

ACE 37.6 — Safehouse: Maintenance Window

The safehouse wasn't broken.

That was the problem.

Ace stood in the middle of the room, arms crossed, staring at the wall like it had personally offended her.

"...it's too quiet," she muttered.

Mai didn't look up from the panel she had opened.

"That's because nothing is wrong."

Ace turned slowly.

"...exactly."

Shammy sat on the back of the couch, watching neither of them.

The air around her was calm.

Too calm.

"...it feels incomplete," she said.

Mai sighed.

"There is nothing to fix."

Ace walked over to the wall panel.

Looked at the wiring.

Looked at Mai.

“...we should still check everything.”

Mai froze.

Just slightly.

“...why.”

Ace blinked.

“...because we might miss something.”

Silence.

Shammy tilted her head.

“...that sounds like the start of something bad.”

□ **STEP 1 — THE CHECK**

Mai closed her eyes briefly.

Then opened them.

“...fine,” she said.

“We run diagnostics.”

Ace nodded immediately.

“Good.”

Shammy slid off the couch.

“...I’ll monitor the air.”

Mai didn’t question that.

She should have.

□ **STEP 2 — THE PROBLEM**

The system came online.

Everything green.

Every system.

Perfect.

Ace frowned.

“...no way.”

Mai leaned closer.

“Everything is within normal parameters.”

Ace pointed at the display.

“...that’s wrong.”

Mai blinked.

“...what.”

“Nothing’s ever this clean,” Ace said.

Shammy nodded faintly.

“...it feels finished.”

Mai stared at the panel.

“...it is finished.”

Silence.

“...we should verify,” Ace said.

□ **STEP 3 — VERIFICATION**

Mai hesitated.

“...verification introduces variables.”

Ace grinned faintly.

“...exactly.”

Mai closed her eyes.

Exhaled.

“...fine.”

She adjusted one parameter.

Just one.

Re-ran the system.

□ RESULT

Everything changed.

Not visibly.

But—

Slightly.

The lights dimmed.

Just a fraction.

The hum of the system shifted.

Ace tilted her head.

“...you hear that?”

Shammy frowned.

“...yes.”

Mai stared at the panel.

“...that shouldn't have affected anything.”

▣ **STEP 4 — CASCADE**

Ace reached over.

“...what if we adjust this too.”

Mai turned sharply.

“No—”

Too late.

Ace flipped the switch.

▣ **CASCADE INITIATED**

The lights flickered.

Then stabilized.

Brighter.

Too bright.

Shammy squinted.

“...that’s not better.”

Mai’s hands moved fast now.

“...okay, that changed the load distribution.”

Ace stepped back.

“...good.”

Mai glared at her.

“No.”

□ **STEP 5 — OVERCORRECTION**

Shammy moved.

The air shifted—

Then resisted.

“...it’s pushing back,” she said.

Mai’s eyes widened slightly.

“...the system is compensating.”

Ace smirked faintly.

“...yeah, that sounds familiar.”

▢ **STEP 6 — TOTAL FAILURE (ALMOST)**

The room hummed.

Not loudly.

But enough.

Lights too bright.

Air too still.

Everything—

Too correct.

Ace stepped back.

“...okay, that’s worse.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“We created a closed loop.”

Shammy looked around.

“...it doesn't want to change now.”

Ace blinked.

“...we made it stubborn?”

“...yes.”

□ **STEP 7 — THE FIX (ATTEMPT)**

Mai exhaled sharply.

“...we reset.”

Ace nodded.

“Good.”

Mai reached for the panel—

Paused.

"...no."

Ace stared.

"...what."

Mai's voice dropped.

"If I reset," she said, "I choose the outcome."

Silence.

Shammy nodded slowly.

"...predictable."

Ace dragged a hand down her face.

"...we broke maintenance."

□ **STEP 8 — BREAKING THE LOOP**

Ace stepped forward.

“...move.”

Mai didn't argue.

Ace grabbed the panel—

And shut it off.

Completely.

▣ **BLACKOUT**

Lights gone.

Hum gone.

Everything—

Gone.

Silence.

Real silence.

A beat.

Then—

Shammy exhaled.

The air moved again.

Free.

“...that worked,” she said softly.

Mai blinked in the dark.

“...you removed the system.”

Ace shrugged.

“...can't predict what isn't there.”

□ FINAL STATE

Emergency lights flickered on.

Dim.

Uneven.

Perfect.

Ace leaned back against the wall.

“...that’s better.”

Mai stared at the dead panel.

“...we need to rebuild this.”

Ace nodded.

“...later.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

“...not now.”

□ **FINAL BEAT**

A soft knock at the door.

All three froze.

Ace didn’t move.

“...no.”

Mai didn't answer.

Shammy tilted her head.

"...that feels familiar."

Knock.

Ace sighed.

"...if that's pizza again, I'm leaving."

Door opened.

Badger.

Holding a toolbox.

"...maintenance," he said.

Silence.

Ace stared at him.

Long.

Hard.

“...get out.”

Badger blinked.

“...you called us.”

Mai froze.

“...we did not.”

Shammy exhaled.

“...that’s worse.”

Ace closed the door.

Slowly.

“...we’re not touching anything anymore.”

[ace](#), [mai](#), [shammy](#), [badger](#)

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Last update: **20/04/2026 16:04**

