

Legend of the Iron Wade



Night City had a particular way of making bad ideas look collectible.

By daylight—which was to say, by the gray approximation of it that occasionally leaked between towers and ad walls—the city turned everything into trash with branding. By midnight it performed the opposite trick. Junk became relic. Cheap plastic became retro. Damaged tech became “vintage.” A broken game cartridge in the wrong district was e-waste. In the right district, under purple neon and a seller with enough tattoos to suggest ceremonial authority, it was an artifact.

Ace held the thing between two fingers like it might either bite or disappoint her.

The cartridge was thicker than standard. Matte black shell, edges worn silver with age. No

manufacturer marks. No compatibility stamp. Just a faded metallic label with a knight-shaped silhouette and four words pressed into the sticker in dull iron-gray letters.

LEGEND OF THE IRON WADE

“That,” Mai said from the kitchenette without looking up from the tiny portable scanner in her hands, “is exactly the sort of object you should not buy from a woman whose left eye was projecting five different prices simultaneously.”

Ace shrugged. “She lowered it from four hundred to eighty.”

“That is not reassuring.”

“It is if you saw the original four hundred.”

Mai did look up then, silver hair falling forward over one shoulder, expression balanced precisely between patience and the sort of concern she reserved for moments when Ace came home carrying objects that looked cursed on principle. The scanner in her hand gave a small irritated chirp, as if agreeing with her.

Behind them, the safehouse window showed Night City in fractured strips of light. Rain moved in fine diagonal threads over the glass. Somewhere far below, traffic hissed over wet asphalt and an ad-drone cheerfully screamed something about memory implants and eternal happiness to citizens who had clearly chosen neither.

Shammy was sprawled upside down on the couch, long legs hooked over the backrest, silver-white hair hanging almost to the floor. She had been reading some local magazine whose cover promised the city’s ten most fatal nightlife mistakes. She lowered it an inch and studied the cartridge with the same mild, curious focus she usually reserved for thunderstorms forming offshore.

“It hums,” she said.

“It does not hum,” Mai said.

Shammy tilted her head. “Not acoustically.”

Ace grinned. “See? Fine.”

“That is the opposite of fine.”

“It’s a game.”

“In this city,” Mai said, “that sentence has the same structure as ‘it’s probably nothing.’”

Ace crossed to the old console unit they’d acquired because Night City had, against all logic, decided nostalgia and black-market hardware belonged in the same shelf category. The machine itself was a thick, heavy slab with patched casing and an aftermarket cooling fan that sounded faintly asthmatic when it started. One of Rogue’s people had sold it to them three days ago with the solemn assurance that it only occasionally caught fire and never twice for the same reason.

Ace pushed the cartridge in.

The console made a click like a reluctant jaw.

Mai set the scanner down. "I would prefer if we first checked for—"

The screen came alive before she finished. No boot logo. No menu. Just a burst of static, then a title screen painted in old pixel-art style: a storm-black keep on a cliff, a narrow bridge over some impossibly red abyss, and a tiny armored figure standing in the foreground with one hand on a sword.

LEGEND OF THE IRON WADE

Press Start, said the text below.

Ace picked up the controller. "See?"

The game's music began at once—thin synth strings, overdramatic drums, something trying very hard to sound ancient and heroic on hardware that clearly could not afford the concept. Ace sat on the edge of the couch and hit Start.

The title screen vanished.

The little armored figure appeared in a castle corridor lined with torches and gray stone. A health bar sat at the top left. A sword icon. A number that was probably currency. Standard side-scrolling action setup. Ace relaxed an entire degree.

"There," she said. "Normal."

The character took one step forward.

Then stopped.

Ace tapped right again.

Nothing.

The tiny armored figure lifted one hand instead, not in any control input Ace recognized, and scratched the side of his helmet.

A text box slid up from the bottom of the screen.

Well, this place looks damp.

Ace stared.

The text remained.

