

The room smelled of wet concrete and ozone, the kind of scent that lingered after a containment run even when the anomalies were long boxed. Safehouse 47-B, third sublevel under the old rail yards on the east edge of the city. Rain hammered the single reinforced window like it had a grudge, neon from the elevated maglev tracks bleeding pink and acid green through the streaked glass. Low-wattage bulb overhead, the filament buzzing faintly. Furniture was functional: low table scarred from knife practice, couch deep enough to swallow a person, two mismatched chairs that no one ever used for long. The air felt thick, charged, the way it always did when the three of them were alone and the adrenaline had nowhere left to go.

Ace perched on the edge of the table, legs folded under her the way she did when she was thinking without moving. One hundred twenty centimeters of compressed intent, black hair with its violet sheen still damp from the earlier downpour. Her katanas rested against her thigh, emerald hilts catching the light like they were listening. She wore the usual—dark fatigues, sleeves pushed to the elbows, a faint bruise blooming along her left forearm from where she'd taken a ricochet that Mai had already patched. Violet eyes half-lidded, she stared at the small tactical screen propped on the table. It played a looped feed from the night's op: civilians clustered behind police tape three blocks out, phones up, faces lit by screens as they watched Theta-24's breach team turn a memetic outbreak into smoke and paperwork. No one had stepped forward. No one ever did.

"People who just watch," Ace said. Voice low, almost conversational if you didn't know her. She didn't look up. "Never cross the line. Phones out, eyes wide, like the whole mess is a feed they can pause. Why bother?"

Mai stood by the window, one shoulder against the frame, arms crossed under her chest. One hundred sixty-five centimeters of precise balance, silver hair loose and catching the neon in faint runic shifts. Her disruptor pistol sat on the sill beside her, power cell glowing a cool blue. She'd traded the field jacket for a thin black tank that showed the faint lines of old ritual scars across her collarbones. Silver-blue eyes tracked the rain, but her attention was on Ace. A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth—sharp, knowing.

"Because it's safer than bleeding for the picture," Mai answered. She pushed off the wall, crossed the room in three measured steps, and dropped onto the couch. The cushions sighed under her. "Control without consequence. You get the rush, the fear, the whatever-it-is that makes it real, but you stay on the outside. No skin in the game. Some people are wired like that from the cradle. They map the edges, calculate the fallout, then step back before the fracture hits them." She glanced at the screen, then at Ace. "Doesn't mean they don't feel it. Just means they've decided feeling it from a distance is enough."

Shammy occupied the far end of the couch, all one hundred ninety-five centimeters of her stretched out like she owned the gravity in the room. Long legs crossed at the ankle, one boot resting on the coffee table beside Ace's katanas. Silver-white hair shifted with a faint ionized gradient, the tips crackling softly whenever she moved her head. Electric-blue eyes half-closed, but the air around her carried that constant low-pressure thrum—static that made the bulb flicker once, then steady. She wore the same dark fatigues as the others, but on her the fabric looked borrowed from a storm. A thin scar along her left forearm glowed faintly blue when the neon hit it right.

She exhaled, slow, the sound like wind deciding which way to turn. "It's equilibrium without the snap," she said. Voice calm, the kind that made the rain outside feel like background music. "Watching lets the tension build in someone else's wires. They absorb the current secondhand, let it ground through them without ever having to carry the charge themselves. Keeps the circuit intact. Or maybe it's the only way they know how to touch anything at all." She shifted, the couch creaking, and the static thickened for a heartbeat before settling. One hand rested on the back of the couch, fingers loose,

close enough that Mai could feel the faint warmth radiating off them.

Ace snorted once, dry as spent brass. She reached over, thumbed the screen to pause on a particular frame: a woman in a yellow raincoat, phone held high, face rapt while Theta-24's Skullker dragged a writhing shadow out of a doorway. "Sounds like an excuse dressed up as philosophy. You either move or you don't. Half-measures get you killed in the field. Or worse—they get the people next to you killed." She tilted her head, violet eyes flicking from the screen to Mai, then to Shammy. The prismatic fracture in her irises caught the light, sharpening. "But I get it. Sometimes I watch you two. Not because I'm standing outside. Because the way your shoulders shift or the way Shammy's hair lifts before she equalizes tells me exactly where the fracture's going to run. Before it does. Saves me having to guess."

