

## Ace31.6 — Latex Night Protocol Failure

The idea began the way most terrible ideas did in their safehouse: with Ace stretched across the sofa like a bored housecat that had already decided to knock something expensive off a shelf.

Night City rain hissed against the windows. Neon bled through the water in long crooked strokes, turning the room into a low-lit aquarium of blue and pink and tired green. Somewhere in the kitchenette, the old coffee machine made a noise that suggested lingering resentment. Mai was at the table with her slate open, pretending she was still reviewing logistics from the last job. Shammy stood near the balcony door, one hand resting lightly on the frame, watching the weather with the same attentive calm she gave everything—as if rain, static, traffic, and human stupidity all belonged to the same family of phenomena and merely expressed themselves differently.

Ace had been quiet for nearly six whole minutes.

That was usually enough to make Mai uneasy.

Sure enough, Ace rolled onto one elbow, looked at the ceiling for another second, then said, with the tone of someone discovering fire for the first time, "We should go out."

Mai did not look up. "No."

"You didn't even ask where."

"I don't need to. The answer is still no."

Ace sat up a little more. "That's not a rational process."

"It is when the variable is you."

That got half a grin out of Ace. A dangerous half grin. The kind that suggested velocity without direction. Post-Horizon, she no longer carried instability alone; the triad had changed that, stabilized it, distributed the stress instead of forcing Mai to bear it by herself. But Ace was still Ace—the point of irreversible action, compact and restless and drawn to motion the way current sought ground.

"I'm serious," Ace said. "No fixer calls. No containment nonsense. No cults. No haunted corporate hardware. We have one free evening in the most overlit city on earth. That feels statistically offensive."

Mai finally looked up from the slate. "Your relationship with statistics is decorative."

"Still counts."

Shammy turned from the window. Silver-white hair caught the room's colored spill and held it strangely, as if light itself wasn't fully certain how to sit on her. "Go where?"

Ace's eyes sharpened. There it was. Opening. Slight, but sufficient.

"Somewhere loud," she said. "Somewhere stupid. Somewhere that makes bad decisions look fashionable."

Mai's expression went flat. "That sentence should have been stopped at customs."

Ace ignored her. "We've been doing jobs, reports, cleanup, post-job cleanup, post-cleanup cleanup—"

"That last one isn't real."

"It feels real."

"It feels real because you create secondary problems recreationally."

Ace sat forward, elbows on knees now, all compressed intent and bright impatience. "Exactly. So let's create a non-lethal one for once."

Mai stared at her for a long moment, then leaned back in her chair. "I do not like how quickly that sounded sincere."

Shammy tilted her head. "What kind of place are we talking about?"

Ace grinned fully now.

That, more than the question, made Mai close her eyes.

"No," Mai said.

Ace blinked. "You don't even know—"

"I know enough."

"You don't."

Mai opened her eyes and leveled a look at her. "You have the facial expression of a tactical mistake."

"That is not a real expression."

"It should be."

Shammy's gaze moved between them with visible curiosity. "I still don't know what we're doing."

Ace stood, already committed. "We are going to one of those upscale industrial clubs downtown."

"That narrows it down to only several hundred bad options," Mai muttered.

"And," Ace said, enjoying herself now, "we are dressing for the occasion."

Silence.

Rain against glass.

The coffee machine made a small dying sound in the kitchen, as if it too understood.

Mai spoke first. "No."

Ace spread her hands. "Why not?"

"Because whatever just occurred in your head is not an argument."

"It's fashion."

"It's provocation with a zipper."

"That is an unnecessarily judgmental description."

"It is an accurate description."

Shammy, in the middle of the room now, asked in total sincerity, "What kind of fashion?"

Ace looked at her.

Mai watched the answer arrive and hated it before it existed.

"Oh, absolutely not," Mai said.

Ace's grin turned wolfish. "Latex."

Shammy blinked once.

Mai set her slate down with the care of someone resisting the urge to throw it through a wall. "No."

"Why do you keep saying that like it's the end of the discussion?"

"Because in civilized systems, it usually is."

Ace pointed at her. "That sounds made up."

Mai stood. "Ace."

"No, listen—"

"I am listening. That is the problem."

Shammy's brows lifted very slightly. "Is that unusual?"

Mai turned to her. "For some people, clothing is functional."

Ace made an offended sound. "For all people, clothing is functional."

Mai folded her arms. "In your proposed case, the function appears to be making an entire room unable to process eye contact."

Ace considered that. "That actually sounds like a benefit."

Shammy, still trying honestly to follow the logic, asked, "Would it make movement harder?"

"A little," Ace said.

"Would it draw attention?"

"Yes."

"Would it be comfortable?"

Ace hesitated. "That feels like a hostile question."

Mai put a hand over her face.

Shammy nodded slowly, as if adding these points into some private weather model. "So the plan is to choose slightly restrictive clothing, go somewhere overstimulating, and become socially disruptive on purpose."

Ace's eyes lit up. "Exactly."

Shammy thought about that. "I see the shape of it."

Mai looked at her in disbelief. "No. No, don't encourage her. The fact that you can map the stupidity does not obligate you to participate in it."

Shammy's mouth twitched. "You said no obligation."

"I implied it."

Ace, smelling weakness in the perimeter, pressed on immediately. "Come on. One evening. No mission. No Foundation. No threat vector. Just us going out and making Night City slightly worse."

Mai inhaled slowly through her nose.

That was the thing about the triad now. Before Shammy, resistance to Ace had often meant simple endurance—Mai as sole stabilizer, absorbing shock, forcing coherence, managing the load alone. That state had nearly burned her hollow more than once. Now the balance distributed differently. Ace's velocity had somewhere to go. Shammy equalized pressure Mai didn't have to carry by herself. The system breathed. It bent. It survived things it could not have survived before.

