

ACE 32.2 — Interlude: Quiet Mode

The word wasn't special.

It didn't sound like anything important.

Victor hadn't made it that way.

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

No ritual.

No signal.

Just—

choice.

The apartment held.

Lights dim.

City noise—

distant.

Contained.

Mai stood by the window.

Watching—

not the traffic—

the patterns.

Always the patterns.

Flow.

Timing.

Prediction.

Everything—

aligned.

Too aligned.

She didn't notice Ace at first.

Not because she couldn't.

Because she had already processed the space.

Everything in it.

Nothing new.

That was the problem.

“You’re running it constantly,” Ace said.

Mai didn’t turn.

“Yes.”

Flat.

Accurate.

“It is more efficient.”

Of course it was.

Ace stepped closer.

No system.

No pattern.

Just movement.

“And it doesn’t stop,” she said.

Mai paused.

Just a fraction.

Then—

“No.”

Shammy shifted slightly behind them.

The air—

soft.

Watching.

“It’s loud,” she said.

Mai frowned—

slightly.

“Define.”

Shammy tilted her head.

The air—

tightened.

“Not sound,” she said.

A beat.

“Pressure.”

That landed.

Mai turned—

finally.

Looked at Ace.

“You are unaffected,” she said.

Not a question.

Ace didn’t answer.

She didn’t need to.

She reached out—

not fast—

not early—

just—

enough.

Mai watched the movement—

tracked it—

predicted it—

understood it—

before it finished.

And that—

was the problem.

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

Mai didn't deny it.

"Yes."

A pause.

"It is inefficient not to."

Ace held her gaze.

"For this," she said—

quiet—

"it is."

Silence.

Shammy stepped slightly closer.

The air—

balanced.

“Try it,” she said.

Mai didn’t move.

Didn’t answer.

Didn’t decide—

immediately.

That alone—

was new.

“Temporary,” she said.

Condition.

Control.

Ace nodded once.

“Say it.”

The word sat there.

Simple.

Unremarkable.

Mai hesitated—

not from uncertainty—

from evaluation.

Then—

she spoke it.

Quiet.

Unforced.

And just like that—

the system—

stopped.

Not powered down.

Not broken.

Gone.

The room changed.

Not physically.

Relationally.

The space—

wider.

Slower.

Uncertain.

Mai blinked.

Once.

Twice.

The delay—

back.

Not clean.

Not optimized.

Real.

“That is—” she started.

Then stopped.

Because the thought didn't finish instantly.

That was new.

Shammy smiled—

slightly.

“There you are,” she said.

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.

No prediction.

No pre-processing.

Just—

presence.

Different.

“You choose this,” she said.

Ace didn’t answer immediately.

Then—

“Yes.”

Flat.

Final.

Shammy stepped back.

The air—

soft.

Balanced.

V's voice came from the other room.

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

A beat.

"...but it feels normal again."

Mai almost smiled.

Almost.

"That is the point," she said.

The city outside didn't change.

Lights moved.

Traffic flowed.

Systems ran.

Optimized.

Efficient.

Unforgiving.

Inside—

for a moment—

none of that mattered.

No system.

No prediction.

No delay removed.

Just—

time.

Messy.

Incomplete.

Human.

And for the first time—

since the upgrade—

Mai didn't try

to get ahead of it.

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Last update: **05/04/2026 17:31**

