

## Chapter 7 — What Doesn't Finish

The pressure didn't come back.

Not the way it had.

No surge.

No demand.

Just... presence.

Thinner now. Less insistent. Like something had stepped back—not out of fear, but to reconsider.

Ace didn't relax.

Didn't shift stance.

Didn't even let her breathing change.

"Still there," she said quietly.

Mai nodded once.

"Yes."

No elaboration.

Didn't need it.

Because they all felt it.

Not pushing.

Not probing.

Waiting.

Shammy's gaze stayed unfocused, tracking the atmosphere instead of the absence.

"It's not trying to complete anymore," she said.

Ace's lips pressed into a thin line. "That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"No," Shammy replied softly. "Just different."

A beat.

Mai adjusted her position slightly—never aligning, never giving a clean angle.

"It learned," she said.

Ace huffed under her breath. "Of course it did."

Because that was the rule.

Everything adapted.

Everything in Night City learned—fast or it died.

This thing—

Didn't die.

So it learned.

The street behind them had changed.

The crowd was further back now. Less clustered. Less focused. The chaotic movement Ace had pushed earlier had settled into something looser, harder to lock onto.

Still dangerous.

But not immediately lethal.

Mai tracked them briefly.

"Pattern fragmentation holding," she said. "For now."

Ace nodded once.

"Then we don't let it settle again."

"How?" one of the bystanders called—hesitant now, not confrontational. "What do we actually do?"

Ace didn't turn.

Didn't engage directly.

"Same thing you're doing right now," she said. "Nothing clean. No staring. No trying to figure it out."

"That's not a solution—"

"It is," Mai cut in, sharper than before. "It is the only one currently available."

Silence followed that.

Not agreement.

But acceptance.

Temporary.

Fragile.

Shammy took a slow step back.

Then another.

Not retreat.

Reset.

The pressure adjusted with her—widening, redistributing, preventing the formation of any single focal point.

“It’s diffusing,” she said.

Ace glanced sideways—not at her, just enough to register.

“Or spreading.”

“Yes.”

That landed.

Hard.

Mai’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Localized control is insufficient,” she said. “This isn’t contained.”

Ace exhaled slowly.

“No kidding.”

Because if it followed attention—

And attention spread—

Then so did it.

“Then we change the story,” Ace said.

Mai looked at her.

Not questioning.

Evaluating.

“Clarify.”

Ace’s lips twitched.

“Right now, everyone’s thinking the same thing,” she said. “Monster. Medusa. Something you can see, identify, beat.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

“And?”

“And we break that,” Ace replied. “Hard.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“Confusion as defense,” she said.

Ace nodded.

“Exactly.”

Mai considered it—fast, precise.

“Disinformation,” she said.

“Not even that,” Ace replied. “Just... noise. Too many possibilities. Nothing sticks.”

A beat.

Mai’s posture shifted.

Decision made.

“Effective,” she said.

Of course it was.

Because the thing—

Whatever it was—

Needed a clean answer.

And they weren’t going to give it one.

Ace finally moved.

Not toward the pressure.

Not toward the bodies.

Toward the crowd.

Controlled. Measured. Still avoiding any fixed lines of sight.

“Listen up,” she said. “Spread this.”

A few of them leaned in.

Careful.

Uncertain.

Good.

“There’s no single explanation,” Ace continued. “No pattern. No creature. No rule you can rely on.”

“That’s not—” someone started.

“It is,” Ace cut in. “Because the moment you think you’ve got it? That’s when you’re done.”

Silence.

Uneasy.

Perfect.

“Tell people that,” she said. “Make it messy. Make it unclear. Don’t let anyone lock it down.”

Mai watched the reaction ripple outward.

Not clean.

Not coordinated.

But effective.

“Cognitive destabilization at scale,” she murmured.

Shammy’s presence eased slightly—just enough to let the environment breathe again without collapsing into stillness.

“It will survive,” she said quietly.

Ace shrugged.

“So will we.”

A beat.

Mai’s gaze shifted—not to the pressure, but to the absence where it had been strongest.

“It’s still observing,” she said.

Ace smirked faintly.

“Good,” she replied. “Let it learn this.”

She adjusted her stance one last time—loose, uneven, deliberately imperfect.

“Not everything gets to make sense.”

The air shifted.

Subtle.

Almost respectful.

Or maybe that was just projection.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The pressure thinned further.

Not gone.

Never gone.

Just... less.

Enough.

For now.

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## Aftermath

The statues remained.

They didn't shatter.

Didn't revert cleanly.

Some of them—

Cracked.

Hairline fractures along the surface, like something beneath had tried to come back and failed halfway through.

Others stayed perfect.

Untouched.

Frozen at the exact moment understanding had completed.

The city adjusted.

Of course it did.

Rumors spread faster than the phenomenon now.

Contradictory.

Messy.

Useful.

"Don't look directly."

"It only works in reflections."

"It's a virus."

"It's a glitch."

"It's nothing."

No single version held.

That was the point.

Ace leaned against a wall later—far enough from the original site, far enough that the pressure was barely a memory.

Mai stood nearby, posture still precise, still controlled.

Shammy sat on the edge of a low barrier, the air around her calm again—but not fully neutral.

“Temporary solution,” Mai said.

Ace nodded.

“Yeah.”

A beat.

“No kill. No containment,” she added.

“Not applicable,” Mai replied.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“It didn’t lose,” she said.

Ace’s lips twitched.

“Neither did we.”

Silence settled.

This time—

Natural.

Almost.

Mai’s gaze lifted briefly, scanning the city—not searching, just... acknowledging.

“It will happen again,” she said.

Ace pushed off the wall.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Different place. Different version.”

Shammy’s eyes flickered—just for a second—tracking something far beyond the visible.

“Same mistake,” she added.

Ace rolled her shoulders once, that familiar kinetic tension settling back into something usable.

“Then we keep breaking it,” she said.

A beat.

Then, quieter:

“Before it finishes.”

The city moved around them again.

Noise returning.

Life resuming.

Nothing solved.

Nothing clean.

But something—

Had changed.

And somewhere—

just beyond perception—

something waited.

Not gone.

Not defeated.

Just...

unfinished.

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