Mai's brow lifted. The teasing edge slid into her voice like a blade finding its sheath. "Oh? So we're admitting it now, Ace? Voyeur by tactical necessity?" She leaned sideways, shoulder brushing Shammy's arm, and reached across to rest her hand on Ace's knee. The touch was light, but it stayed. "You watch like it's recon before the strike. Always have. Even when it's just us in a room like this."

"Not necessity," Ace said. She didn't pull away. Instead she unfolded her legs, slid off the table, and stepped between the couch and the low table so she could face them both. One hand came to rest on the back of the couch, thumb brushing the line of Shammy's neck where the collar met skin. The contact was casual, almost absent, but the pressure was there—anchor point. "Habit. I watch the fault lines. Yours. Hers." A small nod toward Shammy. "Keeps the three of us from collapsing inward. Doesn't mean I'm outside the circuit. I'm just... reading the pressure before I cut."

Shammy's head tilted back into the touch, eyes half-closing. A faint static pop, like distant lightning acknowledging the strike. "You're the worst kind of watcher, then," she murmured, the words carrying that low atmospheric rumble. "The one who pretends it's all strategy while she's memorizing the exact way Mai's fingers tighten on the grip when she's about to overclock the pistol. Or the way my charge builds right before I let the pressure bleed off so you don't have to burn out." She opened her eyes again, electric blue meeting violet. "Me? I watch because sometimes the current is prettier from the edge. The way you two sync when you think the room's empty. The little pause Ace takes before she commits to a swing, like she's checking the triad bond one last time. I don't need to step in to feel it move through me. That's my circuit. Always has been."

Mai laughed once, soft, the sound warm against the rain. She turned her head, silver-blue eyes catching Shammy's, then Ace's. "And here I thought I was the designated observer. The one who has to see the whole board so nothing breaks." She slid her hand higher on Ace's leg, thumb tracing the seam of the fatigues. "Truth? All three of us carry it. Different flavors, same loop. Ace watches like it's pre-strike recon—eyes on the fracture so the cut lands clean. I watch like I'm holding the blueprint together, mapping where the pressure's going to spike so I can dampen it before it fractures anyone. Shammy watches like she's the air that lets the rest of us breathe—absorbing the static so the rest doesn't short out."

Ace stayed where she was, compact frame steady between them. The hand on Shammy's neck didn't move. "Doesn't change the math," she said quietly. "We watch. We move. Same difference when the lights go out." But her voice had dropped half a register, the dry edge softening into something that lived closer to the bone.

The rain picked up, drumming harder. Shammy reached out, long fingers brushing Mai's wrist, then Ace's forearm, connecting the three of them in a loose triangle. The static hummed pleasantly, a low-frequency note that made the neon outside seem to pulse in time. "Some people never figure that out," she said. "They stay at the window forever. Phones up, hearts somewhere else. Us? We break

the glass when it matters. And we watch each other do it.”

Mai leaned in, resting her forehead briefly against Shammy’s shoulder, then turning so her breath brushed Ace’s wrist. “Remember the warehouse on Pier 9? Two weeks after Horizon settled. That residual echo that kept replaying the same thirty-second loop of civilians running. Theta-24 was on perimeter, doing their walking-war-crime thing, but we were inside the signal layer. Ace, you stood on that catwalk for forty-three seconds straight—didn’t move, just watched the loop cycle. I thought you were calculating exit vectors. Turns out you were watching the way the echo’s light hit Shammy’s hair when she equalized the pressure so the loop wouldn’t collapse on us.”

Ace’s mouth twitched—the closest she came to a smile. “Forty-three seconds. You timed it.”

“Blueprint,” Mai said, tapping her own temple. “I watch because if I don’t, the structure forgets how to hold. And yeah, sometimes I watch the two of you just because the way you orbit each other is the only thing that ever made sense in the middle of the mess.”

