

Ace 15 - Systems That Breathe

Chapter 1

Detroit looked almost honest in the morning.

That was the first lie of the day.

From the safehouse window thirty floors above the streets, the city had collapsed into simple shapes: rain-slick rooftops, pale morning light, and long red threads of traffic beginning to move again. The night's chaos had flattened into geometry. Wet asphalt reflected the sky like steel. The whole place looked orderly from up here.

It wasn't.

Distance just made the mess polite.

Ace sat sideways on the wide window ledge, one knee drawn up, a mug balanced between both hands. The glass was cool against her shoulder. The coffee was not. It smelled like burnt bitterness and punishment.

She drank it anyway.

Behind her, the safehouse was slowly becoming a room again instead of the place they had collapsed into a few hours earlier.

Mai stood in the kitchenette with one hip against the counter, staring at the coffee machine like it had personally offended her. She wore an oversized black shirt and dark lounge pants that definitely hadn't been part of the apartment's original inventory. Her silver hair was tied back loosely and already escaping in strands that framed her face. She hadn't bothered fixing them.

Shammy had taken the floor near the couch in the long, loose way tall people sometimes did when they stopped pretending to occupy less space than they actually did. One knee up, elbow resting on it, phone in hand. Her storm-colored hair spilled over one shoulder, pale silver threaded with faint electric blue. Every once in a while the room responded to her presence in quiet, involuntary ways. The curtain shifted slightly though the windows were closed. A spoon on the counter rattled once and then stopped. The air pressure changed by a fraction and settled again.

Ace took another sip of the coffee and grimaced.

Mai glanced over.

"Still terrible?"

Ace inspected the mug like the answer might be floating somewhere in the darkness.

"I think it got worse."

"That's impressive," Shammy said without looking up from her phone. "It already tasted like a prison sentence."

Mai folded her arms. "You're both still drinking it."

Ace shrugged.

“Survival habit.”

Shammy finally looked up. Blue eyes bright with quiet amusement.

“That’s not coffee,” she said. “That’s a compliance test.”

Mai exhaled a short breath that might have been a laugh and turned back toward the counter.

Ace watched her.

It was a small thing. Barely even worth noticing. The line of Mai’s shoulders beneath the black fabric. The way she moved when she reached for the sugar jar she probably wasn’t going to use. The quiet precision in everything she did even when she was half-asleep.

Ace looked a moment longer than she meant to.

Shammy noticed immediately.

Of course she did.

Ace felt it before she turned her head — that faint atmospheric shift that happened when Shammy focused on something. When Ace looked over, Shammy was already watching her above the top edge of the phone, one eyebrow raised in quiet accusation.

Ace drank more coffee.

Shammy’s mouth curved.

Mai spoke without turning.

“If either of you are about to start something before I finish my first cup, I would appreciate advance warning.”

Ace glanced at Shammy.

Shammy glanced at Ace.

Neither said a word.

Mai turned around slowly and leaned back against the counter.

“That,” she said calmly, “counts as starting something.”

“It was eye contact,” Shammy said.

“It was loaded eye contact,” Mai corrected.

Ace lowered the mug.

“You make that sound like a security risk.”

“With you two?” Mai said. “It usually is.”

That pulled a reluctant smile out of Ace. Small, quick, gone almost immediately.

Shammy saw it anyway.

The room shifted around that moment — just slightly. Pressure easing by a fraction.

Ace looked away first, back toward the window.

Detroit was quieter now than it had any right to be. After the Blacklist chain. After the rain. After the engines screaming through the night like mechanical animals fighting over territory.

Morning shouldn't have been able to settle this cleanly.

Her fingers tightened around the mug.

They had won.

That still felt strange.

Not because the result was wrong. The numbers were clean. The points landed where they landed. The system had done exactly what the system was designed to do.

But they hadn't won the way people expected.

They hadn't crushed the field. Hadn't dominated every race. Hadn't left Detroit with a clean story about one unstoppable driver carving through the city.

They had won on the team rule.

They had broken the Blacklist by working the system together.

Which, Ace was discovering, was somehow more irritating than losing would have been.

"We didn't even win most of the races," she said.

Shammy's grin sharpened.

"Good morning to you too."

Mai wrapped both hands around her mug.

"That's because we didn't need to."

Ace looked over her shoulder.

"That was not the point."

"That was exactly the point."

"I dislike that point."

Mai sipped her coffee.

"That's because it worked."

Shammy leaned back on one hand and studied Ace with open amusement.

“You’re upset we didn’t win dramatically.”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

Mai tilted her head.

