”

Ace leaned forward slightly.

“It is if the alternative is irrelevant.”

Shammy leaned back in her chair, letting the air shift around the table.

Oh, this was escalating nicely.

Mai opened her eyes again.

Focus snapping back into place.

“Daniel,” she said calmly, cutting through the exchange. “This is Ace.”

A beat.

Then—

“And Shammy.”

Shammy gave a small, polite nod.

“Hi.”

Daniel blinked once.

Reprocessed.

“...right.”

His attention lingered on Shammy for a fraction of a second longer than expected.

Not in the same way as before.

More... uncertain.

Like he couldn't quite place what he was seeing.

Shammy noticed.

Filed it.

Ignored it.

His gaze returned to Mai.

“So—” he started, tone shifting again, trying to regain footing. “—it's been a while.”

“Yes.”

“Didn't think you'd just... disappear like that.”

“I didn't disappear.”

“You kind of did.”

“I changed contexts.”

Ace's fingers tightened again.

Changed contexts.

That phrase didn't sit well.

Daniel exhaled softly, a small laugh escaping. “Yeah, that sounds like you.”

A beat.

Then—

“Still working alone?”

There it was.

Wrong question.

Wrong assumption.

Ace’s head tilted slightly.

Very slightly.

“No,” she said.

Daniel glanced at her again. “...I was asking—”

“I answered.”

Mai inhaled slowly.

Exhaled.

Controlled.

“Daniel,” she said, tone still calm but firmer now. “What do you want?”

Straight to it.

No drift.

He paused.

Then smiled again — smaller this time.

“Just catching up.”

“No.”

That came from Ace.

Again.

Immediate.

Daniel’s patience thinned just slightly.

“...you always this protective?” he asked, tone shifting toward something sharper.

Ace didn’t blink.

“Yes.”

Mai closed her eyes again.

Shammy tilted her head, watching the pressure spike.

This was it.

The edge.

Daniel let out a small breath, shaking his head faintly.

“Alright,” he said. “I get it.”

He didn’t.

Not really.

But he recognized resistance when he saw it.

His attention returned to Mai one last time.

“It was good seeing you,” he said.

This time, it was cleaner.

More honest.

Less... angled.

Mai nodded once.

“You too.”

He hesitated.

Just a fraction.

Then—

“Take care of yourself.”

Ace’s response was instant.

“She does.”

Daniel’s jaw tightened just slightly.

Not enough to escalate.

Enough to register.

“...I’m sure she does,” he said.

Then he turned.

Left.

No lingering.

No second look.

The air shifted again as he moved away.

Pressure dropping.

Stabilizing.

Shammy exhaled slowly, letting the atmosphere settle.

"...that was inefficient," she said softly.

Ace dropped her fork onto the plate.

Not hard.

But not gentle either.

"He shouldn't talk to you like that."

There it was again.

Same line.

Same weight.

Mai opened her eyes.

Looked at Ace.

"...like what."

Ace gestured vaguely toward where Daniel had been.

"That."

"That is still not a useful descriptor."

"You know what I mean."

"I do," Mai said calmly. "I'm asking if you do."

Ace froze.

Again.

Shammy watched the moment stretch.

Thin.

Taut.

Ace exhaled sharply, pushing her chair back just slightly.

"I don't like it," she said.

Again.

Third time.

Same sentence.

Different intensity.

Mai nodded slowly.

"Yes."

"And?"

Ace frowned. "Stop asking that."

"I need a better variable."

"You're not getting one."

"Then I work with what I have."

Ace leaned forward again, frustration bleeding through now.

"This isn't a model, Mai."

"I know."

"Then stop treating it like one."

Mai held her gaze.

And for a second—

Just a second—

Something in her expression softened.

"...then tell me what it is," she said quietly.

That hit differently.

Ace blinked.

Because that wasn't analysis anymore.

That was—

Asking.

For real.

Ace's shoulders dropped slightly.

Just a fraction.

“I don’t know,” she said.

No frustration this time.

No edge.

Just—

Honest.

Shammy smiled faintly, feeling the pressure finally start to redistribute into something sustainable.

Mai studied Ace for a moment longer.

Then nodded.

“Okay.”

No push.

No follow-up.

Just—

Accepted.

Ace blinked again.

“...okay?”

“For now.”

Ace leaned back slowly in her chair.

The tension didn’t vanish.

But it changed.

Less sharp.

More... internal.

Shammy stretched slightly, long frame relaxing again as the air settled fully this time.

“External variable introduced and removed,” she murmured. “System response: disproportionate but contained.”

Ace groaned, dragging a hand down her face.

“Don’t say it like that.”

“I’m describing it.”

“Stop describing it.”

Mai’s lips twitched again.

There it was.

