

ACE 31.2 — Interlude: Processing Cost

The clinic didn't advertise.

It didn't need to.

People who needed it—

found it.

The door opened before they touched it.

Not because it recognized them.

Because someone inside had already decided.

"Come in," a voice said.

Viktor Vektor didn't look up immediately.

He finished what he was doing first.

Steady hands.

Clean movement.

No wasted motion.

Then—

he glanced at them.

And paused.

“...Yeah,” he said quietly.

“...you’re not standard.”

V leaned against the wall.

“Told you.”

Ace didn't move further in.

She stopped just inside—

not claiming the space.

Mai stepped forward.

“Enhancement,” she said.

Direct.

No explanation.

Victor studied her—

longer than necessary.

Not suspicious.

Curious.

“Define,” he said.

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“Processing.”

A beat.

“Latency reduction. Pattern recognition acceleration.”

Victor’s eyebrow lifted slightly.

“...That’s a new one.”

He stood.

Moved closer.

Not to touch—

to read.

“You’re already running clean,” he said.

A pause.

“Cleaner than most people I see.”

Mai didn’t respond.

“That is insufficient,” she said.

Flat.

Victor exhaled slowly.

“Yeah,” he muttered.

“...this city does that.”

He glanced at Ace.

Stopped.

“...You’ve got nothing.”

Not a question.

Ace didn’t react.

“Works,” she said.

Victor nodded once.

“For now.”

His gaze shifted to Shammy—

and stayed there.

Longer.

“...I’m not even going to ask,” he said.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

The air—

shifted.

“That would be inefficient,” she said.

Victor almost smiled.

“Yeah,” he said.

“...that tracks.”

He turned back to Mai.

“You want processing,” he said.

A beat.

“I can do that.”

No drama.

No build-up.

Just—

fact.

“But,” he added.

There it was.

“It’ll change how you think.”

Mai didn't react.

"That is the objective."

Victor shook his head slightly.

"No," he said.

"That's the risk."

Silence.

He moved to the chair.

Gestured.

"Sit."

Mai did.

No hesitation.

Ace didn't move.

She watched.

Not the tools—

the intent.

Victor worked.

Efficient.

Precise.

No wasted motion.

Time passed—

but not long.

Then—

he stepped back.

“Done,” he said.

Mai stood.

No delay.

No adjustment.

She looked at the room—

once.

Everything—

shifted.

Not externally.

Internally.

Faster.

Cleaner.

Connected.

Shammy noticed immediately.

“You’re faster,” she said.

Mai didn’t answer.

Because she already knew.

She turned toward the door.

The system—

simple—

non-networked—

still responded.

Her hand moved—

before the decision formed.

The door opened.

Not predicted.

Executed.

V blinked.

“...Okay.”

A beat.

“...that’s new.”

Mai paused.

Not confused.

Processing.

“It reduces delay,” she said.

Flat.

“Significantly.”

Victor crossed his arms.

“Yeah,” he said.

“...and it’s going to make you trust it.”

Mai didn’t respond.

Because that was irrelevant—

for now.

Ace stepped forward.

Looked at her.

Not impressed.

Not concerned.

Measuring.

“It works,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“It does.”

Victor looked at Ace again.

Longer this time.

“...You ever think about it?” he asked.

No push.

Just—

offered.

Ace didn't answer.

Not immediately.

She glanced at Mai—

at the difference—

at the speed—

at the absence of hesitation.

Then—

back to Victor.

“What,” she said.

Victor shrugged slightly.

“Reflex boost.”

A beat.

“Neural acceleration.”

Another.

“You’d be scary.”

He paused.

Then—

quietly:

“...Problem is, I’m not sure you should be.”

Silence.

That landed.

Shammy watched Ace.

The air—

shifted.

Subtle.

“You’re thinking about it,” she said.

Ace didn’t respond.

Which—

was the answer.

V exhaled.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...this city gets to everyone.”

Ace turned.

Not dismissing it.

Not accepting it.

Holding it.

“We move,” she said.

Default.

Control.

Mai nodded.

Already ahead.

Shammy followed.

The air—

balanced.

Victor watched them go.

Didn't stop them.

Didn't offer more.

Just one thing—

as they reached the door.

“Don't overdo it,” he said.

Not to Mai.

Not to Ace.

To all of them.

Because in Night City—

enhancement wasn't the danger.

Dependence was.

And as the door closed behind them—

Mai processed faster.

Ace thought—

slightly longer than before.

And Shammy—

felt the difference

before either of them

said a word.

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