Mai took two silent steps closer.

Ace pressed A. Then B. Then every other button in a short, controlled burst. The character still did not move.

Another text box.

Not that I'm criticizing damp. Damp has uses. Moss, for one. Certain atmospheric effects. Rot, if you're committed.

"What," Ace said flatly, "is this?"

Shammy had put the magazine down. "Interesting."

Ace jabbed right on the pad again. The little armored figure obediently took another step. The moment he reached the first torch bracket he stopped again and looked up at it.

That flame is too steady.

A beat.

No draft. No guttering. You see it, right?

Ace leaned toward the screen. "Move."

The figure remained still.

Mai folded her arms. "Is it voice-activated?"

"Move," Ace said louder.

The figure turned slowly, as if hearing something from a great distance. His pixelated helmet faced the screen.

Oh. Hello.

Silence settled over the room for exactly one second.

Then the figure said, in clean text with no sound effect at all:

You're very intense.

Ace blinked once.

Mai actually smiled, which in her case meant the corner of her mouth moved by half a millimeter. "That is not ideal."

Ace pointed at the screen with the controller. "You. Move."

The text box appeared instantly.

Excellent opening note. Command presence. We've established tone.

"I hate this already," Ace said.

The armored figure looked left, then right, then at the torch again.

I was going to continue forward. I just think if a castle wants to maintain this many wall brackets, someone should address wax runoff.

Ace pressed jump. The figure jumped obediently.

"There," Ace said.

The figure landed. Took one step forward. Paused again.

Of course, now I'm curious who does maintenance here. Skeleton staff? Dedicated groundskeeper?

Contract labor?

Ace's fingers tightened visibly on the controller.

Mai sat down on the arm of the couch, watching with sharpened interest now. "Try repeated input. See whether the interruption is random or conditional."

Ace mashed forward.

The armored figure staggered ahead in three jerky steps, as if reluctantly dragged by the force of Ace's will. A bat dropped from the ceiling.

Finally, action, the text box said.

Ace hit attack.

The character did nothing. The bat smacked him in the face. His health bar lost a chunk.

A new text box appeared.

Too early.

Ace inhaled through her nose.

"You can't say that after," she said.

Technically I can, because I just did.

Mai let out a small sound that was dangerously close to a laugh.

Ace turned her head. "Don't."

"I said nothing."

"You almost did."

The character finally drew his sword and swiped at empty air two seconds after the bat had already moved. The bat hit him again.

The text box returned.

You're panicking.

"I am not panicking."

You are accelerating without improving.

Shammy made a soft thoughtful noise. "He notices pressure."

"I notice being attacked," Ace said.

The character stood still while the bat looped lazily overhead.

Actually, I'm not sure this is a bat. Wings are wrong. Head shape too broad. Might be some kind of gargoye larva.

Ace hit attack three more times. On the third press the character slashed correctly and the bat exploded into two coins and a blinking heart.

See? the text box said. We recovered.

"We," Ace repeated.

The character collected one coin, stopped near the heart, and looked down at it.

Question.

"No."

If I eat floor meat in this castle, is that courage or surrender?

Mai covered her mouth with two fingers.

Ace looked at her with pure betrayal. "You are enjoying this."

"Structurally," Mai said, voice very controlled, "it is appalling. But yes."

The character picked up the heart.

Courage, then.

Ace made it another ten meters down the corridor. Every few steps, Iron Wade stopped to comment.

A cracked stone in the wall drew a reflection on structural fatigue.

A second bat triggered a short theory about ceiling ecology.

A suit of armor in an alcove led to a brief but intense speculation on whether decorative halberds created more accidents than actual combat.

Ace fought each enemy through a combination of force, timing, and outright refusal to let the game's central premise infect her mood. The game responded by making Wade just cooperative enough to prevent immediate shutdown and just argumentative enough to guarantee a slow burn.

By the time she reached the first staircase, she was sitting very still.

