

ACE 32.3 — Interlude: Quiet Mode (Part II)

The silence held.

Not empty.

Unstructured.

Nothing in the room was trying to resolve itself.

Mai moved first.

Not because she had already decided—

because the decision finished.

A small difference.

But real.

She crossed the room slowly.

No optimal path.

No corrected angle.

Her shoulder brushed the edge of the table—light contact, unplanned.

She didn't adjust.

Just—

movement.

Ace watched.

Didn't track.

Didn't measure.

Didn't reduce it into outcome and probability.

Just—

watched.

That was new.

Mai stopped in front of her.

Closer than before.

Not calculated.

Not maintained.

Simply—

where she ended up.

“You’re different like this,” she said.

Not analysis.

Observation.

Ace didn’t answer immediately.

The gap didn’t demand to be filled.

“Yes.”

Flat.

Enough.

Mai nodded.

The motion came a fraction late.

Not inefficient.

Human.

Shammy leaned against the wall, one shoulder resting lightly against it.

The air settled around them—no tension trying to align edges, no pressure smoothing things that didn’t need smoothing.

“Better,” she said quietly.

Mai didn’t argue.

“I understand more,” she said.

A beat.

“But I process less.”

Ace tilted her head slightly.

“Not the same thing.”

Mai paused.

Actually paused.

Not simulated.

Not buffered.

Considered.

A moment passed.

"That is correct," she said.

Another.

"I was merging them."

Of course she had.

Shammy smiled faintly.

"That's what the city does," she said.

"It makes everything about efficiency."

From the other room, V's voice drifted in:

"...Yeah—"

A pause, like they were shifting position.

"...and then it eats you for it."

No one disagreed.

Mai shifted her weight.

Her balance tipped slightly to one side.

She felt it.

Didn't correct it.

Allowed it to exist.

"This state is suboptimal," she said.

A beat.

"But it is... necessary."

Ace nodded once.

"Use both."

Simple.

Mai looked at her.

"You do."

Not a question.

Ace didn't answer.

Because she didn't have to.

She had always done that—

moving when needed, stopping when it mattered—

without systems to enforce it.

Shammy stepped closer again.

The air followed—gentle, responsive, never pushing.

"You don't lose anything here," she said.

A pause.

"You just stop skipping."

That landed.

Mai exhaled slowly.

Not measured.

Not shaped.

Just—

breath.

"I see the difference," she said.

Quiet.

Real.

Ace turned slightly toward the door.

The city beyond it pressed faintly through the walls—light, motion, distant sound layering into something constant.

Still moving.

Still demanding.

Still faster than anything inside.

"That doesn't change out there," she said.

Mai followed her gaze.

"No."

Flat.

Accurate.

Another pause.

“Out there, delay is loss.”

Ace nodded.

“Yes.”

No argument.

No correction.

Just—

fact.

Shammy didn't move.

The air held steady.

“Then we choose when to keep it.”

That was it.

Mai looked back at Ace.

Held her gaze longer this time.

Not scanning.

Not predicting.

Seeing.

“I will not keep it on all the time.”

Decision.

Ace nodded once.

“Good.”

No approval.

No reward.

Just alignment.

V stepped into the room, finally committing to the space.

They looked between them, eyes narrowing slightly like they were trying to piece together something they could almost feel but not explain.

"...Okay," they said.

"...whatever you just did—keep doing it sometimes."

A beat.

"...it feels like you're not about to outthink me before I finish a sentence."

Mai almost smiled.

Almost.

"That is inefficient," she said.

A pause.

"But acceptable."

The word landed differently now.

Lighter.

Less absolute.

Ace moved toward the door.

Not rushing.

Not waiting.

Balanced.

"Next job."

Not a command.

Direction.

Mai nodded.

Shammy followed.

The air shifted with them—alive, responsive, never forcing shape.

And as they stepped back toward the city—

Mai said nothing.

But the word stayed with her.

Available.

Not default.

Chosen.

And for the first time since the upgrade—

she understood—

not just how fast she could be—

but when

not to be.

—

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