Unfortunately, survivable did not mean wise.

"It is a terrible idea," Mai said at last.

Ace brightened. "That's not a no."

"It is the preface to a no."

"But not the no itself."

Mai looked at her, then at Shammy, who was still standing with quiet attention, as if this had somehow become a legitimate atmospheric inquiry.

"It is," Mai said carefully, "a terrible idea that is, under current conditions, probably survivable."

Ace pumped a fist once. "That is a yes."

"That is not a yes."

"It is structurally a yes."

"It is structurally a concession."

"Same thing."

"No."

"Yes."

Shammy asked, "Should I change?"

Mai stared at the ceiling.

Ace answered immediately. "Yes."

Mai pointed at her without looking down. "You are enjoying this too much."

Ace's smile turned sharp and delighted. "I know."

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The first sign that Mai's objections had been entirely justified arrived the moment Shammy touched the material.

It was subtle. At first.

The safehouse's bedroom lights dimmed a fraction, not from power loss but from some tiny pressure shift that made the air seem thicker. Shammy stood in front of the mirror, one hand smoothing the sleeve with curious care, electric-blue eyes narrowed in thought. The black shine fit too well—clean lines, impossible silhouette, sleek without becoming theatrical. It should have looked like a costume. Instead, on her, it looked alarmingly natural, as if storms had decided to experiment with tailoring.

There was a soft static tick from somewhere near her shoulder.

Shammy looked around. "Did something happen?"

Mai, in the doorway, gave her a long deadpan stare. "Yes. Physics lost confidence."

"I didn't do anything."

"I believe you," Mai said. "That is not improving the situation."

Ace, already changed and making no effort whatsoever to be normal about the results, leaned against the wall with her arms folded. On her compact frame, the same material didn't create elegance so much as weaponized audacity. She looked quicker, somehow. Sharper. Like a bad idea that had learned posture.

Ace took one look at Shammy and let out a low whistle. "Yeah, that's worse."

Shammy turned to her. "Worse than what?"

"For public stability."

"That seems vague."

"It is. I'm overwhelmed."

Mai shut her eyes briefly, then opened them and looked at Ace. "And you."

"What about me?"

"You look like a nightclub liability compressed into one hundred and twenty centimeters."

Ace's grin flashed. "Compliment accepted."

"It was not one."

"It had the energy of one."

Mai's own outfit was the final insult to her stated objections. She had chosen the least inflammatory possible version—clean, fitted, severe enough to preserve some shred of dignity—but the overall effect only made things worse because restraint on Mai never read as absence. It read as control. Silver hair caught the room's dim light in colder tones; silver-blue eyes stayed steady, analytical, already tracking secondary consequences. She looked like the only adult in a situation that had somehow become more dangerous because she was there to make it legible.

Ace stared for half a second too long.

Mai noticed immediately. "Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"I was thinking."

"That is not a defense."

Shammy looked between them in the mirror. "You both paused."

Mai said, "Ace is developing a problem."

Ace pushed off the wall. "I am surrounded by problems. This is different."

Shammy considered her own reflection again, then touched the collar lightly. Another tiny static crackle moved through the room.

Mai heard it and sighed. "Of course the material is reacting to you."

Shammy frowned. "It's just fabric."

"No," Mai said. "It was fabric. It has now made contact with a localized atmospheric entity."

Shammy blinked. "That sounds exaggerated."

Ace snorted. "It really doesn't."

There was a brief silence then, a stranger one than the banter. The three of them caught sight of themselves at once in the mirror: Ace shortest by far, a compact dark line with violet sheen in her hair and barely contained kinetic satisfaction; Mai at the center, balanced, composed, silver and steel and tired acceptance; Shammy tallest, inevitably, impossibly, carrying that non-negotiable height and presence that made every room reorganize around her whether it wanted to or not.

The silence held for three seconds.

Then Ace said, very softly, "Okay. This is going to be hilarious."

Mai answered without taking her eyes off the mirror. "This is going to be a report."

"That too."

Shammy asked, "Are those mutually exclusive?"

Ace and Mai answered together.

"Yes."

"No."

They looked at each other.

Shammy's mouth curved just slightly. "I'm beginning to understand why you both enjoy this."

Mai looked betrayed. "Do not defect mid-briefing."

"I'm not defecting," Shammy said. "I'm observing."

Ace laughed. "That's how it starts."

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The door problem began exactly as predicted.

The club sat half a district over in one of those upscale Night City towers that pretended not to be obscene by adding mood lighting and minimalist architecture. Black glass. Gold trim. Security that smiled just enough to suggest training rather than warmth. Music leaked through the walls as a bass-heavy pulse you felt more in your sternum than your ears.

Rain still fell, lighter now, turning the street into smeared reflections and moving color.

The line outside adjusted the moment the triad approached.

Nobody stepped away dramatically. Night City people had better instincts than that. They just... shifted. Tiny motions. Space opening where no one admitted to opening it.

Mai noticed.

Shammy noticed because Mai noticed.

Ace noticed and enjoyed it.

At the door stood a security man built like a commercial refrigerator in a tailored suit. He watched them approach with the distant professionalism of someone who had seen nearly everything this city could produce.

Then his eyes settled on Ace.

There it was.

Mai could have timed it with a metronome.

"ID," the guard said.

Ace stopped. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"I am clearly with them."

The guard's expression did not move. "That wasn't the question."

Ace stared up at him. "I am older than I look."

The guard's face remained impassive, but something behind the eyes suggested that this had, in fact, not helped her case at all.

Mai stepped in before Ace could accelerate. "She is."

"I'm sure," the guard said.

"That sounded aggressively unconvinced," Ace muttered.