Mai knew that stillness. It was dangerous.

"Observe before escalating," Mai said.

Ace did not look away from the screen. "I am observing."

"No. You are preparing violence."

"Also that."

The character climbed three stairs, paused in front of a stained-glass window, and did not move.

You know what this needs?

Ace closed her eyes for a brief, sacred second. "Movement."

Colored light accounting. If you put this much red through a corridor and don't adjust the adjacent—yes, yes, moving, I heard you.

The figure climbed two more steps.

Then stopped again.

Actually, who built stairs this narrow? You couldn't carry a wardrobe up here. Not that castles often need wardrobes moved, but the principle matters.

Mai extended a hand. "Controller."

Ace glanced at her. "No."

"You're turning this into a duel."

"It is a duel."

"With a man who appears to be losing an argument to architecture."

"That makes it worse."

"It makes it data."

Ace stared for another beat, then handed over the controller with the tense dignity of someone surrendering a weapon under protest.

Mai settled onto the couch. Her posture changed almost imperceptibly—shoulders aligning, wrists loose, expression smoothing into analytical calm. She pressed a few test inputs. The character moved. She stopped. He stopped. She jumped once. He jumped.

Then she began a pattern test. Short forward pulses. Delayed attack timing. No verbal engagement. Narrow, controlled experimentation.

For six seconds, it worked beautifully.

Then the character halted in the center of a landing and a text box slid up.

Oh, you're different.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "In what way?"

Precision bias, he replied. You're using me like a measuring instrument.

"Can you not respond to direct verbal input?"

Of course I can. I was responding before. I'm versatile.

"Then define the conditions under which you override controller priority."

A beat.

Flexible.

Mai looked offended on a philosophical level. "That is not a condition."

Correct.

Ace made a strangled sound into one fist.

Mai tried another route. "What are your trigger states?"

Situational.

"What situations?"

Broad ones.

"That is not useful."

It could be, if you were more imaginative.

Ace laughed once. It had no amusement in it whatsoever.

Mai ignored her. "Are your interruptions randomized?"

No. That would be irresponsible.

"Then they are based on internal logic."

Probably.

"You do not know?"

I know many things. Separately.

The character resumed moving without being asked and walked directly into a skeleton.

Mai hit attack. Wade raised the sword half a beat late and got hit in the chest.

You led with assumption, he said.

"You walked into that."

Counterpoint: so did the skeleton.

The skeleton hit him again.

Mai leaned closer. "Focus."

Interesting instruction, Wade said. People keep saying that like it's a location.

Ace doubled over, laughing now despite herself. "Okay. Okay, that one was good."

Mai turned slowly to look at her. "You are helping the enemy."

"It is not an enemy," Shammy said.

Both of them looked at her.

Shammy had slid off the couch and onto the floor at some point, folding herself longways against the

seat cushion like a very elegant weather system. Her eyes remained on the screen.

"It drifts," she said.

"It refuses," Ace corrected.

"Refusal has edge," Shammy said. "This has current."

Wade, on-screen, killed the skeleton by accident while apparently gesturing at a candelabrum.

Exactly, he said.

Mai blinked. "Did he just answer you?"

"He answers what fits," Shammy said.

"That is not better."

"I didn't say better."

Mai tried to test Shammy's theory. She loosened her pattern. Stopped trying to optimize input and instead let the character idle near a doorway while she waited.

After three seconds, Wade volunteered:

There's something behind this door.

Mai lifted a brow. "How do you know?"

I don't, but the framing implies ambition.

Ace snorted. "Open it."

Mai pressed forward. Wade entered the room.

There was a chest inside.

Ace sat up. "Hah."

Mai opened it. A burst of pixels, a new sub-weapon icon, a little triumphant chime.

Wade said nothing for two full seconds.

Then:

I would like it noted that I was correct for the wrong reasons, which I think should still count.

"It does not count," Mai said.

That feels needlessly strict.

