

ACE 29 — The Shape That Doesn't Hold

Chapter 1 — It Didn't Resolve

The room wasn't wrong.

That was the problem.

Ace stood still.

Not because she had to.

Because—

for a fraction of a second—

movement didn't feel... necessary.

She blinked.

The feeling passed.

"Again," she said.

Mai didn't ask what she meant.

She had felt it too.

The screen in front of them didn't change.

It should have.

Gears had just advanced the briefing.

A slide transition.

Clean.

Precise.

Except—

it hadn't.

The previous image lingered.

Not frozen.

Not glitched.

Just—

still there.

Underneath the new one.

Two states.

Neither dominant.

"...it didn't resolve," Mai said quietly.

Gears didn't look at them.

“Clarify.”

Ace stepped forward.

One step.

Then—

stopped.

For a moment—

she wasn't sure if she had moved.

Then the floor caught up.

“...that,” she said, pointing at the screen. “It's still both.”

Gears adjusted the display.

The system responded instantly.

But the overlap remained.

Faint.

But undeniable.

Shammy didn't look at the screen.

She didn't need to.

The air told her enough.

"There's no pressure to settle," she said.

Gears paused.

"...pressure."

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

"Everything resolves because something forces it to," she said.

A beat.

"This isn't being forced."

Bright leaned back in his chair.

"...that's new," he said.

Not impressed.

Interested.

Gears switched feeds.

Security footage.

A street.

Normal.

At first.

A man walking.

Stops.

Turns.

Continues—

Two directions.

Simultaneously.

Not a split.

Not a duplicate.

Just—

both.

Ace's expression didn't change.

"...pick one," she muttered.

The footage didn't.

Mai leaned closer.

"Timestamp," she said.

Gears pulled it up.

It flickered.

Not between values.

Between outcomes.

"Not desync," Mai said.

A pause.

“Non-commitment.”

Bright huffed once.

“That’s a new one.”

Ace didn’t look away from the screen.

“That’s a problem,” she said.

“No,” Bright replied lightly.

A beat.

“That’s a philosophy.”

Silence.

That—
was worse.

Gears changed the feed again.

Interior this time.

A café.

People talking.

One conversation—

repeated.

Not identically.

Different phrasing.

Different tone.

Same moment.

Layered.

Ace stepped back.

Just slightly.

“...how far,” she asked.

Gears didn't answer immediately.

Because the answer wasn't clean.

“Localized,” he said.

A pause.

“Expanding.”

Mai straightened.

“Pattern?”

Gears pulled up a map.

Points.

Scattered.

Not random.

But not linear.

Ace studied it.

“...not spreading,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

“No.”

A beat.

“It’s loosening.”

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air shifted with her.

Subtle.

Uncertain.

“They’re taking tension out,” she said.

Ace glanced at her.

“Who.”

The answer came from the doorway.

Before anyone turned.

Before the sound registered.

“You already know.”

Ace’s head snapped toward it.

The door was open.

Again.

Of course it was.

He didn’t rush in.

Didn't need to.

The man stepped inside like he had never been outside.

Same posture.

Same quiet certainty.

Bright sat up slightly.

"...Serpent's Hand," he said.

Not surprised.

Just... confirming.

The man smiled.

Not wide.

Not sharp.

"Labels are convenient," he said.

A beat.

“But limiting.”

Ace didn't move.

Didn't step forward.

“You're doing this,” she said.

The man tilted his head.

“Doing,” he repeated.

A faint amusement.

“No.”

A pause.

“We're allowing it.”

Of course.

Mai's voice cut in.

"You're removing constraints."

The man looked at her.

Really looked.

Recognition.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Finally."

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

"You're breaking it."

The man's expression didn't change.

"No."

A pause.

"I'm fixing it."

Silence.

That—
was the line.

Shammy stepped forward.

The air resisted.

Just slightly.

"You've removed the force that makes things real," she said.

The man's smile didn't fade.

“Or,” he said softly, “I’ve removed the force that makes them arbitrary.”

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...pick one,” she said again.

The man looked at her.

Not dismissive.

Almost—
sympathetic.

“Why,” he asked.

A pause.

“Why should reality have to choose?”

That question hung.

Not rhetorical.

Not aggressive.

Just—
wrong.

Mai answered.

“Because without that,” she said, “nothing holds.”

The man shook his head slightly.

“Everything holds,” he said.

A beat.

“For as long as it needs to.”

Shammy’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s not holding.”

The man's gaze shifted to her.

Interest.

Real this time.

"That's freedom."

Ace stepped forward.

One step.

Enough.

"No," she said.

Silence.

"That's nothing happening," she added.

The man didn't argue.

Didn't need to.

"It's already happening," he said.

And behind him—

on the screen—

the man in the street

finally chose a direction.

Or maybe—

he always had.

It just took something

forcing it

to become real.

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