Small.

But real.

Ace noticed.

“...what.”

“Nothing.”

“That was something.”

“It was a data point.”

Ace stared at her.

Then—

“...I hate this.”

Mai nodded.

“I know.”

Shammy tilted her head, eyes half-lidded, listening to the quiet that followed.

Different now.

Not empty.

Not tense.

Just...

Unresolved.

And alive.

“Working theory update?” she asked softly.

Ace pointed at her without looking.

“No.”

Shammy smiled.

“Noted.”

Chapter 4 — Quiet Variables

The restaurant didn't change.

That was the strange part.

Same lighting. Same low hum of voices. Same quiet clinking of glass and cutlery. The world hadn't reacted to anything that had just happened.

It never did.

Ace sat still.

Not tense anymore.

But not relaxed either.

Her plate was half-finished. The food had gone lukewarm again, but this time she didn't seem to notice.

Mai did.

Of course she did.

She rested her hands lightly around her glass, not drinking, not moving — just... present. Watching without pressing.

Shammy leaned back, one leg stretched slightly under the table, fingers idly brushing against the surface like she was feeling the residual pressure in the air.

It was different now.

Not sharp.

Not unstable.

But... unsettled in a quieter way.

Like the aftermath of a storm that hadn't quite decided if it was over.

Ace exhaled slowly.

"...I didn't like that."

Not defensive this time.

Not sharp.

Just—

Stated.

Mai nodded once. "I know."

Silence.

Ace's fingers traced the edge of her fork without picking it up.

"...he knew you."

"Yes."

"That's not the part."

"I assumed."

Ace frowned slightly.

Then—

"...he knew you *before*."

There it was.

Cleaner.

More precise.

Mai's gaze didn't shift.

"Yes."

Ace looked down at the table.

Not avoiding.

Just... thinking.

That was new.

"I didn't account for that," she said.

Mai tilted her head slightly.

"Account for what."

Ace hesitated.

Then—

"...that you exist outside of this."

A pause.

Not long.

But enough to register.

Shammy's fingers stilled completely.

That—

That was the real variable.

Mai's expression didn't change immediately.

But something behind it did.

"...I do," she said.

"I know."

"Do you."

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

"Yes."

"You didn't behave like you did."

Ace exhaled, frustrated again — but softer now.

"I said I didn't account for it."

"That's not the same as understanding it."

"I'm working on it."

That landed.

Mai watched her for a moment longer.

Then—

"...okay."

No push.

Again.

Ace blinked.

That still threw her off.

"...stop doing that."

"Doing what."

"Accepting incomplete answers."

Mai's lips curved slightly.

"I'm not accepting it," she said calmly. "I'm waiting."

"...for what."

“For you to finish.”

Ace leaned back slightly in her chair, staring at the ceiling again for a second before dropping her gaze back down.

“...this is worse.”

“Yes.”

Shammy’s voice slipped in, quiet.

“It’s also progress.”

Ace didn’t look at her.

“I didn’t ask.”

“I didn’t wait.”

Ace huffed softly.

But there was no real bite behind it.

Just... friction.

The good kind.

The kind that didn’t break anything.

Mai shifted slightly, finally picking up her glass again.

Took a slow sip.

Set it down.

Then—

“...Daniel was from before,” she said.

Ace’s eyes flicked up immediately.

Before.

That word mattered.

“How long,” Ace asked.

“Several years.”

“...you didn’t mention him.”

“He wasn’t relevant.”

Ace frowned.

“He walked up to you like he expected—” she stopped, recalibrating. “—continuity.”

“That’s a fair assessment.”

“That implies relevance.”

“Past relevance.”

“That’s still relevance.”

Mai considered that.

“...not to current structure.”

Ace’s fingers tapped once against the table.

“There’s overlap.”

“Explain.”

Ace hesitated.

Not because she didn’t want to.

Because she was trying to get it right.

“...he didn’t approach you like a stranger,” she said.

“No.”

“He approached you like—” she paused again, then pushed through it. “—like he still had access.”

Silence.

That was it.

That was the shape of it.

Shammy leaned forward just slightly, interest sharpening again.

Mai didn’t respond immediately.

Because that—

That was precise.

“...and you don’t like that,” she said.

“No.”

“Why.”

Ace’s fingers curled slightly again.

But not tight this time.

Controlled.

“I don’t know.”

A beat.

Then—

“...it’s wrong.”

Mai’s head tilted.

“Wrong how.”

Ace exhaled, shaking her head slightly.

“I don’t have a model for it.”

“You don’t need one.”

“That’s not how this works.”

“That’s exactly how this works.”

Ace looked up at her.

There was no frustration in Mai’s tone now.

No testing.

Just—

Clarity.