Mai handed the controller back to Ace. "You handle him."

"Gladly."

“You sound vindictive.”

“I am.”

Ace took over with renewed purpose. She had adapted just enough to survive now. Instead of forcing immediate reactions, she waited a fraction longer. Instead of answering every provocation, she ignored some of them. Not all—no one alive could have ignored all of them—but enough that progress became technically possible.

Technically.

Because with progress came confidence, and with confidence came Wade becoming insufferable in more varied ways.

He began commenting on enemy fashion.

He criticized a moat he hadn't even seen yet on the grounds that “castle design trends had become alarmingly theatrical after the second century.”

He speculated, mid-boss warning, about whether chandeliers were fundamentally honest objects.

He once stopped in front of a closed gate and said, with grave sincerity, We should be careful, which was the first undeniably useful thing he'd said.

Ace paused. “Why?”

I'm not sure, he said. Something about the music.

Then, after a beat:

Or the gate. It might also be the very large skull motif. Hard to say.

A giant axe slammed out of the darkness half a second later and nearly cut Wade in half.

Ace swore and dodged at the last possible instant.

Shammy smiled faintly. “He returns.”

“That was not helpful enough,” Ace said.

“It was exactly helpful enough,” Mai said. “You survived.”

“I nearly didn't.”

“But you did.”

“Because I'm good.”

Wade reappeared from his dodge with a text box.

That too, yes. Let's all celebrate your terrifying reflexes.

Ace froze.

Then she leaned toward the screen until her forehead almost touched it. “Can you hear everything?”

No, he replied. That would be overwhelming. I hear relevance. Sometimes proximity. Occasionally tone. Once, I think, destiny, but I may have been tired.

“Can you stop talking?”

A pause.

That feels personal.

“It is.”

Fair.

He took three silent steps.

Ace blinked. “Wait.”

Four steps.

Five.

“This is better,” she said carefully.

Six.

Then:

I'd like credit for trying.

Ace's shout of outrage bounced off the safehouse walls and vanished into the rain.

Night deepened outside. The room filled gradually with the small signs of long downtime: lights lowered by habit rather than discussion, half-drunk cups migrating to flat surfaces, city glow smearing blue and pink across the floorboards. At some point Mai made coffee because the argument had plainly crossed into evening territory. At some other point Shammy appropriated Ace's earlier takeout fries and built them into neat parallel lines on the table for reasons known only to atmospheric entities and women over six feet tall.

The game remained on.

Which, in retrospect, was the real anomaly. Most irritating objects survived Ace for ten minutes at most. Iron Wade had passed an hour and was somehow still intact.

They reached the first real boss near midnight.

The arena was circular, lined with pillars. A huge armored thing with antlers stepped down from the shadows carrying a sword the size of a traffic barrier. The music swelled into synthetic tragedy. The boss name flashed across the screen in dramatic silver letters.

THE WARDEN OF ASH

“Good,” Ace said. “Finally.”

The Warden raised the giant blade.

Wade did not move.

Ace hit left.

Nothing.

“Move.”

The text box appeared.

I have concerns.

“No.”

Its sword is too large.

“I do not care.”

You should. Large weapons compensate for all kinds of weaknesses.

“The weakness I care about is it hitting you.”

Which is, in a way, also my concern.

The Warden swung.

Ace mashed dodge. Wade hopped backward at the last possible instant.

Too early, he said.

“You moved!”

Correct. You also panicked. These can coexist.

The Warden advanced.

Ace found the rhythm almost immediately—bait swing, dodge, slash, back off—but Wade kept inserting commentary into every opening as if live-analyzing a sporting event he only half respected.

Left shoulder vulnerable.

Not now, that was earlier.

Actually, this pillar placement is doing us favors.

Why is there ash indoors?

No, wait, now left shoulder.

Ace took a hit because of that last one.

Mai exhaled sharply. “He said now.”

“He also said no wait!”