Mai handed over a cred-chip and the kind of compact, polished smile that opened doors because it implied both money and consequences. "We're not here to make trouble."

Ace looked at her.

Mai did not look back.

The guard scanned the chip, then looked once at Mai, once at Shammy, once more at Ace as if re-evaluating the entire concept of proportionality. Something in his posture changed—not relaxation, exactly, but acceptance of risk as a known operating condition.

He stepped aside.

"Enjoy your evening."

Ace walked past him, muttering, "I hate this city."

Mai followed. "No, you hate being carded."

"I hate both."

Shammy passed last. As she crossed the threshold, the metal detector by the wall emitted a tiny unhappy chirp despite registering nothing at all.

The guard glanced at it.

Shammy glanced at it too. "That wasn't me."

He looked at her, then at the machine, then decided his paycheck did not cover metaphysical debate. "Have a nice night."

Inside, Ace whispered, "You scared the building."

"I did not."

"The building disagrees."

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The club was all polished darkness and deliberate excess. Black floors reflective enough to catch light like oil. Hanging fixtures throwing narrow gold beams through haze. Music deep and physical. People arranged in curated clusters pretending not to assess each other. Bars lit from below so every drink looked like a chemical weapon with branding.

For seven full seconds, the room tried to process the triad.

It did not fail dramatically. It failed socially.

Heads turned. Eyes caught, slid away, then returned against their owners' better judgment. A server with a tray of glasses slowed almost to a stop before correcting course. At the far end of the room, two people clearly in the middle of an argument both forgot what they had been saying.

No one said anything.

Night City was too practiced for that.

But the collective atmosphere shifted with the unmistakable pressure of a system trying to revise itself in real time.

Ace looked around with bright satisfaction. "There it is."

Mai said, "I want it noted that I predicted this."

"You predict a lot of things."

"And yet somehow I am still underappreciated."

Shammy stood very still for a second, taking in the room. On the surface, she looked calm. On the atmospheric level, she was doing the exact opposite of calm. Not intentionally—never intentionally with these artifacts of presence—but the air around her had begun to behave with the faint inconsistency of a storm front trying to fit into human architecture. Tiny static lifts. Barely-there pressure pockets. The sense that silk smoke and bass vibration were no longer fully synchronized.

Shammy looked at the ceiling lights. "The air handling is strange."

Ace followed her gaze. "That sentence is going to become important later, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Mai sighed. "Of course it is."

They moved to the bar because standing still in the center of the room would have counted as aggression.

The bartender, a slim man with chrome at his temples and the kind of disciplined expression that survived drunk executives, looked up as they approached.

He paused for half a beat.

Then another.

Then, to his credit, he recovered better than most.

“What can I get you?”

Ace rested an elbow on the bar. “Three drinks. Surprise me.”

The bartender looked at her, then at Mai, then at Shammy, then back at Ace. “I don’t think I can top whatever this is.”

Ace’s grin came back instantly. “You can try.”

Mai pinched the bridge of her nose. “Ignore her confidence. It’s unsupervised.”

The bartender’s mouth twitched. “That I believe.”

He started mixing. Around them, the room continued its quiet negotiation. People looked without admitting they were looking. The DJ, elevated at the rear platform like a priest of expensive bad decisions, adjusted the track transition a little too early and had to compensate. Somewhere behind them, a glass slipped from someone’s fingers and shattered with a crack unnaturally sharp against the bass.

Shammy’s gaze shifted. “The sound reflection is off.”

Mai looked over one shoulder, then back at her. “Can you tell whether that’s because of us or because this place was designed by idiots?”

“Yes,” Shammy said.

Ace snorted into a laugh. “I love it when you answer like that.”

The bartender set down three drinks that glowed in different shades of dangerous.

Ace took hers first. “See? Perfectly normal.”

Mai picked up hers with visible skepticism. “We are six minutes in.”

“Exactly.”

“That is not how ‘normal’ is measured.”

Shammy lifted her glass, studying the light through it. “What happens if nothing goes wrong?”

Ace and Mai both looked at her.

Ace spoke first. “I don’t understand the question.”

Mai answered more honestly. “At this point? I would become suspicious.”

Shammy took a careful sip, considered it, then nodded once. “It tastes like someone weaponized fruit.”

Ace raised her glass. “To excellent choices.”

Mai clinked hers against Ace's with the weary grace of a woman signing a liability waiver in spirit if not in law. "To survivable consequences."

Shammy touched her glass lightly to both of theirs. "To observation."

They drank.

For a moment—one brief, improbable moment—it almost worked.

The music held. The room adapted a little. The collective stare softened into more ordinary nightclub interest. A server passed without forgetting her route. Someone at a nearby booth resumed flirting instead of staring.

Mai exhaled slowly.

Ace noticed. "You thought it might stabilize."

"I hoped. Those are not the same thing."

"Close enough."

"No."

Then the lights flickered.

Not a power dip. Not exactly.

More like they disagreed with timing.

A soft ripple passed through the room. Nothing obvious enough to cause alarm. Just enough to set a few heads turning toward the ceiling, enough to make the bass feel a fraction behind itself.

Shammy looked up. "There."

Mai followed her gaze. "You mean the pressure differential."

"Yes."

Ace took another drink. "I'm choosing to hear that as ambience."

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly, going clinical now. "No. The room is trying to compensate. It's redistributing crowd density away from us."

Ace glanced around again and realized she was right. Nobody was fleeing. That would have made too much sense. They were just... drifting. Slow unconscious redirection. The nearest groups had subtly repositioned. Not away in fear, but away in the same way people step around a spill they haven't consciously identified yet.

"That's incredible," Ace said.

"That is not the word I would use."

"It's my word. You get your own."

