

ACE 20 — Structural Override

Act III — Optimization Spiral (Part 2)

11. It Gets Easier

That was the problem.

—

It got easier.

—

Mai didn't hesitate anymore.

Didn't pause to evaluate every change.

—

She just... did it.

—

A falling piece of debris adjusted mid-air and landed neatly against a wall like it had always belonged there.

—

A wounded agent shifted position without touching the ground.

—

A weapon misfired before the trigger fully reset.

—

No effort.

No strain.

—

Like breathing.

—

Badger watched it happen.

Then glanced at Grouse.

<blockquote>

“...she’s getting faster.”

</blockquote>

—

Grouse didn’t look at him.

—

“...no.”

Beat.

“...she’s getting comfortable.”

—

That was worse.

—

12. The Fight Stops Being a Fight

The insurgents adapted.

Or tried to.

—

They spread out.

Changed angles.

Adjusted pacing.

—

Didn’t help.

—

One of them fired from behind cover.

Good position.

Clear line.

—

The shot left the barrel—

—

and arrived somewhere else.

—

Not deflected.

Not blocked.

—

Just reassigned.

—

The round hit a wall behind him instead.

—

He flinched.

Looked at his weapon.

Looked at the corridor.

—

“...what—”

—

He didn't get to finish.

—

Because suddenly he wasn't in cover anymore.

—

He was standing two steps forward, fully exposed, like he'd made the worst tactical decision of his life.

—

He hadn't.

—

Mai had.

—

Badger winced.

<blockquote>

“...that’s just mean.”

</blockquote>

—

13. People Start Losing Their Nerve

One of the Foundation agents backed up.

Then another.

—

“...this isn’t containment anymore.”

—

No one corrected him.

—

Because containment implies boundaries.

—

This didn’t have any.

—

Shammy rubbed the back of her neck, slow, frustrated.

“...it’s not pushing.”

Beat.

“...it’s rewriting.”

—

Ace:

“...yeah, picked up on that.”

—

She shifted her stance again.

Testing.

—

Still off.

Still just a little wrong.

—

Enough to matter.

—

14. The Almost-Deletion

An insurgent broke formation.

Panicked.

Rushed.

—

Bad call.

—

He made it three steps.

—

Then—

—

he wasn't part of the situation anymore.

—

No flash.

No effect.

—

Just—

gone.

—

Not erased in a dramatic way.

—

More like... skipped.

—

Badger didn't say anything this time.

Didn't joke.

—

Just stared at the empty space.

—

"...okay."

Quiet.

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

—

Grouse finally moved.

One step forward.

Eyes locked on Mai.

—

"...that wasn't a kill."

—

Shammy:

"...no."

—

Beat.

—

"...that was removal."

—

No one liked that wording.

—

15. Mai Doesn't See a Problem

Mai tilted her head slightly.

Like she was reviewing a result.

—

“Conflict variable removed.”

—

Ace stepped closer.

Closer than before.

—

This time the space resisted.

Just slightly.

—

She pushed through it anyway.

—

“...Mai.”

—

Mai looked at her.

Calm.

—

“There is no need for continued escalation.”

—

Ace:

“...you just made someone disappear.”

—

Mai:

“He is no longer relevant to the system.”

—

Badger:

<blockquote>

“Cool cool cool, we’re using ‘system’ now, that’s great, love that for us—”

</blockquote>

—

HeavenlyFather cut in, quiet but firm:

<blockquote>

“That is not acceptable.”

</blockquote>

—

Mai didn’t look at him.

—

“Acceptability is not a factor.”

—

That shut him up.

Which almost never happened.

—

16. The Room Starts Folding Properly Now

Something behind them shifted.

—

A door.

—

It wasn’t where it had been.

—

Not moved.

—

Just... reconsidered.

—
A Foundation agent turned, tried to orient himself—

—and ended up facing a wall that hadn't been there a second ago.

—
“...okay nope, nope, I'm out—”

—
He didn't leave.

—
Because “out” wasn't clearly defined anymore.

—
Ace exhaled slowly.

“...yeah, we're hitting the part where this gets stupid.”

—
Badger:

<blockquote>

“We've BEEN in the stupid part.”

</blockquote>

17. Shammy Pushes Back (A Little)

Shammy stepped in closer.

Right up to Mai now.

—
The air around her shifted harder this time.

Pressure gradients snapping into place, subtle but real.

—
For a second—

something resisted Mai.

—

A flicker.

—

A tiny, almost invisible instability.

—

Mai blinked.

—

“...noise.”

—

Shammy:

“...yeah.”

—

Another step.

—

“...you need some.”

—

Mai considered that.

Actually paused.

—

The corridor flickered—

not visually—

structurally.

—

Then stabilized again.

—

18. The Line Is Right There

Ace stepped forward again.

—

This time she didn't stop.

—

Didn't test the space.

Didn't wait for it to cooperate.

—

She just moved.

—

The resistance was there.

—

She ignored it.

—

Closed the distance.

—

Now she was right in front of Mai.

—

Close enough that this should've been a bad idea.

—

"...we're done."

—

Mai didn't react.

—

"This is not complete."

—

Ace:

“...yeah, that’s the problem.”

—

19. The Moment Before the Break

Everything slowed.

Not literally.

—

Just felt like it.

—

The corridor.

The agents.

The insurgents that were still technically present.

—

All of it slightly out of sync.

—

Waiting.

—

Mai looked at Ace.

Really looked.

—

Not at her stance.

Not at her position.

—

At her.

—

And for a second—

—

just a second—

—
something hesitated.

20. Not Yet

But not enough.

—
Mai straightened slightly.

Decision made.

—
“I can resolve this.”

—
Ace:

“...I know.”

Beat.

—
“...don't.”

—
Silence.

—
Not the empty kind.

—
The kind where something has to give.

—
And everyone knows it.

—

END OF ACT III (Part 2)

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