“Primitive.”

“Accurate.”

“Wasteful.”

“Still accurate.”

Shammy laughed softly.

“This is why Detroit’s going to spend months trying to figure out what happened.”

Ace turned from the window.

“What do you mean?”

Shammy lifted the phone.

“Street boards are already melting down.”

Mai’s attention sharpened immediately.

“Show me.”

Shammy stood and crossed the room in a single fluid movement. She leaned in beside Mai and angled the screen so both of them could see.

Ace watched the motion quietly.

Something about the way Shammy moved around Mai now was different than it had been even a week ago. Still careful. Still respectful of space.

But not retreating anymore.

Mai read silently for a moment.

“Two cars, no wasted motion, like they were sharing a nervous system.”

Her tone stayed neutral, but there was a flicker of satisfaction in her eyes.

Shammy glanced sideways at her.

“You sound proud.”

“I sound accurate.”

"You sound proud."

Mai handed the phone back.

"That observation is not incorrect."

Their fingers brushed in the exchange.

Neither of them reacted visibly.

Ace noticed anyway.

Shammy scrolled again.

"Dashcam clips are starting to show up," she said. "Mostly useless. Motion blur, rain streaks, people yelling."

"That sounds like Detroit," Mai said.

"That sounds like racing," Ace said.

Shammy read another line.

"Silver Aston cut the inside like it was on rails."

Mai said nothing.

Shammy continued.

"Vanta black Nissan came out of nowhere and just started eating distance."

Ace's expression didn't change, but something in her shoulders loosened slightly.

Then Shammy paused.

"Oh."

Mai looked up.

"What?"

Shammy's smile widened.

"The Supra."

Ace straightened immediately.

Mai noticed.

"There it is," she murmured. "That expression."

Ace ignored her.

"What are they saying?"

Shammy scrolled slowly, clearly enjoying the moment.

“Mechanical speculation. People arguing about whether the audio is fake.”

“Reasonable,” Mai said.

“And apparently,” Shammy continued, “the car already has a nickname.”

Ace narrowed her eyes.

Shammy looked up.

“The Demon Supra.”

Silence.

Then Mai laughed.

Not quietly.

Not politely.

It came out sharp and genuine before she could stop it, one hand covering her mouth while the other braced against the counter. Ace watched her with a mix of irritation and reluctant amusement.

Shammy looked delighted.

Ace lasted about three seconds.

Then her own mouth twitched.

“That is ridiculous.”

“It’s perfect,” Shammy said.

“It’s melodramatic.”

Mai lowered her hand.

“You drive a vanta black Nissan that looks like a shadow learned how to hunt,” she said. “You don’t get to complain about melodrama.”

“That Supra did not sound normal,” Shammy added. “Even from the sidelines.”

Ace looked back out the window.

But she wasn’t seeing the city anymore.

She was seeing rain. Floodlights. The black shape of a Supra cutting through spray like it didn’t believe in friction.

Konrad hadn’t even tried to be subtle.

He could have ghosted through the race unseen.

Instead he had appeared like a deliberate insult.

The black Supra had cut into the final run, passed Ace cleanly in the rain, and disappeared again before anyone could process what they'd seen.

He hadn't taken points.

Hadn't interfered with the race outcome.

He had simply shown up.

Trolled her.

And left.

Which was, unfortunately, very on brand.

"He passed me like I was parked," Ace said.

Mai raised one eyebrow.

"You were distracted."

"I was leading."

"You were watching my split line."

"I was monitoring team position."

"You were looking at me."

Ace opened her mouth.

Closed it again.

Then looked at Shammy.

Shammy betrayed her instantly.

"You were definitely looking at her."

Ace stared.

"You too?"

Shammy shrugged.

"I had the best atmospheric angle."

Mai folded her arms.

"And that," she said calmly, "is when your Demon Supra decided to make an entrance."

Ace squinted into the distance.

“He was laughing.”

Shammy blinked.

“You could hear that?”

“I know his laugh.”

Mai nodded.

“Unfortunately accurate.”

Shammy leaned against the counter, shaking her head.

“So from Detroit’s perspective, a mystery team shows up, wins the Blacklist on a team rule, and near the end a demonic Supra blows through the race like it’s bored and disappears.”

“He did not humiliate me,” Ace said.

“He overtook you,” Mai said.

“He did not humiliate me.”

Shammy looked between them.

“This sounds like humiliation.”

“This sounds like Ace,” Mai said.

Ace set the mug down.

“I am surrounded by traitors.”

