

INTERLUDE — “Coffee That Holds”

(Post Ace29 — Pre Ace30)

The café was loud.

Not objectively.

Just—
full.

Voices overlapping.
Cups touching ceramic.
Machines hissing in short, controlled bursts.

Everything happening exactly once.

Ace noticed that immediately.

“...it’s staying,” she said.

Mai didn’t look up from the menu.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

Ace frowned slightly.

“Yeah.”

A beat.

“...still checking.”

Shammy stood near the counter.

Not in line.

Not out of it.

Just—
present.

The air around her held steady.

No drift.

No hesitation.

“It’s consistent,” she said quietly.

Mai nodded once.

“Good.”

Ace stepped closer to the counter.

The barista looked up.

“Hey! What can I get you?”

Ace stared at them.

A beat.

Then another.

“...coffee,” she said.

The barista smiled.

“Yeah, we’ve got a few of those.”

Ace blinked once.

“...one.”

Mai closed her eyes briefly.

Not visibly.

Then stepped in.

“Three,” she said calmly. “Black. And one tea.”

Ace glanced at her.

“I didn’t say tea.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“I prefer it.”

Ace paused.

“...right.”

They stepped aside.

The machine hissed again.

Steam rising—

once.

Ace watched it.

Carefully.

“...that’s normal,” she muttered.

Mai glanced at her.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“It was normal before.”

Ace didn’t answer.

They found a table.

Small.

Round.

Too close to other people.

Too much overlap.

Ace didn't sit immediately.

She watched.

People talking.

Laughing.

Interrupting each other.

No repeats.

No layers.

Just—

one version.

"...this is inefficient," Mai said.

Ace sat.

"How."

Mai gestured slightly.

"Too many concurrent interactions. No optimization."

Ace leaned back.

“That’s the point.”

Mai paused.

Considered.

“...yes.”

A beat.

“That is the point.”

Shammy sat last.

The chair didn’t shift.

Didn’t hesitate.

It just—

accepted.

“They’re not thinking about it,” she said.

Ace glanced at her.

“About what.”

Shammy’s gaze moved across the room.

“Whether this moment could be different.”

Ace huffed once.

“Good.”

A beat.

“They shouldn’t.”

Their drinks arrived.

Placed down.

One by one.

No delay.

No duplication.

Ace picked hers up.

Paused.

Watched the surface.

Still.

“...it’s not changing,” she said.

Mai raised an eyebrow.

“It’s coffee.”

Ace took a sip.

Waited.

Nothing happened.

She nodded once.

“...good.”

A voice from the next table:

“...so I just told him—”

Laughter.

The story continued.

No variation.

No second version.

Ace listened for a moment.

Then stopped.

“...this is boring.”

Mai sipped her drink.

“Yes.”

Shammy’s voice was softer.

“It’s stable.”

Ace glanced at her.

“...I hate that I get why that matters.”

A small silence settled.

Not heavy.

Not empty.

Just—
complete.

The barista called out another order.

A name.

Someone stood.

Walked over.

Took their drink.

Sat down again.

Nothing changed.

For a fraction of a second—

Ace's gaze flickered.

"...did that just—"

Mai didn't look up.

"No."

Shammy's lips curved slightly.

"Probably not."

Ace narrowed her eyes.

"...not helping."

They sat.

Drank.

Did nothing.

And that—

was the entire point.

After a while—

Ace stood.

Not abruptly.

Just—

finished.

“...we’re done,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Shammy followed.

The chair stayed where it was.

Of course it did.

They stepped outside.

The city moved.

Lights.

Noise.

Motion.

Everything—

once.

Shammy paused.

Just for a moment.

Looked out across the street.

“It’s quieter,” she said.

Mai stepped beside her.

“Yes.”

Ace glanced between them.

“...too quiet?”

Shammy didn't answer immediately.

A small pause.

Then:

“No.”

A beat.

“Just enough.”

Ace exhaled once.

Looked out at the city.

No distortion.

No hesitation.

“...fine,” she said.

And for now—

that was enough.

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