

One Breath Before Neon

Rain had finally run out of voice. What was left of it clicked from a cracked gutter and tapped the rim of a rusted bucket in slow, apologetic beats. The room they'd taken wasn't much—four walls that used to be six, a window with no glass, the floor a patchwork of dust and old tile—but it was dry, and the wind only found them when it remembered they existed.

Ace stood just inside the doorway, small and all edges, dripping a slow line onto the floor. She rolled her shoulders; the twin katanas settled in the shape her back knew better than sleep. The lacquered sheaths were smudged with road grit, runes dulled to a quiet bruise of color that didn't try to be seen. She shook her hair once. Water came off like shaken mercury.

Mai set her disruptor on a splintered crate and checked the last indicator light automatically—habit, not worry. The pistol answered with a soft, satisfied blink. "Still breathing," Mai murmured to it, then to Ace. "Both of you."

"Mm." Ace's smirk was half there, the energy in it bled down by the day. She glanced at the empty room as if it might suddenly demand a fight. When it didn't, she exhaled. "This is an upgrade."

"From the alley with the broken neon sign and the dead vending machine? Barely." Mai dug into her pack and came up with a threadbare towel that had clearly seen more catastrophe than fabric had any right to survive. She tossed it. "Don't say it."

Ace caught it one-handed. "You carry towels now?"

"Risk management." Mai's mouth twitched. "Also, you sulk when your hair's wet."

Ace considered denying that and decided she was too tired to lie convincingly. She sat on the floor with the kind of unceremonious grace only exhaustion can teach, boots leaving half-moons in the dust. The towel went over her head, and for a minute the world shrank to the muffled rasp of cloth and the weird, homely intimacy of being alive enough to be damp.

Outside, the distant city breathed. Not loudly—just a low, electric hum that framed the horizon. The cloud deck still glowed faintly, as if someone below was painting with neon and couldn't stay inside the lines. Every so often, a smudge of color—lilac, teal, that searing blue that pretends it's calm—bled through the cutout window and washed the wall.

Mai lowered herself beside Ace, close but not crowding, the way she always did: a presence you felt before you reached for it. She pulled a slim metal tin from her jacket, thumbed the striker; a soft, stubborn flame coughed to life and found a wick. The candle wasn't the kind you buy for mood; it was the kind you coerce into being because heat and light are nicer than dark and cold. Its glow turned their shadows gentle.

"Any new voices?" Mai asked, casual as weather.

Ace stilled, towel sliding into her lap. She listened to the inside of her skull like you might listen to the hallway outside a motel door. For a moment there was only the candle, the gutter's drip, that steady far hum. The other thing—the violet-pitched itch at the back of her thoughts that sometimes tried to be helpful and mostly wasn't—felt... distant. Watching through glass.

"Quiet," Ace said. "Either we bored her, or she's sulking."

"Both plausible." Mai leaned her shoulder into Ace's. Warmth, clean and uncomplicated, spread along

the points where they touched. "I'll take it."

They didn't race to fill the silence. They let it unfurl, heavy at first, then lighter, like a blanket warming up. The room's old smells—rain-peeled paint, machine oil that had become memory, something sweet that once might have been a fruit shop two doors down—settled around them. The day they'd come through was still in their bodies: the running and the talking-too-loud and the pull of everything that pretends to be fate. Here, none of it could find a purchase.

"Today was stupid," Mai said at last.

"On a scale of one to us?" Ace's mouth tilted. "We broke the scale weeks ago."

Mai's laugh was small and real. "You took three risks you didn't have to."

"I took two and a half. The third was an enthusiastic stumble."

"You call it enthusiastic; I call it the part where my heart developed extra edges." Mai turned her head, silver hair gone wild in the candle's small wind. "I know why you do it. I also know you don't have to do it alone."

Ace looked down at her hands. They were cut in new places and healed in old ones, a map that made no promises and told no lies. She flexed them, slow. "I didn't forget you were there."