“Bound traitors,” Shammy murmured.

The words were light.

But something in the room shifted around them when she said it.

Ace felt it. Mai did too.

A quiet alignment settling into place between the three of them.

No one commented on it.

Ace stepped away from the window and crossed toward the kitchenette.

She stopped close enough that the space between them felt smaller than it actually was.

Shammy noticed.

Mai noticed Shammy noticing.

Mai slid her own mug across the counter.

"Taste this."

Ace frowned.

"Why?"

"I fixed it."

Ace took the mug.

Their fingers touched briefly.

Mai didn't move her hand right away.

Ace looked up.

Mai's expression was perfectly calm. Just the smallest hint of warmth at the corner of her mouth.

Shammy watched the exchange with open amusement.

Ace drank.

The coffee was better.

"Annoyingly improved," she said.

"As expected," Mai replied.

Shammy tilted her head.

"Are you two always like this after winning something?"

Ace answered without looking up.

"No."

Mai answered at the same time.

"Yes."

Shammy laughed.

The air shifted again.

Ace finally looked up at her.

For a moment none of them spoke.

Then Shammy glanced back at the phone.

"Oh this part is great."

Mai leaned closer.

"What now?"

Shammy held the screen between them.

Ace stepped closer to see.

The three of them ended up standing shoulder to shoulder around the small glow of the phone screen.

A thread title blinked at the top.

WHO THE HELL WERE THEY

Below it:

Two cars. Perfect timing. No names.
Vanta black Nissan moved like it wanted blood.
Silver Aston was surgical.
And what the hell was that black Supra near the end?
Tell me someone else heard that thing.
That wasn't a normal engine note.
I'm telling you that was a demon.

Shammy scrolled.

No plates. No tags. No known crews.
They hit the board, took the score, and vanished.
You don't do that by accident.

Another comment.

The Demon Supra wasn't with them.
It just... happened.

Mai nodded slowly.

"That part is technically correct."

Ace shook her head slightly.

"They named it that fast."

"It earned it," Shammy said.

Mai folded her arms again.

"The important part," she said, "is that nobody knows who we are."

"And Detroit is going to spend months arguing about whether the Demon Supra was real," Shammy added.

Ace leaned back against the counter.

"He's going to enjoy that."

Shammy looked at her.

“Who?”

Ace stared past the room.

“Konrad.”

Shammy nodded.

“Of course.”

Mai’s eyebrow twitched.

“I was waiting for one of you to say it.”

Ace looked at her.

“You knew.”

Mai gave her a flat look.

“A black Supra appears in the rain, sounds like a mechanical exorcism, overtakes you purely to be irritating, and disappears.”

She took another sip of coffee.

“Who else would it be?”

Shammy lifted one hand.

“In fairness, I haven’t known him long.”

“Now you know enough,” Mai said.

Ace picked up her original mug again.

The coffee had cooled.

She drank it anyway.

The city below was waking fully now. Traffic thickening. Light sharpening across the wet streets.

Detroit looked calm again.

It wasn’t.

“We move before noon,” Mai said.

Ace nodded.

Shammy walked over and stood beside her at the window.

Close enough that their shoulders almost touched.

“Qualifier,” Shammy said quietly. “Still sounds weird.”

Ace glanced up at her.

“Winning without winning?”

Shammy smiled slightly.

“That too.”

Mai joined them a moment later, taking the space on Ace’s other side without comment.

From the outside it might have looked like nothing.

Three people drinking bad coffee and watching a city wake up.

Inside the room it felt different.

Balanced.

Alive.

Temporary.

Real.

Shammy raised her mug slightly toward the skyline.

“To Detroit,” she said.

“May its forums never recover.”

Ace allowed herself a small smile.

“To the Demon Supra.”

Mai closed her eyes for a moment.

Shammy laughed.

And the room settled into a quiet that felt dangerously right.

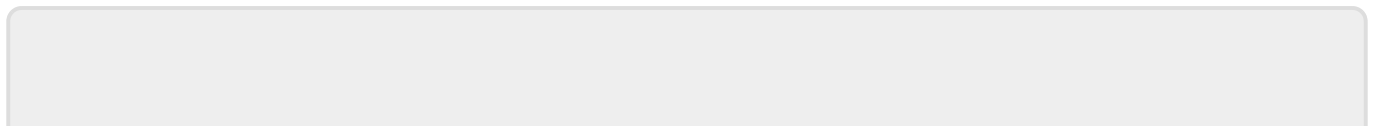
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Last update: **27/03/2026 09:56**