Shammy’s fingers tightened fractionally on both of them. “Pier 9,” she echoed, voice carrying the memory like distant thunder. “I watched you both from the floor level. Ace on the catwalk, Mai pacing the ritual circle. The way Ace’s shoulders dropped half a centimeter when she saw the echo start to fray—knew she was about to cut in. The way Mai’s eyes narrowed right before she overclocked the disruptor to anchor the layer. I could’ve stepped in sooner. Didn’t. Watched instead. Let the charge build until it was perfect. Then I bled it off so neither of you had to burn.” She exhaled again, the static softening to a gentle hum. “That’s the part they don’t get—the watchers outside. They think it’s passive. It’s not. It’s choosing where to stand so the current flows right.”

Ace shifted her weight, boot scuffing the floor. She didn’t step back. Instead she leaned down, compact frame folding until her forehead rested against Mai’s for a heartbeat, then turned so her temple brushed Shammy’s jaw. “Tactical voyeurism,” she muttered. “Call it what it is. I watched the two of you in the motor pool last month. After the void-memetic cleanup. You were arguing about the overclock risk on Mai’s pistol. I stood in the doorway, katanas still sheathed, and just... let it play. Didn’t interrupt. Because the way Shammy’s charge rose to meet Mai’s frustration told me the triad was still balanced. Didn’t need to move. Just needed to see it.”

Mai’s hand slid up Ace’s arm, fingers tracing the bruise with careful pressure. “And I watched you watch us. Knew you were there the whole time. Felt the weight of those violet eyes like a second anchor. That’s the thing about us. We’re all watchers by necessity, but it’s never just watching. It’s the way we stay inside the loop. The civilians with their phones—they’re outside forever. We’re the ones who watch and then step through the glass together.”

The bulb flickered again as Shammy shifted, drawing both of them closer without seeming to try. The couch creaked under the redistributed weight. Ace ended up half-perched on the armrest, one leg draped across Mai’s lap, the other foot braced on Shammy’s thigh. Not forced. Just the natural settling of three bodies that had learned each other’s gravity.

“Some people watch because they’re afraid the current would burn them out if they touched it,” Shammy said after a long beat. Her hand rested on Ace’s knee now, thumb tracing slow circles that left faint static trails on the fabric. “Others because touching it would mean admitting they’re part of the mess. And some—us—because watching is the only way we know how to keep the mess from swallowing everyone.”

Ace’s fingers found the edge of Shammy’s collar, tugging lightly. “Afraid,” she repeated, tasting the word. “Maybe. But fear’s just pressure with a different name. I’ve watched enough fractures to know

that." She paused, violet eyes flicking between them. "Last month, when the Foundation liaison tried to pull Theta-24 off our flank mid-op. I watched from the ridge. Didn't fire. Just waited to see if Mai would map the politics or if Shammy would let the atmosphere drop low enough to make the liaison rethink his entire chain of command. You both handled it. I watched. Then I moved when the window opened. Same as always."

Mai's laugh was quieter this time, almost private. She turned her head and pressed her lips to the inside of Ace's wrist, brief, warm. "And I watched you wait. Knew you'd cut the second it was right. That's my part—seeing the board so the cut lands clean. But yeah, sometimes I watch the two of you for no tactical reason at all. The way Shammy's hair lifts when she's amused. The way Ace's eyes go that deeper violet right before she decides something's worth the overdrive. It's not distance. It's... staying connected without having to speak it."

Shammy's free hand found Mai's shoulder, pulling her in until the three of them formed a tighter knot on the couch. The rain had eased to a steady hiss against the glass. The neon outside painted shifting colors across their skin—pink across Mai's silver hair, green along Ace's jaw, blue bleeding into Shammy's eyes until they looked almost liquid.

"Some watchers never learn the difference between distance and detachment," Shammy said. Her voice had dropped to that low-pressure register again, the one that made the room feel smaller and safer at the same time. "They think standing back keeps them clean. We know better. Standing back is just another way of being exactly where you need to be."

