

INTERLUDE — Safehouse Logic

The apartment wasn't theirs.

Not in any way that Night City would recognize.

The lock had been replaced twice.

The doorframe still carried a hairline fracture where the previous owner—or occupant, or problem—had been removed a little too forcefully. The hallway outside smelled faintly of burnt insulation and synthetic citrus.

Inside—

it held.

That was enough.

The door closed behind them with a solid, mechanical click.

No drift.

No soft misalignment.

No quiet correction five seconds later.

Just—

closed.

Mai noticed immediately.

Her gaze flicked once to the hinges, then to the frame, then to the thin seam of light that didn't shift.

"Consistent," she said.

Ace dropped the case onto the table. Not carefully, not carelessly—just with the kind of finality that said the job was over and the object no longer mattered.

"Good."

Shammy stepped in last.

The moment she crossed the threshold, the air changed.

Not dramatically. Not visibly.

But the subtle pressure imbalance that always followed them—like the room couldn't quite agree on where they ended and everything else began—settled into something... closer to agreement.

"It breathes," she said.

V, leaning against the wall like they had always been there and never fully committed to it, gave a small shrug.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...barely, but yeah.”

Silence followed.

Not empty.

Occupied.

The kind that didn’t ask to be filled.

Less than a month.

That was all it had taken.

From displacement—
to a working loop:

a place to return to,
a network that didn’t immediately reject them,
jobs that paid in something more stable than survival.

Mai moved to the window.

Not for the view.

The view was noise—neon bleed, traffic streams, distant sirens folding into each other until they stopped meaning anything.

She watched the systems behind it.

Traffic patterns.
Signal density.
Energy flow between grid nodes.

Everything in Night City moved.

Everything responded.

Everything expected to be part of something larger.

“Baseline established,” she said.

Ace didn’t look up.

“Explain.”

Mai didn’t turn from the glass.

“We can operate here.”

A short pause, just enough to test the statement against everything she had already calculated.

“Reliably.”

That word mattered.

It changed the city from threat to structure.

Shammy shifted slightly, and the air followed—subtle, responsive, never quite still.

“It still doesn’t like us,” she said.

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“It doesn’t recognize us.”

Closer to the truth.

V let out a quiet, humorless huff.

“...Same difference in this city.”

Ace leaned back just enough to rest her weight against the edge of the table.

“Work holds,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Another pause.

“Access does not.”

There it was.

The real fracture.

Ace’s gaze lifted, finally focusing.

“Define.”

Mai turned now, fully.

“You are flagged every time you enter a secured system.”

No softening. No abstraction.

“Default classification: hostile.”

Silence.

Ace didn’t react.

“Works,” she said.

V laughed under their breath.

“...Yeah. Until it doesn’t.”

Shammy tilted her head, listening to something that wasn’t sound.

The air tightened slightly, then released.

“You push through it,” she said.

“A system that rejects you still has to process you.”

A beat.

“But it pushes back.”

Ace didn’t deny it.

Mai stepped closer.

“This is inefficient.”

Flat. Precise.

“Every entry increases exposure.”

“Every system escalates its response.”

She held Ace’s gaze.

“Every time, the city learns you a little better.”

Ace didn’t blink.

“Solution.”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“Implant.”

The word landed clean.

No buildup.

No framing.

Just fact.

V straightened slightly, interest cutting through their usual detachment.

“...Yeah,” they said.

“...that would fix a lot.”

Shammy didn’t move.

But the air shifted again—less stable now, more attentive.

“It would change things.”

Ace didn't answer immediately.

That, by itself, was new.

A small pause opened—
not uncertainty,
not resistance,

evaluation.

"How," she said.

Mai answered without breaking rhythm.

"You would be recognized."

A beat.

"Validated."

Another.

"Allowed."

The room held those words.

Ace's expression didn't change.

"That's the problem."

V blinked.

"...Wait—what?"

Mai watched her carefully now.

"Clarify."

Ace pushed off the table and took a step toward the window, stopping just short of Mai.

"If it recognizes me—" she said, voice low, controlled,

"—it defines me."

Silence.

That landed.

Heavier than anything before it.

Shammy exhaled slowly, and the air softened with her.

"It gives you a place," she said.

Ace nodded once.

"Yes."

A pause.

"And I don't take assigned positions."

V dragged a hand across the back of their neck.

"...Okay," they muttered.

"...that's either really deep or really inconvenient."

Mai didn't argue.

Because both were true.

"Operational efficiency would increase," she said.

"But autonomy would decrease."

Balanced. Clean. Complete.

Ace didn't respond.

She stepped past Mai to the window and looked out—

not at the city,

but through it.

Less than a month.

And already—

it was trying to categorize them.

Define them.

Fit them into something it could process.

Shammy moved closer, stopping just behind her.

The air followed—gentler now, less reactive.

"You don't have to decide now," she said.

Ace didn't turn.

"I already did."

Of course she had.

V exhaled sharply.

"...Yeah," they said.

"...that tracks."

Mai held her gaze a second longer.

“Decision.”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

“No implant.”

Flat.

Final.

Silence settled again.

Different this time.

Structured.

Mai nodded once.

“Then we adapt.”

That was the real answer.

Shammy leaned back slightly, the air stabilizing with her.

Balanced again.

Not perfect.

But survivable.

V pushed off the wall.

“...You’re going to fit in here,” they said.

A beat.

“...just not in any way the city understands.”

Ace didn’t respond.

She didn’t need to.

Because Night City didn’t care how you fit.

Only whether you functioned.

And now—

they did.

Not cleanly.

Not comfortably.

But enough.

And somewhere—

in systems that tracked,
classified,
and tried to assign meaning—

Ace remained

unresolved.

Unrecognized.

Unassigned.

Exactly

as intended.

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