

Epilogue: Drop It

Night City didn't care what you learned.

It cared what you did with it.

The café wasn't quiet.

It never was.

Steam hissed in uneven bursts behind the counter, cutting through overlapping conversations that didn't try to stay separate. Neon bled in through the window, turning glass into a shifting mirror that showed more of the street than the room if you looked at it the wrong way.

Mai didn't look at it at all.

She sat with her hands around a mug that had already gone cold, fingers resting lightly against ceramic like she needed the contact more than the heat. The table was small, uneven at one leg, just enough to make anything placed on it settle into a position that felt stable but wasn't.

Across from her, Ace leaned back in her chair, one leg hooked around the base like she'd claimed the space by refusing to adjust to it. Not watching the room. Not ignoring it either. Just... present.

Shammy sat beside the window, angled slightly outward, her reflection fractured by rain that hadn't decided whether it was going to fall properly or just hang in the air long enough to matter. People passed behind the glass in blurred streaks, outlines more than shapes.

For a while, none of them spoke.

They didn't need to.

The city filled the gaps without asking permission.

A group at the next table laughed too loudly at something that wasn't funny. Someone dropped a glass. It didn't shatter—just rolled once, twice, then stopped like it had reconsidered the idea halfway through.

Mai's gaze flicked to it.

Then away.

She didn't follow the motion.

Didn't complete the pattern.

Good.

Ace noticed.

Of course she did.

Didn't comment.

Didn't need to.

Shammy's fingers traced the rim of her cup once, a soft, absent movement that didn't quite repeat. The air around the table held steady—no sudden shifts, no pressure spikes. Just... balance.

It was enough.

The door opened.

Not loud.

Just another entry into the noise.

A man stepped in, shaking rain from his jacket like it might make a difference. Mid-twenties, maybe. Wired just enough that it showed in the way his eyes moved—too fast, too precise, like he was still running something even when he wasn't plugged in.

He scanned the room once.

Paused.

Then headed straight for the counter.

Mai didn't look at him.

Not directly.

But she registered the way he held himself. The way his attention snagged on things that weren't relevant. The way his focus... tightened when it didn't need to.

Familiar.

Too familiar.

Ace's gaze shifted slightly, tracking the same vector without turning her head.

"Don't," she said.

Quiet.

Flat.

Mai didn't respond.

Didn't move.

Behind them, the man started talking.

Too fast.

"...yeah, I know, sounds stupid, but it's not like that. It's clean. No ICE, no pushback, just—"

He stopped.

Like he'd realized he'd skipped something important.

“—it just sits there. Like it’s waiting for you to—”

Mai’s fingers tightened slightly against the mug.

Just enough to feel it.

Not enough to move.

The words didn’t matter.

The shape did.

She could see it already.

Not the system.

The pattern of thought.

The approach.

The mistake.

Finish it.

One more minute.

It would resolve.

Her mind moved—

not toward it—

but around it.

Recognizing.

Mapping.

Stopping.

“—I’m telling you, it’s not a trap,” the man continued, voice dropping slightly like that made it more convincing. “It doesn’t do anything. That’s the point. You just have to—”

Mai stood.

The chair didn’t scrape.

Didn’t draw attention.

She didn’t rush.

Didn’t hesitate either.

Just crossed the small distance to the counter like it had already been decided.

The man turned slightly as she approached, words faltering mid-sentence.

For a second, he looked confused.

Then curious.

Then—

interested.

Wrong reaction.

Mai met his eyes.

No analysis.

No breakdown.

No explanation.

Just—

recognition.

“Drop it,” she said.

Two words.

Nothing behind them.

No weight.

No threat.

Just—

final.

The man blinked.

Once.

Twice.

“What?”

Mai didn't repeat herself.

Didn't elaborate.

Didn't justify.

She held his gaze for exactly one second longer—

long enough for the idea to settle—

then turned away.

Back to the table.

Back to the mug.

Back to nothing.

The man stood there for a moment.

Confusion flickered.

Then irritation.

Then—

something else.

Doubt.

Small.

Unstable.

But there.

“...yeah,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. “Maybe.”

He turned back to the counter.

Changed the subject.

Didn't come back to it.

Mai sat.

Ace watched her for a second.

Then:

“Good.”

Mai didn't answer.

Didn't need to.

Shammy's hand brushed lightly against her shoulder as she settled back into her seat.

The air stayed level.

Outside, the rain finally decided what it was doing.

Not heavy.

Not light.

Just... consistent.

The city adjusted around it without caring.

Inside, the noise continued.

Unchanged.

Unresolved.

And for once—

that was exactly what it needed to be.

Mai lifted the mug.

Took a sip.

Cold.

She didn't react.

Didn't fix it.

Didn't ask for another.

Just set it back down where it balanced wrong in a way that worked.

Ace leaned back again.

Shammy watched the window.

And the conversation at the counter moved on to something else entirely.

No one tried to finish anything.

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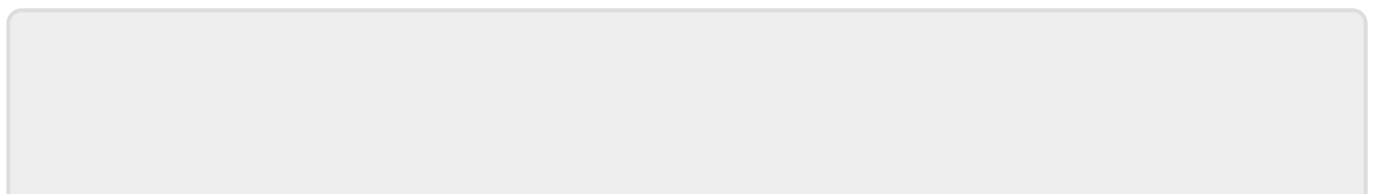
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