"You never do." Mai's tone softened. "But you forget you're allowed to let me carry part of it."

Ace breathed a laugh that wasn't quite a laugh. "I'm allowed now?"

"Have been for a while." Mai bumped her shoulder again, lighter this time. "Permission slips are retroactive."

Ace turned to look at her. The candle made Mai's eyes catch and hold light in strange, lovely ways; they always had. There was steadiness there, yes, but something else too—something that had weathered every absurdity Ace had dragged them through and chosen to stay anyway. The sight put a shape to the ache in her chest and wrapped it in something that felt suspiciously like peace.

"Alright," Ace said. "One night, I let you carry part of it."

"Generous." Mai reached up and, without ceremony, brushed a wet strand off Ace's cheek. The touch was unshowy and devastating. "We'll renegotiate in the morning."

Ace's smirk tried to come back and made it halfway. "Tomorrow's rates are terrible. City tax."

"As if neon ever offers a discount." Mai glanced toward the window. The light beyond it had deepened, the color stack brightening into sharper swaths. "We're close."

Ace followed her gaze. The horizon was a suggestion more than a line—an ache of color where night learned a new dialect. She could feel the city's gravity as a tug in her bones, equal parts threat and invitation. There were a thousand stories out there waiting to trip them; a thousand alleys that would try to swallow their names. Even knowing that—especially knowing that—her pulse steadied.

"Before we go," Mai said, quieter, "we're going to sleep."

"Sleep?" Ace blinked in exaggerated horror. "That myth?"

"Unverified, but promising." Mai set the disruptor within arm's reach and moved just a little closer. "Twenty minutes. Maybe forty. I'll accept eighty if you insist on spoiling me."

"Two hundred," Ace said, deadpan. "Wake me for breakfast. Or lunch. Or next week."

Mai tilted her forehead to Ace's. The touch landed like a promise they'd been keeping so long it no longer needed words. Ace closed her eyes. For a blink and another, the world simplified: candle heat, cotton smoke, the steady cadence of Mai's breathing. The room didn't get safer, exactly. It just got honest.

"I like this," Ace said into the small space between them.

"I know." Mai's voice feathered there, too. "Me too."

Outside, the gutter found its last drip. The candle burned lower, the tin warming the floor beneath it. Shadows shifted and softened into new animals. Somewhere far off, a siren wound up and then thought better of it. The neon at the edge of the sky brightened as if someone had turned the city a single degree more awake.

Minutes slid. Ace let her weight lean, then rest. The instinct to rise, to check the door, to measure every angle for attack, didn't disappear, but it loosened. She could feel—without looking—that Mai had cataloged the room's stupid little dangers and decided none of them were worth their attention. So Ace decided the same.

When they finally moved, it was together. Mai pinched the candlewick between finger and thumb; the flame shrank to a stubborn ember, then gave up with a sigh. Smoke curled, drew a thin line toward the window, and was gone. The dark that came after wasn't absolute. The world had more colors in it now, not fewer.

Ace pushed to her feet and offered a hand without making a speech about it. Mai took it without making a ceremony out of that. They stood close enough that the old room could have mistaken them for one person and wouldn't have been far wrong.

"Long way in," Mai said.

"We'll make it longer," Ace answered, automatic mischief curling around a tired smile. "No shortcuts. No enthusiastic stumbles."

"Mm." Mai shouldered her pack, clipped the disruptor back to her side. "You can keep the enthusiasm. Just save me a seat when you decide to leap."

"Always."

They stepped to the door and paused. The cityline threw a low, liquid reflection across the puddles outside, smearing the ground with borrowed color. The air smelled like wet dust and new electricity. Somewhere a sign chattered to life and then, reconsidering, chattered to death again.

Ace looked over, a question in her eyebrows.

Mai nodded. "Let's go."

They went. Not running, not braced for impact. Just walking, shoulders brushing, the quiet following them out and choosing—for once—to keep pace. Neon gathered on the horizon like a personal dawn,

and the road found their feet as if it had been waiting all night.

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