"I did revise," Wade said. "That's intellectual honesty."

"You are intolerable."

"I contain multitudes."

"That is not what that means."

"Maybe not to you."

They got the boss to half health.

Wade went silent.

Ace, too used to noise by now, noticed instantly. "Why are you quiet?"

The character stood facing the boss. Sword lowered slightly.

It's winding up something bad, Wade said.

Ace's hands tightened on the controller. "What kind of bad?"

Unsure. The dramatic kind.

The Warden planted its sword in the floor. The whole arena flashed red.

Mai snapped upright. "Jump. No—pillar. Behind the pillar."

Ace moved before the sentence finished. Wade rolled behind stone as a fan of fire exploded across the arena and swallowed everything not in cover.

The blast passed.

Silence.

Then Wade said, with unusual calm:

There. That was useful.

Ace stared at the screen. "You knew."

Broadly.

"You really knew?"

I knew enough to dislike the music.

Shammy's gaze stayed on the screen, attentive now in a different way. "He hears pressure."

Mai glanced at her. "You keep saying that."

"Because it does."

The fight resumed. Ace was better now. Not calm, exactly—calm was not her style in battle, not even here, not even seated on a couch with a controller in hand—but aligned. Wade's nonsense had

become part of the rhythm in the worst possible way. An irritation, yes. A sabotage risk, absolutely. But also a strange current to move with. His good warnings arrived late, his bad advice arrived confidently, and every now and then a ridiculous observation contained a splinter of actual value.

The Warden lunged.

Its footing is wrong, Wade said.

Ace dodged under the swing and struck twice.

The armor is cracked at the knee.

She repositioned and cut low.

Not that knee, Wade added.

Too late. The boss clipped her with a backswing.

“Then say it earlier!”

That would require certainty.

“I hate your process.”

I understand. I also resent it.

The boss dropped to a sliver of health.

Ace leaned forward, focused to a knife-edge. “Now.”

Wade stood still.

Ace’s voice went dangerously soft. “Do not.”

A beat.

I had a thought.

“No.”

It left. Proceeding.

He lunged. Final strike. The Warden of Ash shattered into a storm of gray pixels and dropped a glowing sigil.

Victory music blared.

For one impossible second, the room held still.

Then Ace threw one hand into the air. “Yes.”

Mai’s expression eased into open satisfaction. “That took far longer than it should have.”

“It still counts.”

"It does."

Shammy tilted her head. "He returned."

Ace pointed at her without looking away from the screen. "Do not encourage him."

Wade stood in the center of the arena amid the fading ash. A text box appeared.

Well done, all.

"All?" Ace said.

We all suffered.

Mai actually laughed then, quietly but unmistakably.

Ace gaped at her. "You too?"

"I'm not made of stone."

"You're alarmingly close."

"I'll take that as affection."

The game awarded them a new area and some kind of relic. Wade paused near the exit corridor and looked back into the empty boss room.

You know, that thing never explained the antlers.

Ace slumped against the couch. "I'm done."

A pause.

Emotionally or operationally?

"Yes."

That is not a category.

"It is now."

Mai took her mug from the table. "You should stop before you develop an actual grudge against a cartridge."

"I already have an actual grudge."

"Then stop before it matures."

Ace stared at the screen another second. Wade was now pacing in a short, thoughtful line near the exit like a tiny armored philosopher who had misplaced several priorities and one important fear response. Rain tapped the windows. The safehouse breathed quietly around them, all old boards and patched wiring and the distant mechanical hum of a city that never really slept so much as lose interest in one form of noise and reinvent it in another.

Ace reached for the console's power switch.

Wade said, suddenly:

Wait.

Her hand stopped.

Mai glanced over the rim of her cup. "That sounded purposeful."

Ace narrowed her eyes. "What?"

The text took a second longer than usual to appear.

There is a second path behind the chapel wall in the previous room.

The safehouse went silent.

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai lowered her cup. "That is specific."

