

Interlude: "Edges and Returns"

The safehouse was quieter than usual.

Not empty. Not calm.

Just... waiting.

Night City pressed against the windows in layers of neon and distant engine noise, but inside, the air held a different weight. Not danger. Not urgency.

Something closer to decision.

Ace sat on the floor with her back against the couch, one knee pulled up, one leg stretched out. A blade rested across her lap, not drawn, not sheathed. Just... there. Her fingers moved along the edge without looking at it.

Mai stood by the window, one hand lightly touching the glass, watching reflections more than the city itself. Her posture was still, but not rigid. Thinking stillness.

Shammy lay stretched across the couch, one arm draped over the back, long legs angled toward the floor. Her eyes were half-closed, not asleep, just... listening.

No one had started the conversation.

Which meant it had already started.

Ace broke it first.

"People keep coming back."

Flat. Observational.

Not a complaint.

Not a question.

Mai didn't turn. "Of course they do."

"Not what I meant."

Ace's fingers paused on the blade. Just for a second.

Then continued.

"They remember."

That got Mai to shift slightly. Not fully turning, but enough that her voice came from a different angle.

"Memory isn't the issue," she said.

Shammy's voice followed, soft but clear.

"No. Pattern is."

Silence again.

Ace exhaled slowly.

"Yeah."

Mai finally turned from the window.

She didn't move closer yet. Just leaned back against the glass, arms loosely crossed.

"Say it properly," she said.

Ace didn't look up.

"We keep running into the same people," she said. "Same places. Same outcomes."

A beat.

"Not accidents."

"No," Mai agreed. "They wouldn't be."

Shammy shifted slightly on the couch, her hair catching the low light, faint movement like static settling.

"They're not seeking you," she said. "They're... recognizing you."

Ace's jaw tightened just enough to notice.

"Doesn't matter."

"It does," Mai said.

Ace's gaze flicked up, sharp.

"Why."

Because that wasn't rhetorical.

Mai pushed off the window.

Now she moved.

Two steps. Three. She stopped just short of Ace, enough distance to keep the line clear.

"Because recognition creates expectation," she said. "And expectation creates pressure."

Ace snorted softly.

"Pressure I can handle."

"That's not the point."

Mai's voice didn't rise. It didn't need to.

"The question isn't whether you can handle it. The question is whether it changes the system."

That landed.

Not hard.

But deep.

Shammy's eyes opened fully now.

She didn't sit up yet.

Just watched.

"You're asking if they matter," she said.

Mai shook her head once.

"No."

Then, more precisely:

"I'm asking if they start to matter."

Ace looked back down at the blade.

"Don't see how."

"Because repetition builds familiarity," Mai said. "And familiarity—"

"—doesn't mean attachment," Ace cut in.

Flat. Immediate.

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Usually," she said. "Not always."

Another pause.

Longer this time.

Ace set the blade aside.

That was new.

Her hands rested on her knee instead, fingers tapping once, twice, then still.

"You think this is a problem."

Not a question.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Shammy did.

"Not yet."

Ace glanced at her.

Shammy pushed herself up slightly, sitting now, one leg still stretched out, the other bent.

"It's a question," she said. "Questions aren't problems. Not until they're ignored."

Ace's mouth twitched faintly.

"Great."

Mai stepped closer now, finally closing the distance. She didn't sit. She remained standing, looking down at Ace, not in dominance, just... clarity.

"We need to define the boundary before it defines itself," she said.

Ace tilted her head slightly.

"Boundary for what."

"For external connections."

There it was.

Said clean.

No dressing it up.

Ace leaned her head back against the couch, eyes up now, looking at nothing in particular.

"Connections," she repeated.

"Accurate term," Mai said.

"Sounds like you're planning something."

"I'm preventing something."

Ace huffed a quiet breath.

"Same thing, usually."

Shammy stood.

That shifted the room.

Not dramatically. Just enough that the air seemed to settle into a more even shape.

She walked over, slow, unhurried, and sat on the edge of the low table in front of Ace.

Closer now.

Triangle tightening.

"Let's simplify," Shammy said.

They both looked at her.

"Do you want to stop?" she asked Ace.

Direct.

Ace didn't hesitate.

"No."

"Do you want to replace us?" Shammy asked.

Ace's expression didn't change.

"No."

"Do you want anything from them that you don't get here?"

That took half a second longer.

But not much.

"No."

Shammy nodded once.

Then turned her gaze to Mai.

"Same questions."

Mai didn't flinch.

"No."

"No."

A smaller pause.

"No."

Shammy leaned back slightly, hands resting behind her on the table.

"Then the system is stable," she said.

Mai's eyes sharpened.

"Temporarily," she corrected.

Shammy's head tilted.

"Everything is temporary."

"That's not a useful metric."

"It's the only accurate one."

Ace let out a quiet laugh.

"Great. Philosophy night."

But she didn't sound annoyed.

Just... engaged.

Mai shifted her weight slightly.

"Stability isn't just about current state," she said. "It's about trajectory."

Ace glanced at her.

"You think this leads somewhere bad."

