

ACE 32.1 — Interlude: Quiet Mode

The word wasn't special.

That had been deliberate.

Viktor hadn't dressed it up, hadn't turned it into a command or a failsafe or anything that felt like a system hook.

"That's the point," he'd said.

No ritual.

No signal.

Just—

choice.

The apartment held.

Lights dimmed low enough to soften the edges of everything.

City noise filtered through the walls—not gone, just pushed back far enough to stop mattering.

For once—

nothing demanded attention.

Mai stood by the window.

Not looking at the traffic.

Looking through it.

Patterns layered over movement, timing stacked over intent, prediction feeding into prediction until the entire city reduced itself into something legible.

Flow.

Timing.

Response loops.

Everything aligned.

Too aligned.

She didn't notice Ace at first.

Not because she couldn't.

Because there was nothing left in the room that hadn't already been processed, mapped, categorized, resolved.

Nothing new.

That—

was the problem.

“You’re running it constantly.”

Ace’s voice didn’t interrupt the space. It entered it.

Mai didn’t turn.

“Yes.”

Flat.

Accurate.

“It is more efficient.”

Of course it was.

Ace stepped closer.

No pattern.

No pre-calculation.

Just movement that existed because she chose it.

“And it doesn’t stop.”

A fraction of a pause.

Barely measurable.

“No.”

Shammy shifted slightly behind them.

The air followed—soft, attentive, adjusting without forcing anything.

“It’s loud,” she said.

Mai frowned, just enough to register the word.

“Define.”

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

The air tightened slightly.

“Not sound,” she said.

A beat.

“Pressure.”

That landed.

Mai turned then—finally—looking at Ace.

“You are unaffected.”

Not a question.

Ace didn’t answer.

She didn’t need to.

Instead, she moved.

Slow enough to be seen.

Late enough to not be predicted early.

Her hand lifted—

not to strike, not to test—

just to exist inside the space between them.

Mai tracked it instantly.

Mapped it.

Projected the path.

Resolved the outcome—

before the motion completed.

And that—

was the problem.

“You already know what I’m doing,” Ace said quietly.

Mai didn’t deny it.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“It is inefficient not to.”

Ace held her gaze.

“For this,” she said,

“it is.”

Silence.

Not empty.

Tight.

Shammy stepped closer, just enough to change the balance in the room.

The air softened around them.

“Try it.”

Mai didn’t move.

Didn’t answer.

Didn’t decide—

immediately.

That alone was new.

A gap.

Small.

Real.

“Temporary,” she said.

Condition.

Control.

Ace nodded once.

“Say it.”

The word sat there between them.

Unremarkable.

Unprotected.

No system weight attached to it.

Mai hesitated.

Not uncertainty.

Evaluation.

Then—

she spoke it.

Quiet.

Unforced.

And the system—

stopped.

Not powered down.

Not disconnected.

Just—

gone.

The room didn't change.

But the space inside it did.

Wider.

Slower.

Uncertain in a way that wasn't immediately solvable.

Mai blinked.

Once.

Twice.

The delay was back.

Not clean.

Not optimized.

Real.

"That is—" she started.

The thought didn't complete.

Not instantly.

She stopped.

Adjusted.

Finished it the slow way.

"...different."

Shammy smiled, just slightly.

"There you are."

Mai exhaled.

Not controlled.

Not measured.

Just—

breath.

“It is slower,” she said.

A beat.

“But quieter.”

Ace nodded.

“Good.”

No analysis.

No correction.

Just—

accepted.

Mai looked at her again.

Really looked this time.

No projection.

No pre-processing.

Just presence.

It felt—

different.

“You choose this.”

Ace didn’t answer immediately.

Then—

“Yes.”

Flat.

Final.

Shammy stepped back.

The air settled with her, balance restored without force.

From the other room, V’s voice cut in:

"...Okay, I don't know what you just did—"

A beat.

"...but it feels normal again."

Mai almost smiled.

Almost.

"That is the point."

Outside, the city kept moving.

Lights shifting.

Traffic flowing.

Systems running exactly as designed.

Efficient.

Relentless.

Unforgiving.

Inside—

for a moment—

none of that mattered.

No prediction.

No optimization.

No need to get ahead of anything.

Just—

time.

Messy.

Incomplete.

Human.

And for the first time since the upgrade—

Mai let it happen

without trying

to outrun it.

—

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