Ace held her gaze.

Then—

“...it feels like he thinks something is still his.”

There.

It landed.

Clean.

Unfiltered.

Correct.

Shammy’s eyes softened slightly.

Pressure equalized.

Mai didn’t move.

Didn't react immediately.

Because that—

That mattered.

"...and it isn't," she said.

Not defensive.

Not sharp.

Just—

Certain.

Ace's shoulders dropped slightly.

A fraction.

But enough.

"I know," she said.

A pause.

Then—

"...I still don't like it."

Mai nodded once.

"I gathered that."

A flicker of something passed through her expression again.

Not amusement.

Not quite.

Something warmer.

Subtle.

Shammy caught it.

Filed it.

Didn't comment.

For once.

Ace leaned forward slightly, resting her arms on the table now.

Less guarded.

"...you said he wasn't relevant," she said.

"Yes."

"But he still exists."

"Yes."

"And he can still show up."

"Yes."

Ace frowned.

"That's inefficient."

Mai almost smiled.

"Reality tends to be."

Ace huffed softly.

"...I don't like variables I can't control."

"That's also not new."

Ace shot her a look.

"This is different."

"Yes."

Another pause.

Then—

"...I don't want to control it," Ace added, quieter now.

Mai's gaze sharpened just slightly.

"...no?"

Ace shook her head once.

"No."

That was important.

Shammy's fingers brushed lightly against the table again, feeling the system settle further.

Not forced.

Not constrained.

Just... aligning.

Mai leaned back slightly in her chair.

Studying Ace.

"...then what do you want."

Ace blinked.

That question—

That one landed differently.

Because it wasn't about analysis.

Or variables.

Or structure.

It was about—

Intent.

Ace looked down at the table again.

Then back up.

Slower this time.

"...I want it to be clear," she said.

"Define clear."

Ace hesitated.

Then—

"...that you're not his."

Silence.

Not heavy.

Not tense.

Just—

Still.

Mai held her gaze.

Didn't look away.

"...I'm not," she said.

Simple.

Direct.

No qualifiers.

No expansion.

Just—

Fact.

Ace nodded once.

Sharp.

Satisfied.

That—

That helped.

Not everything.

But enough.

Shammy leaned back again, the air around them smoothing out almost completely now.

Residual tension dissolved into something quieter.

Something stable.

"...system recalibrated," she murmured softly.

Ace pointed at her again.

"I said no."

"I didn't say it loudly."

Mai's lips twitched again.

This time, she didn't hide it.

Ace noticed.

Of course she did.

"...what."

"Nothing."

"That's twice."

"I'm aware."

Ace narrowed her eyes slightly.

“...you’re enjoying this.”

“Parts of it.”

“That’s concerning.”

“It’s informative.”

Ace stared at her for a second longer.

Then—

“...this is still worse than fighting something.”

Mai tilted her head slightly.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

Then—

“It’s just harder to map.”

Shammy’s voice slipped in, soft, almost satisfied.

“But easier to survive.”

Ace leaned back in her chair, exhaling slowly.

“...I’m not convinced.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

Chapter 5 — Misinterpretation Cascade

The air had settled.

Not completely.

But enough that the table no longer felt like a fault line.

Ace had gone back to eating.

Not fast. Not distracted.

Just... normally.

Which, for her, was already a noticeable shift.

Mai watched it without commenting.

Shammy, for once, wasn’t analyzing out loud.

She was just... there.

Listening to the room.

Letting it move around them without resistance.

For about—

Thirty seconds.

Then—

A chair scraped lightly against the floor nearby.

“Hey, excuse me—”

The voice was female this time.

Early twenties. Bright tone. Slight edge of nervous energy — the kind that came from committing to a decision mid-step and refusing to back out.

All three of them looked up.

The woman stood just beside their table, shifting her weight slightly, one hand holding her phone like a shield.

Her eyes flicked between Ace and Mai.

Then back again.

“Oh—okay, good, I got the right table,” she said, exhaling quickly. “Sorry, I just—this might sound weird.”

Ace didn't respond.

Mai tilted her head slightly. “Go ahead.”

The woman smiled — relieved.

“Okay, so—first of all, you two are *very* obvious.”

Silence.

Ace blinked.

“...what.”

The woman gestured vaguely between Ace and Mai.

“The tension. The eye contact. The whole—” she made a small circular motion with her hand, searching for a word. “—thing.”

Ace stared at her.

Mai did not react.

Shammy leaned back slightly, already knowing where this was going.

“Oh no,” she murmured under her breath.

The woman continued, encouraged by the lack of immediate rejection.

“And like, I totally get it—communication issues are the worst, but you really should just talk to each other instead of—”

“We *are* talking,” Ace said.

Flat.