A man in a silver jacket approached from the left flank with the unearned confidence of someone who

had mistaken nightclub lighting for personal immunity. He got within three meters, slowed, and visibly lost the internal script that had carried him there.

His eyes moved from Ace to Mai to Shammy.

He opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Tried again.

“Hey,” he said, which was already weaker than whatever he had intended.

Ace turned toward him, interested.

Mai turned toward him, resigned.

Shammy turned toward him, politely attentive.

The man’s confidence died in stages.

“Is this,” he asked, “like—a theme, or—”

He never finished because at that exact moment the front doors opened again.

And Night City, already struggling, gave up on subtlety.

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Theta-24 entered like a deliberate insult to probability.

Badger came first, because of course he did—walking into the club with the unmistakable physical ease of a man whose understanding of boundaries was academic at best. Behind him came HeavenlyFather, already wearing the expression of someone morally opposed to at least eighty percent of the current room. Grouse scanned as he moved, absorbing layout, exits, crowd behavior, fault lines. Jello slipped in with that particular quiet attention of a man listening to three conversations nobody else could hear. Skullker brought up the rear, heavy presence distilled into human form, looking like the concept of escalation had been given shoulders.

And yes.

They were dressed for the venue.

Or rather: they had interpreted the venue’s dress logic in a manner consistent with Theta-24’s entire institutional philosophy—deterrence through absurdity, disruption by overcommitment, violence to the concept of moderation itself. They existed to make dangerous ideas stop being attractive. Tonight, apparently, they had decided to broaden the definition of dangerous ideas.

Badger saw the triad almost instantly.

Stopped dead.

Grinned like a man receiving divine confirmation.

"Oh, hell yes."

HeavenlyFather stopped beside him and looked across the room in long, exhausted silence. "No."

Badger did not take his eyes off the bar. "Oh, this is absolutely a yes."

Grouse said, without visible change in expression, "Everyone is staring."

Jello's gaze moved over the club and sharpened. "They don't know why."

Skullker simply looked at the room once and rumbled, "...good."

At the bar, Ace's face lit up with pure delighted disbelief.

Mai whispered, "No."

Shammy watched the new arrivals with calm interest. "You know them."

"Unfortunately," Mai said.

Badger started toward them with the confident momentum of a man about to worsen every system he touched.

He reached the bar, planted one hand on its edge, looked at Ace, and said, "You started this."

Ace looked up at him, grinning. "I regret nothing."

Mai put down her drink. "You should."

HeavenlyFather arrived half a second later, took in the triad, the room, the lighting, the static, and whatever eldritch arithmetic connected those elements, then closed his eyes briefly.

"This is a violation of at least five ethical frameworks."

Badger shrugged. "Worth it."

Jello, meanwhile, had already noticed Shammy's atmospheric distortion interacting with the club's sound system. He looked at a nearby speaker, then at the overhead lights, then at Shammy.

"...yeah," he said. "That's not normal air behavior."

Shammy, with perfect sincerity, replied, "I'm still not doing anything."

Jello nodded once. "Somehow that makes it worse."

Grouse arrived and stood slightly off-angle, scanning the room's crowd drift. "People are reorienting unconsciously. South side of the floor is already thinning."

Mai glanced at him. "Thank you for confirming my nightmare."

"You're welcome."

Skullker said nothing. He just stood there, looked around once, and the nearest knot of would-be onlookers abruptly decided they had urgent business elsewhere.

Badger flagged the bartender, who had reached that spiritual state beyond panic where a person simply became very efficient or else dissolved.

"Six more," Badger said.

The bartender looked from Badger to the triad to HeavenlyFather and back again. "I'm going to need a minute."

Badger leaned in. "Take two. This is historically significant."

Mai muttered, "That is the first true thing anyone has said tonight."

Ace laughed into her drink.

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There were, in retrospect, several points at which the evening might still have recovered.

That possibility ended when Badger and Ace discovered they were having fun in the same direction.

It started small.

That was the dangerous part.

Badger leaned on the bar beside Ace like they had planned this, which was already enough to make Mai want a different planet. "You know what this needs?"

"No," Mai said instantly.

Ace, naturally, said, "What?"

Badger pointed toward the dance floor. "Confidence."

Mai answered before Ace could. "No."

Ace answered anyway. "Counterpoint: yes."

HeavenlyFather rubbed at his forehead. "I want the record to show that I tried to oppose this."

Jello looked around at the room's confused crowd behavior. "There won't be a reliable record."

"That is not comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be."

Shammy looked toward the dance floor, where the crowd was already subtly opening space without deciding to. "If they go there, the room will have to recalculate."

Mai stared at her. "Why do you say that like you're discussing weather fronts?"

Shammy paused. "Because I understand weather fronts."

"That was rhetorical."

"I know."

Ace slid off her stool. "Okay. I'm hearing a lot of negativity and not enough commitment."

Mai caught her wrist. "Sit down."

Ace looked at the hand, then at Mai. "You know that only works when I respect the strategy."

"You do respect the strategy."

"I do. I don't respect the mood."

Badger was already moving. "Come on."

HeavenlyFather reached for him and missed by pure centimeters and the fact that Badger treated ordinary restraint as a design challenge. "Absolutely not."

Skullker, unexpectedly, spoke. "Let them."

Everyone turned.

Skullker lifted one shoulder in a movement so small it was almost tectonic. "Anyone stupid enough to approach will stop being stupid."

There was a beat of silence.

Mai looked at him. "That is a horrifyingly practical argument."

Skullker nodded once.

Ace pulled her wrist free—not sharply, just inevitably—and flashed Mai a grin that was mostly affection and mostly trouble. "See? Consensus."

"That is not what consensus means."

"It is tonight."