Ace didn't answer with words. She simply leaned in, compact frame fitting between them like it had been machined for the space, and let her forehead rest against Shammy's collarbone while her hand stayed tangled in Mai's hair. The static hummed. The neon pulsed. The city outside kept its distance, phones up, eyes elsewhere.

Mai's fingers traced idle patterns on Ace's back, mapping the tension that still lingered from the op. "We're the loop," she murmured. "Watchers who move. Observers who anchor. The triad doesn't work any other way."

Shammy's arm came around both of them, long reach making it easy. "And some people will never understand why that's better than standing at the window forever."

The bulb steadied. The rain continued, softer now. The screen on the table had gone dark. None of them reached to restart it. There was nothing left to watch except each other, and that had always been enough.

Hours later the conversation hadn't really ended; it had simply folded into the rhythm of the room. Ace had moved to the floor, back against the couch between Shammy's knees, katanas across her lap like a sleeping guard dog. She was sharpening one edge with a small whetstone, the rhythmic scrape the only sound besides the rain. Mai had stretched out along the couch, head in Shammy's lap, silver hair spilling over storm-carried thighs. Shammy's fingers moved through it absently, the static turning the strands faintly luminous.

"Still thinking about the civilians," Ace said without looking up. Scrape. Scrape. "The ones who filmed Theta-24 dragging that shadow out. They'll upload it, comment, then go home and sleep like it was someone else's fracture."

Mai's eyes were closed, but her voice was sharp as ever. "They get the spectacle without the static. No pressure bleed. No need to equalize anything. Just pixels and distance." She opened one silver-blue eye, looked up at Shammy. "You ever wonder what it feels like to be that detached?"

Shammy's hand paused in Mai's hair. "Feels like static with nowhere to ground," she answered. "Empty charge. I tried it once—early, right after first contact, before the triad locked in. Watched you two handle a residual layer from the ridge. Didn't step in. Told myself it was atmospheric observation. Almost lost the pressure equilibrium entirely. The air around me went flat. Couldn't breathe right until I dropped down and let the current run through all three of us." She looked down at Ace. "You felt it too. I saw the way your shoulders tightened when my charge dipped."

Ace's whetstone paused mid-stroke. "Felt like the fracture was coming from inside the bond instead of outside. Didn't like it." She resumed the motion, slower. "Watching's fine. Watching and staying out? That's how systems die."

Mai sat up partway, propping herself on one elbow so she could see both of them. "That's the difference between them and us. They watch to stay safe. We watch to stay whole. Ace maps the cut. I map the structure. Shammy maps the air between. Together we make the loop that doesn't break."

Shammy's electric-blue eyes met Mai's, then Ace's. The static crackled softly, a gentle reminder of presence. "Some people watch because they're waiting for permission to step in. Others because they're afraid permission will never come. Us? We don't wait. We watch, we move, we hold the line for each other."

Ace set the whetstone aside and leaned her head back against Shammy's knee. "Doesn't mean I don't enjoy the view sometimes," she said, dry humor threading through the words like a hidden blade. "The way Mai's eyes go sharp when she's calculating risk. The way Shammy's hair lifts right before she decides the pressure's perfect. Better than any feed the civilians could stream."

Mai's smile was slow, teasing. She reached down and flicked Ace's ear lightly. "Careful. That almost sounded like a compliment."

"Observation," Ace corrected, but the corner of her mouth twitched.

Shammy's laugh rolled through the room like distant thunder, warm and low. She pulled Mai back down into her lap and rested her other hand on Ace's shoulder, thumb pressing into the muscle where the bruise had started to yellow. "Keep observing, then. We've got all night. The city's still watching its screens. We're the ones who know how to watch back."

The rain eased further, turning to a mist that blurred the neon into watercolor smears. The safehouse held its breath around them—three vectors in equilibrium, watchers who had long ago learned that distance was just another way of staying close. Ace's hand found Mai's. Mai's fingers brushed Shammy's wrist. Shammy's static hummed steady, grounding them all.

Outside, the civilians would keep filming, keep scrolling, keep standing at the window. Inside, the triad kept the circuit alive. Watching. Moving. Balanced.

And for once, none of them needed to say anything more.

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Last update: **02/04/2026 17:03**