Immediate.

The woman paused.

“...not like that.”

Ace frowned. “Like what.”

“Like—” she pointed vaguely at both of them. “—this. You’re doing the whole silent frustration thing.”

“We’re not silent,” Ace said.

“You are emotionally.”

Ace blinked.

“...what.”

Mai’s lips twitched.

Shammy covered her mouth with her hand, clearly not even attempting to hide the amusement now.

The woman stepped in a little closer, lowering her voice conspiratorially.

“Look, I’ve seen this before,” she said. “One of you says something, the other one pretends it’s fine, and then it builds until someone explodes.”

Ace slowly turned her head toward Mai.

“...is that what this looks like.”

Mai met her gaze calmly.

“...apparently.”

“That’s inaccurate.”

“I agree.”

The woman blinked.

“...wait, you agree?”

"Yes," Mai said.

"With me or—"

"With you being incorrect."

"Oh."

A beat.

Then—

"...okay, but like—" the woman gestured again, more insistently now. "—you *are* clearly into each other."

Silence.

Ace froze.

Completely.

Not tense.

Not reactive.

Just—

Paused.

Mai didn't move.

Didn't respond.

Because that wasn't incorrect.

But it also wasn't... the whole picture.

The woman looked between them again, misreading the silence entirely.

"See? This is what I mean," she said. "You're both just standing there—well, sitting—but like emotionally standing there, waiting for the other one to make the first move."

Shammy made a small choking sound that might have been a laugh.

Ace slowly turned her head toward her.

"Do not."

"I didn't say anything."

"You're thinking it."

"Yes."

Ace groaned, dragging a hand down her face.

“This is not what’s happening.”

The woman tilted her head.

“...then what *is* happening.”

Ace opened her mouth—

Stopped.

Because—

That was not a simple answer.

Mai stepped in smoothly.

“We are in a stable relationship structure,” she said calmly.

The woman blinked.

“...okay, that sounded very official.”

“It is.”

“And you’re still having tension.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not stable.”

“It is,” Mai said. “It’s just... complex.”

The woman looked between them again.

Then—

Her gaze shifted.

To Shammy.

Who was now leaning back in her chair, watching this entire situation unfold like it was a particularly entertaining weather system.

“...and you are?” the woman asked.

“Shammy.”

“...friend?”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“Not exactly.”

The woman frowned.

"...okay, now I'm confused."

"Good," Ace muttered.

"That's normal," Shammy added lightly.

The woman exhaled, running a hand through her hair.

"Okay, wait, let me reset," she said. "You two are clearly—something—" she gestured at Ace and Mai again, "—but also not resolving something, and she—" she pointed at Shammy, "—is just... observing?"

"Yes," Shammy said.

"That's not helpful."

"I'm not here to help."

Ace pointed at Shammy without looking.

"See."

The woman stared at them.

Then—

"...okay, I might have misread this."

"Yes," Mai said.

"Probably."

The woman hesitated.

Then—

"...but you *are* still into each other, right?"

Ace didn't hesitate this time.

"Yes."

Clean.

Immediate.

No confusion.

No delay.

The woman blinked.

"...okay, good."

A pause.

Then—

“Then why are you arguing about other people talking to you?”

Silence.

Ace froze again.

Not because she didn't understand the question.

Because she did.

Too well.

Mai didn't move.

Shammy leaned forward just slightly, interest sharpening again.

There it was.

The external reframing.

The thing that cut through all the internal complexity and turned it into something—

Simple.

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...because I don't like it,” she said.

Again.

Same words.

But now—

Different context.

The woman stared at her.

“...that's it?”

Ace frowned.

“...yes.”

“That's actually very normal.”

Ace blinked.

“...what.”

“Yeah,” the woman said, nodding. “That's like—baseline human jealousy.”

Ace's expression flattened.

"I don't have baseline human responses."

The woman shrugged. "You do now."

Ace looked at Mai.

"...I don't like that."

Mai's lips curved slightly again.

"I gathered that."

Shammy leaned back, satisfied.

"External validation," she murmured. "Unexpected but effective."

Ace groaned again.

"Stop narrating."

"I'm not narrating. I'm appreciating."

The woman stepped back slightly now, looking between them with a small, satisfied smile.

"...okay, I think you'll be fine," she said.

No hesitation.

No doubt.

Just—

Conclusion.

Ace frowned. "Based on what."

The woman shrugged lightly.

"You're already saying the honest part out loud."

A pause.

Then—

"That's the hard part."

Silence.

Ace didn't respond.

Because—

That was annoyingly accurate.

Mai watched her.

Then—

“...she’s not wrong,” she said.

Ace stared at her.

“...you’re both against me.”

“We’re not against you,” Mai said calmly. “We’re just aligned with observable reality.”