Then she and Badger walked onto the dance floor together, and the club crossed some invisible threshold from strained nightlife into anthropological event.

People moved aside without agreeing to. The music was still loud, but the room had begun reacting to itself now. The DJ, sensing something profoundly incorrect, tried to compensate by pushing the track harder. This made everything worse. Bass came in half a fraction too heavy, enough for the floor vibration to interfere with Shammy's standing pressure field. Overhead lights re-timed themselves in a pattern that would have seemed intentional if it had not been one beat late.

Mai watched the geometry of the room go wrong in real time.

"This is turning into data," she said hollowly.

HeavenlyFather stood beside her at the bar, equally grim. "I hate that you said that because now I can see it."

At the edge of the floor, Ace moved with her usual compressed precision, but stripped of combat context it became something even more destabilizing—too exact for casual dancing, too alive to be performative, all compact gravity and irreverent control. Badger matched her not in style but in

energy, turning every beat into an act of social vandalism. Between them, they were less two dancers than a coordinated attack on public composure.

The crowd responded by trying desperately to pretend it was fine.

It was not fine.

Shammy watched, head slightly tilted. Her eyes tracked the shifting air, the body heat gradients, the pulsing sound. "They're adapting."

Mai gave a laugh that held no joy whatsoever. "That is the problem."

"How?"

"The room has decided not to reject the anomaly," Mai said. "It's normalizing around it."

Jello, listening to something on a subvocal channel, looked suddenly more alert. "Speaking of anomaly."

He tapped the side of his ear.

Everyone near him recognized that gesture.

HeavenlyFather went still. "No."

Jello listened for another second, then let out a short breath through his nose. "We just got a passive flag from one of the local monitoring sweeps."

Mai turned. "For what?"

Jello's mouth twitched in disbelief. "'Possible memetic-social event. Source uncertain. Crowd coherence irregular. Recommend low-level review.'"

Badger, across the dance floor, heard enough to shout back, "That's amazing."

Mai said, "That is not amazing."

Ace shouted too, because restraint had clearly died earlier, "It's a little amazing."

HeavenlyFather looked to the ceiling as if hoping for meteorological intervention. "We are being professionally evaluated for existing in public."

Shammy frowned slightly. "But we are just here."

Jello looked at her. "That, apparently, is the issue."

Grouse, who had repositioned near one of the support columns for better line of sight, spoke without raising his voice. "Three civilians approaching from west side. One already reconsidering. Two still committed."

Mai turned just in time to see them: a pair of overconfident corporate predators in designer black and one woman behind them who looked mostly curious and only secondarily doomed.

"They want to know if this is a performance," Grouse said.

"It is not," Mai said.

Badger laughed from the floor. "It kind of is."

"It is not," Mai repeated.

The two men reached the edge of the open space and slowed, their confidence faltering under direct exposure to Ace, Badger, crowd displacement, and the increasingly strange timing of the club lights.

One of them tried anyway.

"Hey," he said, loud enough to compete with the music. "So what exactly is—"

Skullker turned his head.

That was all.

He didn't step forward. Didn't raise his voice. Didn't do anything that would register as aggressive to an outside observer. He just looked at the man with the calm, heavy focus of an avalanche considering legal procedure.

The man stopped speaking mid-word.

Skullker said, very quietly, "Walk away."

The man walked away.

His friend followed instantly.

The woman with them stopped, looked at Skullker, looked at the dance floor, looked back toward the bar, and made the excellent decision to abandon curiosity in favor of continued survival.

Mai exhaled through her teeth. "I hate how efficient that was."

Skullker shrugged once. "Worked."

He was right. That was, perhaps, the most irritating part.

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From there, the night entered its final form.

The club did not collapse. That would have been simple.

Instead it entered a state Mai would later describe, in private notes, as socially non-Newtonian.

Cause and effect no longer matched in ordinary ways. Conversations started in one mood and ended in another without a visible bridge. People who had no reason to move found themselves slowly circling the room to maintain visual access while pretending not to. A pair of women near the north rail spent seven straight minutes trying to decide whether Shammy was somehow making the temperature change or whether that was the lighting. Neither answer helped them.

The bartender stopped asking questions and began simply producing drinks at strategic intervals, as if feeding the phenomenon might keep it placated.

The DJ, perhaps the least prepared person in the building, made the catastrophic decision to switch genres in search of regained control.

The transition hit like a badly thrown chair.

Bass misaligned. Light timing slipped. The overhead haze system released too much vapor at once, and the air around Shammy caught it, shaped it, turned drifting cloud into layered visible pressure patterns for one brief impossible second.

The nearest twenty people saw it.

Not clearly.

But enough.

The reaction was not panic. Panic would have implied understanding.

What spread instead was a deeper, stranger hush beneath the music—an instinctive shared awareness that something in the room had ceased to follow ordinary etiquette.

Shammy looked around, puzzled. "They noticed."

Mai stared at the haze dispersal pattern. "Yes."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know."

Ace returned from the dance floor slightly flushed, grinning, and completely devoid of remorse. "Okay. We may have reached the interesting phase."

Mai looked at her with the flat, exhausted intensity of a saint reconsidering martyrdom. "The interesting phase began forty minutes ago."

Badger followed Ace back, delighted with himself. "You people do not go out enough."

"We go out exactly enough," Mai said.

"Incorrect."

HeavenlyFather accepted a fresh drink from the bartender like a man receiving palliative care. "I would like to leave."

Ace leaned against the bar, shoulder brushing Mai's. "You say that like we're under attack."

"We are under observation," Mai said.

"That's normal."

"Not by institutional monitoring."

"That's still not the worst thing that's happened to us this month."

Shammy looked from one to the other. "Should we go?"

That cut through more than the rest. Ace turned to her. Mai did too.

