

# ACE 32.2 — Interlude: Quiet Mode (Part II)

The silence held.

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Not empty.

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Unstructured.

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Mai moved first.

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Not because she had already decided—

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because the decision finished.

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A small difference.

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But real.

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She crossed the room slowly.

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No optimal path.

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No shortest route.

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Just—

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movement.

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Ace watched.

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Didn't track.

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Didn't measure.

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Just—

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watched.

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That was new.

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Mai stopped in front of her.

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Closer than before.

No calculated distance.

No prediction.

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

Not analysis.

Observation.

Ace didn’t respond immediately.

Because there was no need to fill the gap.

“Yes,” she said.

Flat.

No elaboration.

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Mai nodded.

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The motion—

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slightly delayed.

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Not inefficient.

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Human.

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Shammy leaned against the wall.

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The air—

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settled around them.

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No tension.

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No pressure trying to align things that didn't need it.

“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 considered that.

Actually considered.

A moment passed.

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“That is correct,” she said.

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Another pause.

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“I was merging them.”

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Of course she had.

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Shammy smiled faintly.

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“That’s what the city does,” she said.

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“It makes everything about efficiency.”

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V’s voice drifted in again.

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“...Yeah, and then it eats you for it.”

No one disagreed.

Mai shifted her weight slightly.

Unbalanced.

Not corrected.

Allowed.

“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.

Without systems.

Without implants.

Without assistance.

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Shammy stepped closer again.

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The air—

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gentle.

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“You don’t lose anything here,” she said to Mai.

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A pause.

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“You just stop skipping.”

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That landed.

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Mai exhaled slowly.

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Not measured.

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Not optimized.

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Just—

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breath.

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“I see the difference,” she said.

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Quiet.

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Real.

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Ace turned slightly.

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Looked toward the door.

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The city beyond it—

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still moving.

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Still demanding.

Still faster than everything 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.

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“Yes.”

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No denial.

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No correction.

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Just—

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---

fact.

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Shammy didn't move.

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The air—

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---

steady.

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---

“Then we choose when to keep it,” she said.

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That was it.

Mai looked back at Ace.

Longer this time.

Not scanning.

Not predicting.

Seeing.

“I will not keep it on all the time,” she said.

Decision.

Ace nodded once.

“Good.”

That was enough.

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No approval.

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No praise.

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Just—

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alignment.

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V stepped into the room finally.

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---

Looked between them.

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“...Okay,” they said.

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“...whatever you did, keep doing it sometimes.”

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---

A beat.

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---

“...it feels like you’re not about to outthink me before I finish a sentence.”

---

---

Mai almost smiled again.

---

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Almost.

---

---

“That is inefficient,” she said.

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---

A pause.

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---

“But acceptable.”

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---

The word hung—

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---

light.

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Different from before.

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Ace moved toward the door.

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Not rushing.

Not waiting.

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---

Balanced.

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“Next job,” she said.

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Not a command.

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Direction.

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Mai nodded.

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---

Shammy followed.

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The air—

---

shifted with them.

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Alive.

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And as they stepped back toward the city—

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Mai said nothing—

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but the word stayed with her.

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Available.

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---

Not default.

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---

Chosen.

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And for the first time—

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since the upgrade—

---

she understood—

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not just how fast she could be—

---

but when

not to be.

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