“That’s worse.”

Shammy laughed.

Actually laughed this time.

Soft.

Warm.

The tension broke.

Not completely.

But enough.

The woman smiled once more, stepping back fully now.

“Good luck,” she said. “Or—actually, you don’t need it.”

Then she turned.

Walked away.

Just like that.

Silence returned.

Different now.

Lighter.

Ace stared at the table for a moment.

Then—

“...I don’t like being predictable.”

Mai tilted her head.

“You’re not.”

“She called it baseline.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s simple.”

Ace considered that.

Then—

“...still don’t like it.”

“I know.”

Shammy leaned back again, completely relaxed now.

“System status,” she said softly. “Functional.”

Ace pointed at her again.

“I swear—”

“You’re adapting,” Shammy continued, ignoring her.

“I’m tolerating.”

“Same thing.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Ace dropped her hand back onto the table, shaking her head slightly.

“...this is still worse than fighting something.”

Mai glanced at her.

Then—

“...less damaging.”

Ace paused.

That—

That landed.

“...fine,” she muttered.

A beat.

Then—

“...but I still don’t like it.”

Mai nodded.

“I gathered that.”

Shammy smiled.

“Consistent variable.”

Ace groaned.

Again.

Chapter 6 — Clear Enough

The restaurant was the same.

Still.

Unbothered.

Which, at this point, almost felt intentional.

Ace leaned back in her chair, one arm resting loosely along the backrest, posture finally — actually — relaxed.

Not alert-relaxed.

Not “ready to move” relaxed.

Just... relaxed.

It was subtle.

But it was there.

Mai noticed.

Of course she did.

She didn’t comment.

She just... adjusted her own posture slightly in response.

Not mirroring.

Not consciously.

Just aligning.

Shammy watched both of them, quiet now, letting the air settle into something that no longer needed managing.

The pressure was gone.

Not suppressed.

Resolved.

Ace exhaled slowly.

"...this is still weird."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

A beat.

Then—

"...but less."

"Yes."

Ace tilted her head slightly, looking at her.

"You're not analyzing."

"I finished."

"...that's new."

"It's efficient."

Ace frowned faintly.

"...doesn't feel like it."

Mai's lips curved just slightly.

"Feelings rarely do."

Ace huffed softly.

There was no bite behind it this time.

Just... acknowledgment.

A small silence followed.

Comfortable.

Different from before.

Ace glanced at her plate.

Then at Mai.

Then—

"...you didn't answer him."

Mai blinked once. "Which part."

"The classification."

Mai tilted her head slightly. "I did."

“You avoided it.”

“I simplified it.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“It isn’t.”

Ace leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on the table now.

“Say it properly.”

Mai held her gaze.

For a second—

Just watched her.

Then—

“...you want a definition.”

“Yes.”

Mai exhaled softly.

Not tired.

Not reluctant.

Just... choosing words.

“We are not a conventional structure,” she said.

Ace rolled her eyes. “That’s obvious.”

“Yes.”

“Not helpful.”

“I’m building context.”

“You’re delaying.”

“I’m being precise.”

Ace narrowed her eyes slightly.

“...Mai.”

There was a hint of something in that.

Not frustration.

Not pressure.

Something lighter.

Mai noticed.

Adjusted.

"...fine," she said.

A beat.

Then—

"You're mine."

Silence.

Ace froze.

Completely.

Again.

But this time—

Not because she didn't understand.

Because she did.

Immediately.

Fully.

The words landed clean.

No ambiguity.

No qualifiers.

No escape routes.

Just—

Certain.

Ace's breath caught slightly.

"...that's—"

She stopped.

Recalibrated.

"...you don't say things like that."

"I do when they're accurate."

“That’s not—”

“It is.”

Ace stared at her.

Trying to process.

Failing.

Shammy turned her head slightly, watching the shift ripple through the space between them.

That—

That was a pressure change worth noting.

Ace’s fingers tapped once against the table.

Then stilled.

“...say it again.”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“You’re mine.”

Same tone.

Same weight.

No escalation.

No added emphasis.

Just—

Repeated.

Ace swallowed.

Once.

“...okay.”

That was all she managed.

Shammy smiled.

Not amused.

Not teasing.

Just... quietly satisfied.

Ace leaned back slowly in her chair again, running a hand through her hair.

"...I don't hate that."

Mai's lips curved slightly.

"Good."

A pause.

Then—

Ace tilted her head slightly, studying her.

"...your turn."

Mai blinked.

"My turn."

"Yes."

"For what."

Ace leaned forward just a fraction.

Returning it.

Not as clean.

Not as controlled.

But—

Honest.

"You're mine."

It came out a little rougher.

Less precise.

But—

No less real.

