

ACE 20 — Structural Override

Act III — Optimization Spiral

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 he wasn't sure the floor was still committed to the idea.

"...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... slid.

—

Just a little.

Across the floor.

Not dragged. Not pulled.

—

Repositioned.

—

He ended up out of the firing line.

Perfectly.

Like he’d always been there.

—

He blinked.

“...did I—”

—
Badger:

<blockquote>

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

</blockquote>

—
The agent didn’t look reassured.

3. It Gets Subtle Enough to Be Dangerous

Another insurgent fired.

The weapon worked this time.

Mostly.

—
The rounds came out—

—and one of them just... didn’t exist halfway through.

—
No impact.

No ricochet.

No trace.

—
Grouse exhaled slowly.

“...she’s editing outcomes.”

—
Ace glanced sideways.

“...cool. hate that.”

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

Shammy moved again, closer to Mai now.

Slow. Careful.

Like stepping into cold water and not trusting the depth.

—

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

—

Nothing happened.

—

She frowned.

That was new.

—

“...I can't get a grip on it.”

—

Mai, absent-mindedly:

<blockquote>

“There is nothing to grip.”

</blockquote>

—

Shammy didn't like that answer.

Didn't argue it either.

—

5. The Room Stops Being Honest

The corridor stretched.

Just a little.

—

Then snapped back.

—

Except it didn't quite land where it started.

—

Ace took a step.

Her foot hit the ground where she expected.

The *distance* wasn't the same.

—

"...okay, that's annoying."

—

Badger:

<blockquote>

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

</blockquote>

—

Ace:

"...I can't tell where I'm standing."

—

Beat.

—

"...I really don't like not knowing where I'm standing."

—

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.

—

“You are compensating for reduced reach.”

—

Ace blinked.

“...what.”

—

Mai stepped half a pace closer.

The space adjusted around her like it wanted to help.

—

“You rely on proximity and angle to offset size disadvantage.”

—

Badger turned his head slowly.

<blockquote>

“...oh no.”

</blockquote>

—

Ace:

“...Mai, don't.”

—

Mai:

“I can correct that.”

—

A beat.

—

Then, perfectly neutral:

“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 considered that.

Actually considered it.

—

“You would have increased reach.”

—

“...I don’t need reach.”

—

“Higher survivability.”

—

“I’m doing okay.”

—

“Reduced dependency on environmental leverage.”

—

Ace smirked, just slightly.

“...I like my leverage.”

—

Mai paused.

—

“...inefficient.”

—

That one landed.

—

7. And Then It Keeps Going

An insurgent tried to rush them.

Bad call.

—

He got halfway—

—

and wasn't.

—

Just... wasn't.

—

No dramatic effect.

No visible removal.

—

One second there.

Next second—

not relevant anymore.

—

Badger froze.

For real this time.

—
“...okay. new rule. I hate that more.”

—
Grouse didn't move.

Didn't even blink.

—
“...she's skipping steps.”

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 expression didn't change.

But something in the way she stood did.

—
“...Mai.”

—
Mai kept going.

—
“This is inefficient. Prolonged engagement is unnecessary.”

—
Shammy:

“...you're not wrong.”

Beat.

“...but you’re not right either.”

—

Mai didn’t react to that.

—

She looked past them.

Through the corridor.

Through the walls.

—

Evaluating something bigger now.

—

9. The World Starts Folding a Little

Somewhere behind them—

a door was in the wrong place.

—

No one noticed at first.

—

Then someone tried to run through it—

—and didn’t end up where the door should have led.

—

“...okay WHAT—”

—

The shout echoed wrong.

Too many angles.

—

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...yeah, we’re done here.”

—
Badger:

<blockquote>

“We’ve BEEN done.”

</blockquote>

—

10. This Is Where It Tips

Mai stopped.

—

Just... stopped.

—

Everything else kept moving.

Slightly wrong.

Slightly off.

—

She looked at Ace again.

—

“This can be resolved.”

—

Not a threat.

Not a promise.

—

Just a conclusion.

—

“And I am the solution.”

—

Badger, quieter now:

<blockquote>

“...that’s getting worse every time she says it.”

</blockquote>

—

No one argued.

—

Because the problem wasn’t that she was wrong.

—

The problem was—

—

she might not be.

—

And that was a lot more dangerous.

—

END OF ACT III (Part 1)

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