"I think unexamined systems tend to drift."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the best one available."

Shammy watched them both.

Then:

"Say what you're actually worried about."

Mai's silence stretched.

Not because she didn't know.

Because she was choosing how to say it.

Carefully.

Finally:

"Dilution."

The word landed clean.

No emotion attached.

Which made it heavier.

Ace frowned slightly.

"Explain."

"Focus," Mai said. "Priority. Response alignment."

She gestured lightly between the three of them.

"This works because we default here."

Ace nodded once.

"Yeah."

"If that default shifts," Mai continued, "even slightly, it changes reaction time. Decision weight. Risk thresholds."

Ace's eyes narrowed.

"You think I'd hesitate."

"No."

Mai's answer was immediate.

"I think you wouldn't notice when you start not needing to."

That hit differently.

Ace went still.

Not defensive.

Not angry.

Just... still.

Shammy's voice came in, softer now.

"She's not saying you'll choose them," she said.

"She's saying if something else starts to feel equally easy..."

She didn't finish.

Didn't need to.

Ace ran a hand through her hair.

"Not happening."

Mai didn't argue.

But she didn't agree either.

"Then we define it," Shammy said.

Both of them looked at her again.

"Define what."

"What this is," she said simply.

Ace gestured vaguely between them.

"This?"

"Yes."

"That seems... obvious."

"It isn't."

Shammy leaned forward slightly.

"When you leave," she said, "what are you leaving?"

Ace blinked.

"Nothing."

"Wrong."

That got her attention.

Shammy's gaze held hers.

"You're leaving pressure," she said. "Impulse. Residual tension."

She glanced at Mai.

"You're leaving control."

Then back to Ace.

"They're not taking anything. You're shedding."

Mai's posture shifted subtly.

That reframed it.

"And when you come back?" Shammy continued.

Ace didn't answer.

So Shammy did.

"You're cleaner."

A beat.

"More precise."

Mai exhaled slowly.

“That’s... consistent with observed behavior.”

Ace looked between them.

“So what’s the problem.”

Mai answered this time.

“There isn’t one.”

Then:

“There could be.”

Ace rolled her eyes slightly.

“Helpful.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

“She’s right,” she said.

Ace groaned.

“Of course she is.”

Shammy continued.

“The only way this breaks us... is if it stops being what it is.”

“And becomes?” Ace asked.

Shammy met her gaze.

“Substitute.”

That word stuck.

Longer than the others.

Mai nodded once.

"That's the threshold."

Ace leaned forward now, elbows on her knees.

"Okay," she said. "So don't let it become that."

"Define how," Mai said immediately.

Ace hesitated.

Not because she didn't know.

Because putting it into words made it real.

Shammy didn't push.

She just waited.

Finally:

"They don't come here," Ace said.

Simple.

Clear.

Mai considered it.

"Location boundary," she said. "Acceptable."

Ace continued, more certain now.

"They don't get time."

Mai's brow lifted slightly.

"Clarify."

"No lingering," Ace said. "No... staying."

Shammy nodded slowly.

"Temporary contact."

Mai added:

"No integration."

Ace looked at her.

"Yeah."

Shammy tilted her head.

"No names," she said.

Ace blinked.

"Why."

"Because names build continuity," Shammy said. "Continuity builds weight."

Mai thought about that.

Then nodded.

"Agreed."

Ace scratched her jaw lightly.

"Fine."

A beat.

Then she added:

"And no bringing anything back."

Mai's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Define."

Ace gestured vaguely.

"Emotional residue. Attachments. Whatever."

Shammy smiled faintly.

"Already handled."

Ace looked at her.

Shammy just shrugged lightly.

"Atmosphere."

Mai exhaled.

"Good."

Silence again.

But different now.

Structured.

Ace leaned back.

"So that's it."

Mai shook her head.

"Not quite."

Of course.

"What."

Mai met her gaze directly.

"If it ever changes," she said, "we stop."

Ace didn't hesitate.

"Yeah."

Shammy added, softer:

"No delay."

Ace nodded once.

"Agreed."

Mai's shoulders relaxed a fraction.

Barely noticeable.

But real.

Shammy leaned back on her hands again.

The air shifted.

Not dramatic.

Just... settled.

Ace looked between them.

Then smirked faintly.

"So we just... keep doing what we're doing."

Mai's lips curved slightly.

"With defined parameters."

Shammy's eyes softened.

"With awareness."

Ace stood.

Picked up her blade.

Spun it once before settling it back into place.

"Good."

She didn't move away.

Not yet.

Instead, she stepped closer.

Not fast.

Not impulsive.

Deliberate.

Mai didn't move either.

She just watched.

Until Ace stopped right in front of her.

Close.

Shammy stood last.

Closing the triangle.

No rush.

No escalation.

Just presence.

Ace's voice was quieter now.

"Still the same."

Mai answered immediately.

"Yes."

Shammy:

"Always."

That was enough.

Night City pressed against the glass.

Neon. Noise. Endless motion.

Out there:

variables.

Inside:

constants.

And for once—

they had defined the difference.

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