Mai didn't move.

Didn't react immediately.

Because that—

That mattered.

More than she'd expected.

"...yes," she said quietly.

Agreement.

Not correction.

Not expansion.

Just—

Accepted.

The air settled around them again.

Fully this time.

No tension.

No residual edges.

Just... stable.

Shammy stretched slightly in her chair, long frame relaxing completely now.

“Symmetry achieved,” she murmured softly.

Ace pointed at her again.

“You had to say it.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t.”

“I implied it.”

“That’s worse.”

Mai’s shoulders shook just slightly.

A quiet laugh.

Small.

But real.

Ace noticed.

Of course she did.

“...you’re enjoying this.”

“Yes.”

“That’s concerning.”

“It’s accurate.”

Ace shook her head slightly, but there was no frustration left in it.

Just... warmth.

A beat.

Then—

“...so what now.”

Mai tilted her head.

“Now?”

Ace gestured vaguely at the table, the room, the world.

“This.”

Mai considered that for a moment.

Then—

“...now we eat.”

Ace blinked.

“...that’s it.”

“For now.”

“That’s anticlimactic.”

“It’s stable.”

Ace stared at her.

Then—

“...fine.”

She picked up her fork again.

Actually ate this time.

Properly.

Shammy watched them for a moment longer.

Then leaned back, eyes half-lidded, listening to the quiet settle fully into place.

No pressure.

No instability.

No escalation.

Just—

Three people.

At a table.

Existing.

Together.

“...you adapted,” she said softly.

Ace didn’t look up.

“I tolerated.”

“Same thing.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Ace huffed softly.

Then—

“...I still don’t like it.”

Mai smiled.

“I know.”

Shammy smiled too.

“Consistent variable.”

Ace groaned.

One last time.

Chapter 7 — Pressure Shift

The air was quiet.

Not empty.

Just... balanced.

The plates were nearly cleared. The tension from earlier had dissolved into something that no longer pressed against the edges of the room.

Ace leaned back, one leg hooked under the chair again, posture loose in a way that finally matched the environment.

Mai sat across from her, calm, centered — not analyzing anymore, just... present.

Shammy sat beside them.

Still.

Listening.

Not to the room.

To something more subtle.

A change.

Not external.

Internal.

She didn't move at first.

Just... noticed it.

Then—

"...interesting," she said softly.

Ace didn't look up. "No."

Mai's eyes flicked toward her. "What."

Shammy tilted her head slightly, gaze drifting past them for just a moment.

Then returning.

"...I think I understand it now."

Ace frowned. "Understand what."

"This."

She gestured vaguely between them.

Ace groaned. "No more analysis."

"This isn't analysis."

"What is it."

Shammy's lips curved faintly.

"Replication."

Ace froze.

"...no."

Mai blinked.

“...wait.”

Too late.

A shadow fell lightly across the table.

“Hey.”

Male voice.

Different.

Calmer.

Less confident than Daniel.

But steady.

Shammy turned her head.

Looked up at him.

Directly.

Fully.

No hesitation.

That alone was enough to throw the rhythm off.

The man blinked once, caught slightly off guard by the intensity of her attention.

“Uh—sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt, I just—” he hesitated, recalibrating. “You look like someone I know.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“That’s unlikely.”

“...yeah, probably,” he admitted, a small, uncertain smile forming. “Still—do you mind if I—”

“Yes,” Ace said.

Immediate.

Again.

Shammy didn’t look at her.

Didn’t react.

She kept her gaze on the man.

“Continue,” she said.

Ace’s head snapped toward her.

“...what.”

Mai’s eyes sharpened slightly.

There it was.

The shift.

The difference.

The man blinked again.

“...uh, okay,” he said, still a little off-balance. “I was just going to ask if you—”

Shammy leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on the table.

Fully engaged now.

“Yes?”

The man hesitated.

Then committed.

“—wanted to grab a drink sometime.”

Silence.

Ace’s fingers tightened against the table.

Not sharp.

Not aggressive.

But immediate.

Mai didn’t move.

Didn’t intervene.

She was watching Shammy.

Only Shammy.

Because this—

This was new.

Shammy didn’t answer immediately.

She studied him.

Not in the way Ace mapped threats.

Not in the way Mai evaluated structure.

She... felt him.

The intent.

The tone.

The absence of pressure.

"...you are asking for future interaction," she said.

"...yeah," the man said slowly.

"That implies continuity."

"...I guess so."

Shammy nodded once.

Processing.

Then—

"...I do not object to the concept."

Ace stood up.

Chair scraping sharply against the floor.

"No."

Flat.

Absolute.

Shammy turned her head.

Slowly.

Looked at Ace.

Not confused.

Not defensive.

Just—

Curious.