Shammy's eyes brightened with faint electric blue interest.

Ace looked back at the screen. "How do you know that?"

I remembered, Wade replied.

"From what?"

An honest pause.

Unclear.

"That is not an answer."

It is the answer I have.

Mai set the cup down carefully. "Test it."

Ace should have said no. Every structural principle available to a sane person suggested the correct response was to turn the machine off, put the cartridge in a drawer, and perhaps later shoot the drawer for completeness.

Instead she took the controller again.

They backtracked.

Through the boss room. Up the corridor. Past the narrow stairs Wade had previously slandered. Into the small chapel-like chamber they had crossed twenty minutes earlier without incident. Stone altar, broken glass, wall banners, one angel statue with a missing head.

"Where?" Ace said.

Left side, Wade replied. No—my left. Yours if you're facing. Hold on. Orientation is a tyrant.

Mai pinched the bridge of her nose.

Shammy, perfectly serene, said, "He's trying."

Ace moved to the wall.

Nothing obvious.

"Again," Mai said. "Slow sweep. Look for texture break."

Wade walked toward one section of stone and stopped with a confidence so unlike his usual drift that all three women noticed at once.

Here, he said.

Ace struck the wall.

A crack split through the stone.

Then, with a heavy grinding sound, part of the chapel wall slid inward and revealed a narrow hidden passage behind it.

No one spoke.

Wade remained standing before the opening, a tiny figure in iron armor with one hand on his sword and his head tilted, as if he had surprised himself too.

Ace's mouth opened. Closed.

Mai recovered first. "That changes the model."

"You don't have a model," Ace said without looking away from the screen.

"I had several. They are now all insulting me."

Shammy leaned forward slightly, listening to something none of the others could hear. "He drifted back."

Wade's text appeared after a long pause.

I don't think I was always in the hallway.

Nobody said anything.

Then Ace, very carefully, said, "Pure comedy. Remember? We're doing pure comedy."

Mai turned to her. "You are saying that to yourself."

"Yes."

"Ace."

"Yes."

"Turn around."

Ace looked back to the screen.

Wade had moved three steps into the hidden passage. Torches flickered to life one by one deeper in the dark. At the end of the corridor, barely visible, sat another chest.

And above it, carved into the back wall in old pixel stone, were the words:

ONLY THE DISTRACTED FIND THE WAY

Silence again.

Then Wade said:

That is so embarrassingly on-brand.

Ace stared for two whole seconds.

Then she laughed.

It cracked out of her all at once, sharp and helpless and far louder than the room deserved. Mai held out against it for approximately four seconds before her own composure collapsed and she bowed her head, laughing into one hand. Shammy did not laugh loudly, but her smile widened with that clear, bright look she got when some strange pressure pattern in the world resolved into exactly the shape she had expected all along.

Ace wiped at one eye with the back of her wrist. "No. No, that's awful."

It is, Wade agreed. But it is also excellent.

"It's terrible."

And memorable.

Mai shook her head. "I hate that he's right."

"You hate that everyone is right except you," Ace said.

"That is not true."

Shammy reached across the table and stole the last fry from her parallel arrangement. "It is a little true."

Mai gave her a wounded look. "Traitor."

"Balance," Shammy said.

Ace pushed forward. Wade entered the hidden chamber. The chest opened with a bright chime and produced a strange item shaped like a compass crossed with an eye. A relic name flashed.

WAYFINDER'S ERROR

Under it: Reveals paths missed by certainty.

Ace looked at the item description, then at Wade.

Wade looked back from under his tiny helmet.

That feels rude, he said.

"A little," Mai admitted.

Ace sat back slowly. The earlier frustration had not vanished. It had simply transformed into something worse and, therefore, better: the realization that the most annoying system she had touched all week might actually reward being exactly as impossible as it was.

She considered that for a moment.

Then she put the controller down.

"No."

Wade paused.

No?

"We stop here."