Because buried under the absurdity, the question mattered.

Shammy wasn't embarrassed. She rarely framed things that way. But the room had begun pressing back, not hostile, just overloaded. Too much adaptation. Too much low-level distortion. Too many humans trying to normalize what their instincts refused.

Mai glanced across the club. Jello was still listening to intermittent chatter. Grouse was watching exits. HeavenlyFather had reached the phase of ethical fatigue where his objections became more sincere by becoming quieter. Skullker remained an unmoving argument against poor choices. Badger looked like he would happily continue until sunrise or intervention, whichever came first.

Ace followed Mai's gaze, read the room, and, because she was not reckless so much as precisely impulsive, exhaled once through her nose.

"Yeah," she said. "We should probably call it before this place evolves."

Badger looked wounded. "Cowards."

Mai answered, "Alive cowards."

HeavenlyFather lifted his glass a fraction. "My favorite kind."

Jello touched his ear again, listened, then said, "Monitoring sweep downgraded it."

Mai blinked. "Why?"

Jello looked around the room. "Because the system can't identify a memetic payload. It thinks this might just be nightlife."

Ace laughed so hard she nearly spilled her drink. "That's incredible."

Mai, despite herself, felt the corner of her mouth move. "That is deeply offensive."

Shammy asked, "Why?"

"Because," Mai said, "in a technical sense, they're correct."

Badger slapped the bar once in triumph. "You hear that? Officially stylish."

"Nobody said stylish," Mai said.

"It was implied."

"No, it very much was not."

Skullker stood. "Leaving?"

"Yes," Mai said.

Badger downed the rest of his drink. "Fine. We'll stay another twenty."

HeavenlyFather turned to him slowly. "We will not."

"We might."

"We will not."

Grouse cut in without inflection. "You should all go now. Crowd tolerance is peaking. Another ten minutes and someone starts thinking this is a challenge."

That was enough to settle it.

Mai nodded once. "Agreed."

Ace pushed off the bar. "Fine. Tactical withdrawal."

"Thank you," Mai said, meaning more than the words.

Ace bumped her shoulder lightly. "You were right."

Mai stared at her. "I need that recorded."

Ace grinned. "You'll never prove it."

Shammy set down her empty glass with careful precision. "I liked observing."

Mai looked at her. "Despite all of this?"

Shammy considered the room, the lights, the crowded confusion, the faint static still lifting at the edges of the haze.

Then she gave that small, strange smile she reserved for moments when the world had behaved badly but interestingly.

"Yes."

Ace laughed again. "See? Worth it."

Mai sighed. "The fact that you may not be entirely wrong is, once again, the most annoying outcome available."

---

They left in stages, because a coordinated exit would have drawn too much attention and because nobody involved wanted to admit there had been a structure to any of this.

The triad went first.

As they crossed the floor toward the door, heads turned again, but differently now. Less shock. More the lingering stare people gave storms once they had passed the building without destroying it.

At the threshold, the same guard from earlier looked them over and said, with admirable professionalism, "Leaving so soon?"

Ace stopped just long enough to mutter, "That's between me and the building."

The guard did not ask what that meant.

Mai gave him a nod on the way out.

Shammy passed last, and once again the detector gave a tiny unhappy chirp at absolutely nothing.

Outside, the rain had nearly stopped. The city smelled like wet concrete, ozone, machine heat. Neon reflected off the pavement in liquid stripes. For a few seconds none of them spoke. The cool air felt cleaner after the club, less overworked.

Ace rolled one shoulder. "Okay. That was objectively funny."

Mai folded her arms. "It was objectively documented."

"That too."

Shammy looked back once at the tower. "They're still adapting."

Mai followed her gaze. Through the dark glass, she could see little shifts of movement, the club already trying to settle back into ordinary patterns. It would probably manage. Human systems were very good at rationalizing pressure after the fact.

"What happens now?" Shammy asked.

Mai answered at once. "I write nothing."

Ace looked delighted. "Liar."

Mai gave her a dry look. "I write almost nothing."

"That's better."

Behind them, the club doors opened again.

Theta-24 spilled out with the chaotic stagger of a unit still functioning despite itself.

Badger looked entirely too pleased. "Excellent venue."

HeavenlyFather looked like a man who had been outvoted by reality. "I hate all of you."

"That's the spirit."

Jello checked his feed one last time. "For the record, the anomaly tag is gone."

Mai said, "Good."

Jello added, "It's been reclassified as probable crowd-perception cascade amplified by environmental stressors."

Ace let out a sharp laugh. "That sounds fake."

"It is," Jello said. "But it's official fake."

Grouse glanced back at the tower. "Half the people in there are going to wake up tomorrow convinced tonight was stranger than it was."

Shammy looked at him. "It was strange."

"Yes," Grouse said. "That's what makes it work."

Skullker, hands in pockets, said only, "No casualties."

There was a pause.

Then Ace, Mai, Shammy, Badger, Jello, and even Grouse all looked at him.

Skullker frowned slightly. "What?"

Mai answered first. "The fact that this counts as success is a terrible indictment of our operational norms."

HeavenlyFather muttered, "You're all proving my point for me."

Badger pointed at Ace. "Same time next month?"

Mai and HeavenlyFather answered together.

"No."

Ace answered, "Maybe."

Shammy asked, in complete good faith, "Would the building survive?"

Nobody answered immediately.

That silence was answer enough.

At last Mai started walking toward the waiting car. "We are going home before anyone says anything more legally actionable."

Ace fell into step beside her, hands in her pockets, grin lingering. Shammy moved on Mai's other side, tall and quiet and still carrying that faint charge in the air like the city hadn't fully let go. Behind them Theta-24 continued bickering in low tones as they headed toward their own transport, a secondary weather system of consequences and bad supervision. Triad handled meaning. Theta-24 handled consequences. Tonight, disastrously, both had occupied the same room.