"...why."

Ace stared at her.

“Why.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not happening.”

“You said that earlier.”

“That was different.”

“How.”

Ace opened her mouth—

Stopped.

Because—

It wasn’t different.

Not structurally.

That was the problem.

Mai stood up as well.

Slower.

Controlled.

“Pause,” she said calmly.

Not to the man.

To the system.

He stepped back slightly, hands raising just a fraction.

“I can come back later,” he said quickly.

“No,” Shammy said.

He froze.

“...no?”

Shammy shook her head once.

“Continue.”

Ace turned toward her fully now.

“Shammy.”

That tone—

That was new.

Not sharp.

Not frustrated.

Something else.

Something closer to—

Alarm.

Shammy noticed.

Tilted her head slightly.

“You reacted the same way I did,” she said.

Ace’s jaw tightened.

“This is not the same.”

“How.”

Same question.

Again.

Ace exhaled sharply.

“Because—”

She stopped.

Because—

She didn’t have a clean answer.

Mai watched her.

Then—

“...say it,” she said quietly.

Not pushing.

Not testing.

Just—

Inviting.

Ace looked at her.

Then at Shammy.

Then—

“...because I don’t like someone thinking they can have you.”

Silence.

That landed.

Clean.

Unfiltered.

Shammy’s expression didn’t change immediately.

But the air around her did.

Subtle.

Almost imperceptible.

A shift in pressure.

“...interesting,” she said softly.

The man looked between them.

“...I feel like I walked into something.”

“You did,” Ace said.

He nodded slowly. “...okay.”

Shammy leaned back slightly, still watching Ace.

“You did not react when he approached Mai,” she said.

“I did.”

“You did. But you processed it.”

A beat.

Then—

“You did not process this.”

Ace frowned.

“That’s not—”

“It is.”

Mai didn’t interrupt.

Because that—

That was accurate.

Ace's fingers curled slightly.

"...this is different."

"How."

Again.

Ace exhaled, frustrated now.

Because—

She still didn't have a model for it.

"...I don't know," she admitted.

Shammy nodded once.

Accepted.

Then—

She turned her attention back to the man.

"...your request is valid," she said calmly.

Ace took a step forward.

"No."

Shammy held up a hand.

Not forceful.

Just—

Present.

Ace stopped.

Not because she had to.

Because—

Something in the air told her to.

Shammy continued.

"...but it is misaligned with current structure."

The man blinked.

"...which means."

"It means no."

Clear.

Direct.

No ambiguity.

He exhaled, nodding quickly. "Got it."

A beat.

Then—

"...sorry."

"No need," Shammy said.

He gave a small, awkward smile.

Then turned.

Left.

Fast.

The air shifted again.

Settling.

But—

Not the same way as before.

Different pressure.

Different shape.

Shammy turned back to Ace.

Studied her.

"...you reacted faster," she said.

Ace crossed her arms.

"Yeah."

"Why."

Ace frowned.

"Still don't know."

Shammy tilted her head.

“...you will.”

Mai stepped slightly closer, positioning herself between them without blocking either.

Stabilizing.

“Observation,” she said.

Both of them looked at her.

“This is not identical to previous case.”

“No,” Shammy said.

“No,” Ace echoed.

Mai nodded.

“...this is triadic.”

Silence.

That landed.

Differently.

Ace blinked.

“...oh.”

Shammy’s lips curved faintly.

“Yes.”

A pause.

Then—

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...I don’t like that either.”

Shammy smiled.

“Consistent variable.”

Ace groaned.

Again.

Chapter 8 — Stable Configuration

The air didn’t snap back this time.

That was the first difference.

When the man left, nothing rushed in to fill the space he'd occupied. No rebound. No pressure spike. No sudden imbalance.

Just...

A shift.

And then—

Stillness.

Ace sat back down slowly.

Not sharply.

Not like before.

Controlled.

Aware.

Mai didn't move immediately.

She watched the moment complete first — watched Ace settle, watched Shammy remain exactly where she was, posture unchanged, presence steady.

Only then did she sit as well.

The table reformed.

Not the same.

But not broken either.

Shammy leaned back slightly, long frame relaxed, fingers resting lightly against the surface of the table.

"...that was different," she said.

Ace exhaled.

"...yeah."

No argument.

No resistance.

Just—

Agreement.

Mai folded her hands loosely in front of her.

“Define different.”

Ace stared at the table for a moment.

Then—

“...faster,” she said.

“Yes.”

“...stronger.”

“Yes.”

“...and worse.”

A small pause.

Mai tilted her head.

“...worse how.”

Ace hesitated.

Then—

“...less controlled.”

That one landed clean.

Shammy nodded once.

“Accurate.”

Mai didn't respond immediately.