But we just found the mechanic.

"Exactly. That means if we keep going, this becomes a relationship."

I think it already is.

"No."

Mai looked openly entertained now. "That, unfortunately, is the most accurate thing he's said."

"I will throw this cartridge into the bay."

You won't, Wade said.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Test me."

Because you want to know what's in the next room.

A long, dangerous pause.

Then Ace said, with utter sincerity, "I despise you."

Fair, Wade replied. I'm still not certain about the wall texture in the opening corridor.

"Ace," Mai said, too innocent by half, "he does have a point about that torch spacing."

Ace turned toward her so slowly it became theatrical. "You are both dead to me."

Shammy stretched, uncoiling from the floor with impossible easy grace until she was standing over the couch like a silver-white weather front about to drift elsewhere. "I like him."

Ace stared up at her. "Of course you do."

"He drifts," Shammy said.

“He derails.”

“Yes,” Shammy said. “Pleasantly.”

“That word means nothing anymore.”

Wade, on-screen, wandered to the edge of the hidden chamber and stopped.

I should note, he said, that if we continue, I may become worse.

Ace closed her eyes. “How.”

I suspect confidence.

Mai made the fatal mistake of laughing first.

Ace looked at the ceiling. Rain whispered against the glass. Somewhere outside, distant gunfire cracked twice and got ignored by the city on institutional reflex. Inside, their safehouse held four women and one impossible game cartridge in a pocket of warm light and accumulating irritation.

Then she opened her eyes again and pointed one finger at the screen.

“Listen to me carefully. We are not playing this again tonight.”

Understood, Wade said.

Ace leaned back. “Good.”

A beat passed.

Then another.

The game remained still.

Ace nodded once, suspicious. “See? Growth.”

Mai said nothing. That should have been warning enough.

Ace reached out and flipped the console off.

The screen went black.

The room exhaled.

At once, the safehouse felt larger without the game’s music in it. More ordinary. Rain on glass. Distant traffic. The soft click of Mai collecting empty cups. Shammy drifting toward the window. Ace sitting on the couch with the strange, hollow triumph of someone who had wrestled an absurdity into temporary silence and intended to enjoy it.

For perhaps six seconds, peace held.

Then the screen flashed back on by itself.

All three of them turned.

The console fan spun up with a cough. Static rolled across the display, then cleared.

Wade stood exactly where they had left him in the hidden chamber. He lifted one pixelated hand.

I remembered what I was doing, he said.

Ace made a sound somewhere between a groan and a battle cry.

Mai sat down immediately. "Don't turn it off."

"What?"

"Don't turn it off."

"You just told me to stop."

"I've changed my position."

"Because of one secret hallway?"

"Because of the mechanic."

"That is the same thing."

Shammy, by the window, watched the screen with bright electric eyes and the calm satisfaction of someone whose forecast had just been confirmed. "He returned again."

Ace looked from Mai to Shammy to the screen and visibly realized, with dawning horror, that she had already lost the vote in a room with only three people and one intrusive game.

Wade waited politely.

Then:

Also, I think there may be a false floor in the bell tower, but I'm less certain about that. It might just be guilt.

Ace stood.

Not dramatically. More dangerously than that. A small woman unfolding to her full height with a face of complete, crystalline resignation. She took the controller from the table, sat back down, and pointed at the screen with the solemnity of an execution order.

"One room," she said. "One."

Reasonable, Wade replied.

"One room, and if you start talking about masonry again, I'm putting you through the window."

Understood.

A beat.

The bell tower, then?

Ace's eye twitched.

Mai failed to suppress a smile.

Shammy's laughter came soft and bright as distant thunder.

Outside, Night City burned in neon and rain. Inside, in a safehouse above the wet electric streets, a swordswoman, a structuralist, an atmospheric anomaly, and one distractible man trapped in a video game began making the worst kind of progress:

the kind that guaranteed they would absolutely be doing this again tomorrow.

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