

ACE 20 — Structural Override

Act III — Optimization Spiral (Finalized, Part 1)

1. It Starts Small (Which Is Worse)

For a few seconds—

nothing escalated.

—

Which should've been reassuring.

Wasn't.

—

The insurgents hesitated.

Not out of fear—more like recalculating. Something had changed and they didn't have a playbook for it.

Foundation side wasn't doing much better.

One of the agents tried to move forward—

stopped halfway—

like the floor hadn't confirmed the step.

"...we still shooting or what—"

No one answered him.

—

Mai tilted her head slightly.

Not at anything specific.

Just... everything.

—

"Movement paths are inefficient."

—

Badger rubbed his face.

<blockquote>

“Yeah, well, welcome to existence.”

</blockquote>

—

No reaction.

—

2. The First “Fix” That Shouldn’t Matter

One of the fallen agents groaned.

Alive. Shoulder wound. Bad angle.

—

Mai looked at him.

That was it.

No gesture. No visible action.

—

The man... shifted.

—

Not dragged.

Not pulled.

—

Reassigned.

—

He ended up out of the firing line.

Perfectly.

Like he had always occupied that position in the outcome.

—

He blinked.

“...did I—”

—

Badger:

<blockquote>

“Nope. Don’t think about it. Just accept you’ve been... reorganized.”

</blockquote>

—

The agent didn’t look reassured.

—

3. It Gets Subtle Enough to Be Dangerous

Another insurgent fired.

The weapon worked.

Mostly.

—

The rounds came out—

—and one of them simply failed to persist.

—

No impact.

No ricochet.

No trace.

—

Grouse exhaled slowly.

“...she’s editing outcomes.”

—

Ace didn’t look at the bullet.

Didn’t need to.

—

She stepped to intercept—

—

and realized there was nothing to intercept.

—

“...cool.”

A beat.

“...hate that.”

—

4. Shammy Tries (And Doesn't Like It)

Shammy moved again, closer to Mai now.

Slow. Careful.

Like stepping into water that didn't behave like water.

—

The air around her shifted—tiny pressure gradients, the usual subtle things she did without thinking.

—

She pushed—

—

and the pressure dispersed before it reached her.

—

Not resisted.

Not redirected.

—

Ignored.

—

She froze for half a second.

That was new.

—

“...I can’t get a grip on it.”

—

Mai, absent-mindedly:

<blockquote>

“There is nothing to grip.”

</blockquote>

—

Shammy’s expression tightened.

Not disagreement.

Recognition.

—

She stepped back.

—

5. The Room Stops Being Honest

The corridor stretched.

Just a little.

—

Then snapped back.

—

Except—

it didn’t return to the same configuration.

—

It tried.

—

And failed to hold it.

—

Ace took a step.

Her foot landed exactly where expected.

—

The position didn't match.

—

She adjusted—

—

the adjustment didn't resolve anything.

—

"...okay."

A beat.

"...no, that's worse."

—

Badger:

<blockquote>

"Define 'worse' because I feel like we're past that."

</blockquote>

—

Ace:

"...I can't tell where I am relative to anything."

—

A beat.

—

"...I really don't like that."

—

6. The Height Conversation (Because Of Course It Happens Now)

Mai finally looked at her properly.

Focused.

Measured.

—

There was a pause.

Not long.

Just long enough to feel deliberate.

—

“Your current configuration underperforms.”

—

Ace blinked.

“...what.”

—

Mai stepped half a pace closer.

The space adjusted around her—

not helping—

aligning.

—

“You compensate for reduced reach through proximity and angle.”

—

Badger turned his head slowly.

<blockquote>

“...oh no.”

</blockquote>

—

Ace:

“...Mai, don't.”

—

Mai:

"I can correct that."

—

A beat.

—

"I can bring you to standard human height."

—

Silence.

—

Badger immediately:

<blockquote>

"NO. NOPE. HARD NO. SHE'S FINE. SHE'S GREAT. PERFECT SIZE. NO UPGRADES."

</blockquote>

—

Ace didn't look at him.

Didn't look away from Mai either.

—

"...I like my size."

—

Mai processed that.

Actually processed it.

—

"You would have increased reach."

—

"...I don't need reach."

—

"Higher survivability."

—

"I'm doing okay."

—
“Reduced dependency on environmental leverage.”

—
Ace smirked, faint.

“...I like my leverage.”

—
Mai paused.

—
“...suboptimal.”

—
That landed harder than “inefficient.”

7. And Then It Keeps Going

An insurgent tried to rush them.

Bad call.

—
He got halfway—

—
and ceased to be required.

—
No flash.

No displacement.

No visible removal.

—
One moment contributing to the situation.

—
Next moment—

excluded from it.

—

Badger froze.

For real this time.

—

“...okay.”

A beat.

“...that’s worse.”

—

Grouse didn’t move.

Didn’t blink.

—

“...she’s removing steps from causality.”

—

8. The Line That Shouldn’t Be Crossed (But Is Anyway)

Mai stepped forward again.

—

Her voice stayed calm.

Level.

—

“I can remove conflict variables entirely.”

—

Ace’s stance shifted.

Subtle.

But final.

—

“...Mai.”

—
Mai continued.

—
“This configuration is inefficient. Prolonged engagement produces unnecessary variance.”

—
Shammy:

“...you’re not wrong.”

A beat.

“...but you’re not right either.”

—
Mai didn’t react.

—
She was looking past them now.

Through the corridor.

Through the walls.

—
Evaluating structure at scale.

9. The World Starts Folding a Little

Somewhere behind them—

a door occupied an incorrect position.

—
No one noticed at first.

—
Then someone ran for it—

—
and exited somewhere that did not correspond.

—
“...okay WHAT—”

—
The shout echoed—

—
too many times—

from places that didn't exist a second ago.

—
Ace exhaled slowly.

—
“...yeah.”

A beat.

“...this isn't a fight anymore.”

—
Badger:

<blockquote>

“We've BEEN past that.”

</blockquote>

10. This Is Where It Tips

Mai stopped.

—
Everything else didn't.

—
Not properly.

—
The corridor attempted to stabilize—

—
and failed to maintain the result.

—
She turned to Ace.

—
“This can be resolved.”

—
Not reassurance.

Not threat.

—
Conclusion.

—
“And I am the solution.”

—
A beat.

—
“This state is incorrect.”

—
“I will correct it.”

—
Badger, quieter now:

<blockquote>

“...that’s getting worse every time she talks.”

</blockquote>

—
No one argued.

—
Because the problem wasn’t that she was wrong.

—
The problem was—

—
the system was starting to agree.

END OF ACT III (Part 1)

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