She watched Ace.

Then—

“...but not less contained,” she said.

Ace frowned slightly.

“...difference.”

“Containment is outcome,” Mai said. “Control is process.”

Ace leaned back slightly.

Processing that.

“...so I lost control.”

“Yes.”

“But didn’t break anything.”

“No.”

A beat.

Then—

“...that’s annoying.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

“It’s growth.”

Ace pointed at her again.

“I’m starting to regret involving you.”

“You didn’t.”

“I allowed it.”

“That’s different.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

Mai’s lips curved slightly again.

The rhythm was back.

Different.

But familiar.

Stable.

Shammy shifted slightly, turning her attention fully to Ace now.

“You reacted to perceived claim,” she said.

Ace frowned.

“...again with that.”

“This time it was clearer.”

Ace didn’t respond immediately.

Because—

It was.

“...he wasn’t wrong,” Ace said quietly.

Mai's eyes flicked up.

"...explain."

Ace hesitated.

Then—

"...he wasn't assuming anything," she said. "He asked."

A pause.

Then—

"...that's worse."

Shammy tilted her head.

"Why."

Ace exhaled.

Because this—

This needed precision.

"...because it means it's open," she said.

Silence.

That landed.

Mai's gaze sharpened slightly.

"...and you don't like open variables."

"No."

"Why."

Ace's fingers tapped once against the table.

Then stilled.

"...because I don't want to compete," she said.

There.

That was new.

Shammy leaned forward just slightly.

Interest sharpening.

Mai didn't move.

Didn't interrupt.

"...compete with what," she asked.

Ace shook her head once.

"...not a what."

A beat.

Then—

"...with the possibility."

Silence.

That—

That hit deeper.

Shammy's expression softened slightly.

Not amused.

Not curious.

Just...

Understanding.

Mai held Ace's gaze.

Then—

"...you don't need to," she said.

Simple.

Direct.

Ace blinked.

"...I know."

"Do you."

"Yes."

"Then why react."

Ace exhaled, frustrated again — but softer.

"Because knowing isn't the same as—"

She stopped.

Then—

“...feeling it.”

There.

That was it.

Clean.

Unavoidable.

Shammy leaned back slowly, letting the pressure equalize completely now.

“That aligns with earlier observation,” she said quietly.

Ace groaned.

“Of course it does.”

Mai’s shoulders shook slightly again — another small, contained laugh.

Ace noticed.

“...you’re doing it again.”

“Yes.”

“That’s still concerning.”

“It’s still accurate.”

Ace shook her head, but there was no resistance left in it.

Just... acceptance.

A small pause settled over the table.

Then—

Shammy spoke again.

Softer now.

More precise.

“This is not pair-bond jealousy,” she said.

Ace glanced at her.

“...no.”

Mai nodded.

“No.”

Shammy's eyes moved between them.

Then—

"This is structural," she continued.

"Define," Mai said.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

"You are not reacting to losing something," she said to Ace.

Ace blinked.

"...no."

"You are reacting to ambiguity in ownership of position."

Silence.

That—

That was sharp.

Mai didn't move.

Didn't interrupt.

Ace stared at the table.

Then—

"...that sounds worse."

"It isn't."

"How."

Shammy's lips curved faintly.

"Because it's solvable."

Ace looked up.

"...how."

Shammy didn't answer immediately.

She looked at Mai.

Then back at Ace.

Then—

"You already did."

Ace frowned.

“...what.”

Shammy gestured lightly between them.

“You defined it.”

A beat.

Then—

“You said she’s not his.”

Ace blinked.

“...yeah.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“And she said you’re hers.”

Another pause.

Ace’s expression shifted slightly.

“...yeah.”

Shammy leaned back.

“And you accepted that.”

Silence.

That was it.

That was the resolution.

Not dramatic.

Not explosive.

Just—

Aligned.

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...so that’s it.”

“Yes.”

“That’s too simple.”

“It isn’t simple,” Mai said. “It’s just complete.”

Ace leaned back in her chair again.

Staring at the ceiling for a second.

Then—

“...I still don’t like the feeling.”

Mai nodded.

“I know.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

“Consistent variable.”

Ace dropped her hand onto the table.

“I swear—”

Shammy laughed softly.

This time without holding it back.

The air didn’t react.

Didn’t tighten.

Didn’t shift.

It just... held.

Ace glanced between them.

Then—

“...this is still worse than fighting something.”

Mai tilted her head.

“No.”

A beat.

Then—

“It’s just slower.”

Ace considered that.

Then—

“...fine.”

Another pause.

Then—

“...but I still don’t like it.”

Mai smiled.

“I know.”

Shammy smiled too.

“Stable.”

Ace groaned.

One last time.

—

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