As they reached the curb, Ace glanced up at Mai. "So."

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Yes, I do."

"You really don't."

Mai opened the car door. "You were going to ask whether this qualifies as one of your good ideas."

Ace smiled. "And?"

Mai got in without answering.

Shammy paused beside the car, looking at Ace with mild curiosity. "Does it?"

Ace considered the rain-slick street, the fading music overhead, the memory of an entire nightclub quietly failing to process them, the look on the guard’s face, the monitoring sweep, Badger’s delighted insanity, Skullker’s minimalist crowd control, Mai pretending not to have enjoyed any of it, and Shammy genuinely asking for a technical verdict on social chaos.

Then she grinned.

“Absolutely.”

Mai, from inside the car, said, “I heard that.”

Ace slid into the seat beside her. “Good.”

Shammy got in last, and for a moment the three of them sat in the dim interior while Night City glowed wet and electric outside the windows.

No mission. No report yet. No pressure except the leftover kind that followed laughter into quiet.

Mai looked out at the street. “This was still a terrible idea.”

Ace leaned back, satisfied down to the bone. “Sure.”

Shammy settled into the seat, considering both of them. “But survivable.”

Mai glanced at her.

Then, against every professional instinct she possessed, she let out one short laugh.

“Yes,” she said. “Unfortunately, that too.”

And the car pulled away into the wet neon night, leaving behind one expensive club, one unresolved social anomaly, and a small pocket of Night City that would, by morning, already be rewriting its memory into something more manageable than the truth.

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## □ Black File — “Retention Policy”

The safehouse door closed behind them with a soft hydraulic hiss.

Rain had followed them back in faint streaks along coats and shoulders, now melting into the low-lit warmth of the room. The city stayed outside—neon, noise, social collapse—all of it reduced to distant glow through reinforced glass.

Inside, it was quiet again.

Not peaceful.

Just... stable.

Ace dropped onto the sofa first, boots hitting the floor with a dull thud, one leg bouncing immediately like the night hadn’t quite burned out of her system.

"That," she said, staring at the ceiling, "was absolutely worth it."

Mai didn't answer. She moved past her, already pulling the slate from the table, posture shifting back into that familiar analytical mode—like the world had handed her something messy and she intended to file it until it behaved.

"It was," Mai said after a moment, "objectively a contained incident."

Ace turned her head. "That's your takeaway?"

"That is the version that goes into anything resembling a report."

"You're unbelievable."

"I am consistent."

Shammy stepped in last, closing the door behind her. The faint pressure irregularities that had followed her all night softened as the safehouse systems reasserted baseline equilibrium. The air settled.

She tilted her head slightly, as if listening to the absence of distortion.

"They're still adapting out there," she said quietly.

Ace snorted. "Good luck to them."

There was a pause.

A normal one, this time.

Then Ace sat up.

Looked at Mai.

Then at Shammy.

Then toward the door.

"...okay."

Mai didn't look up. "No."

"You don't even know—"

"I do."

"You really don't."

Mai exhaled once and finally looked at her. "You're about to say something that will extend this evening."

"Yes."

"No."

Ace grinned. "Too late."

She pushed off the sofa and walked to the door.

Mai's voice sharpened slightly. "Ace."

Ace opened it.

Perfect timing.

Theta-24 was just stepping into the hallway.

Badger stopped mid-step when he saw her.

"...round two?"

Ace leaned against the doorframe, arms folded, expression sharp with curiosity now instead of chaos.

"No," she said.

That got everyone's attention.

Badger frowned. "That's disappointing."

Ace tilted her head.

Studied him.

Then HeavenlyFather.

Then Grouse.

Then Skullker.

Then Jello.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Too carefully.

Mai saw it happen and immediately regretted everything.

"...oh no," she said under her breath.

Shammy looked between them. "What?"

Ace didn't answer.

She stepped fully into the hallway.

Walked up to Badger.

Stopped right in front of him.

Looked up.

Long pause.

"...wait."

Badger blinked. "What."

Ace narrowed her eyes slightly.

"How old are you."

Silence.

HeavenlyFather closed his eyes.

"...we're not doing this."

Ace didn't even look at him.

"No, we are absolutely doing this."

Badger snorted. "Old enough."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting."

Ace leaned in a fraction, gaze sharpening.

"I've seen your file."

Mai froze.

"Partial," Ace continued. "Old ops. Pre-collapse stuff. Way before Night City."

Grouse shifted slightly. Not defensive.

Just... aware.

Ace pointed at Badger.

"You look exactly the same."

She pointed at HeavenlyFather.

"You look exactly the same."

At Skullker.

"The same."

At Jello.

"The same."

At Grouse.

"...the same."

She straightened.

Arms crossed again.

"...that's not normal."

Jello answered first, because of course he did.

"No."

Ace's eyes snapped to him. "Good. So we agree."

HeavenlyFather sighed. "Ace—"

"No," Ace cut in. "No deflection. No vague answers. I want the actual explanation."

Mai stepped into the doorway now, voice controlled.

"Ace."

Ace didn't move.

"I'm asking a question."

Mai's tone shifted. Slightly sharper.

"You're interrogating Foundation assets in a hallway."

Ace shot back without looking at her, "I'm asking why they're not dead."

Silence.

That landed.

Badger looked at her for a second.

Then laughed.

Not loudly.

Just enough.

"...fair."

Shammy stepped closer, curiosity fully engaged now. "They should be older?"

"Yes," Ace said immediately. "By decades."

Shammy looked at Theta-24 again, this time more carefully.

"...they are not."

"No," Ace said. "They are not."

Mai closed her eyes briefly.

"...this is going to become a conversation."

"It already is," Ace said.

HeavenlyFather rubbed his forehead.

"...we were hoping to avoid this."

Badger shrugged. "I wasn't."

Jello leaned lightly against the wall.

"Performance bonus."

Ace blinked.

"...what."

Jello nodded once.

"Performance bonus."

"That is not a performance bonus."

HeavenlyFather sighed.

"Technically," he said, "it was classified as a long-term retention incentive."

Mai stared at him.

"...that is somehow worse."

Ace pointed between them.

"No, no—stop. No euphemisms. Actual answer."

Grouse spoke this time, voice even.

"We were retained."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Retained how."

Another beat.

Then Badger, grinning again, said it plainly.

"They upgraded us."

Silence.

Shammy tilted her head. "Upgraded."

Ace stared at them.

"...no."

Jello added, helpfully, "Samsara-adjacent package."

Ace blinked again.

"...no."

Mai exhaled slowly.

"That explains the physiological consistency."

Ace turned to her. "You're just accepting this?"

"I'm processing it."

"Process faster."

HeavenlyFather lifted a hand slightly.

"It's not what you think."

Ace snapped back. "Then explain it better."

He did.

"We are not combat shells."

"Good," Mai muttered.

"No external augmentation profile," Heavenly continued. "No escalation in operational capacity beyond baseline."

Ace frowned. "Then what did they do."

Grouse answered.

"They stopped the clock."

Silence.

Shammy's eyes widened slightly.

"...that's possible?"

Jello shrugged. "With enough budget."

Badger added, "And enough justification."

Mai crossed her arms.

"...what was the justification."

Jello didn't hesitate.

"Replacement cost exceeded retention cost."

Ace stared at him.

"...you're kidding."

"No."

Grouse added, almost conversationally,

"Training new units to equivalent effectiveness was statistically inferior."

HeavenlyFather finished it quietly.

"Morally, financially, and operationally."

Silence.

Ace looked at each of them again.

Slowly.

Recalibrating.

"...so let me get this straight."

Badger smiled. "Go ahead."

"The Foundation looked at you—"

"Yes."

"—ran the numbers—"

"Yes."

"—and decided it was cheaper to make you... what, semi-immortal?"

Jello tilted his head.

"Longevity-stabilized."

"That's worse."

"It's more accurate."

Mai spoke, voice flat.

"They turned you into a long-term asset."

Badger nodded.

"Exactly."

Shammy was still watching them, something deeper turning behind her expression now.

"You didn't change," she said.

"No," Grouse confirmed.

"You're the same."

"Yes."

She looked at Ace.

"They preserved them."

Ace exhaled sharply.

"...that is the most Night City thing I've heard all week."

Mai corrected her.

"No. That is the most Foundation thing."

Ace pointed at Theta-24 again.

"You're telling me you've been like this for—what—decades?"

Badger shrugged.

"Give or take."

"And you're just... fine with it?"

That one hung for a second.

HeavenlyFather answered.

"No."

Badger answered at the same time.

"Yes."

They glanced at each other.

Jello smirked faintly.

"Depends on the day."

Grouse added,

"Operationally, it works."

Skullker finally spoke.

"Still effective."

Ace let out a short, disbelieving laugh.

"This is insane."

Mai nodded once.

"Yes."

Shammy looked between both groups, then back at Theta-24.

"You were not made stronger."

"No," Heavenly said.

"You were made... persistent."

"Yes."

She considered that.

"...that feels heavier."

No one argued.

Ace dragged a hand through her hair.

"...so you're telling me—"

"Yes," Badger said.

"—you're basically a permanent problem."

Badger grinned.

"That's one way to put it."

Mai muttered,

"That is the only way to put it."

There was a long pause.

Then Ace leaned back against the wall, arms crossing again.

"...I hate that this makes sense."

Mai glanced at her.

"I don't."

"You don't?"

"No."

Mai's gaze moved to Theta-24.

"It's exactly what they would do."

Silence.

That landed harder than anything else.

Shammy looked at them again.

Then, softly:

"...they chose to keep you."

Grouse answered.

"Yes."

She nodded once.

"...I understand that."

Ace looked at her.

"...you do?"

Shammy's expression stayed calm.

"They didn't want to rebuild something unstable."

Mai watched her for a second.

Then nodded.

"...correct."

Badger pushed off the wall.

"Well," he said, clapping once, "that was fun."

Ace stared at him.

"That was not fun."

"It was for me."

He started down the hallway.

"Next time, we charge for the explanation."

HeavenlyFather followed, shaking his head.

"There will not be a next time."

"There's always a next time."

Jello gave Ace a small nod as he passed.

"Try not to trigger a monitoring sweep again."

"No promises."

Grouse paused just long enough to say,

"You asked the right question."

Then he moved on.

Skullker stopped last.

Looked at Ace.

"...works."

Then left.

The hallway went quiet again.

Ace stood there for a second.

Then another.

Then turned back inside.

Mai was already at the table again.

Of course she was.

"...you're writing that down, aren't you."

Mai didn't look up.

"No."

Ace narrowed her eyes.

"...you're absolutely writing that down."

Mai paused.

Then, very slightly:

"...maybe."

Shammy stepped back into the room, closing the door.

"They're... strange."

Ace laughed once.

"Yeah."

Mai finally looked up.

"They're consistent."

Ace dropped back onto the sofa.

"...I still hate it."

Mai allowed the smallest hint of a smile.

"I know."

Shammy looked between them.

"...but it works."

Ace exhaled.

"...yeah."

Pause.

Then, quieter:

"...that's the worst part."

And somewhere outside, Night City kept moving, adapting, forgetting—  
while the things that worked simply... stayed.

—

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