

CHAPTER 5 — Breaking Sequence

He felt it.

That was new.

Not pain.

Delay.

Small.

But real.

Ace didn't pull back.

Didn't reset.

Didn't give him the space—

to become early again.

She stayed inside the gap.

Where nothing aligned.

Where nothing resolved.

“You’re late,” she said.

Flat.

The figure smiled—

but it didn’t hold.

“Temporary,” he said.

A beat.

“I fix that.”

That was the problem.

Mai moved—

not to intercept—

to distort.

Her path—

not optimal.

Not clean.

The system—

refused to build.

Prediction—

failed.

Shammy stepped wider—

pulling pressure unevenly across the room.

The air—

lost cohesion.

No rhythm.

No baseline.

Nothing to select.

The implant—

strained again.

Not visibly.

But functionally.

He moved—

too early.

Too much.

The strike—

overshot.

Missed—

by everything.

For the first time—

he corrected.

After.

That was wrong.

“That’s it,” Mai said.

“He cannot resolve without structure.”

Ace didn’t respond.

She moved.

Not faster.

Not earlier.

Unpredictable.

No clean sequence.

No clear outcome.

The figure stepped again—

but this time—

the next action—

wasn't singular.

Multiple paths.

Conflicting.

He chose—

and it failed.

Just slightly.

But enough.

Shammy pushed harder.

The air—

collapsed—

then expanded unevenly.

Pressure—

non-linear.

Alive.

“You’re breaking it,” he said again.

This time—

less certain.

Mai didn't answer.

She adjusted again—

further from optimal—

further from clean logic.

“Remove prediction,” she said.

Flat.

“Remove outcome.”

Ace stepped inside his space.

Too close.

Too wrong.

The implant reacted—

trying to select—

trying to resolve—

trying to find the next moment—

and failing.

The black surface—

didn't change—

but everything around it did.

Edges—

unstable.

Undefined.

He moved—

but now—

the movement—

lagged.

Just a fraction.

But consistent.

That was enough.

Ace struck again.

Not precise.

Not optimal.

Effective.

Impact—

solid.

He dropped—

not cleanly—

not decisively—

but down.

For the first time—

the sequence—

held.

After.

He exhaled slowly.

Still conscious.

Still aware.

Still—

late.

“...That’s new,” he said quietly.

Almost impressed.

Mai stepped closer—

carefully.

The implant—

still active—

but unstable.

“It cannot maintain without order,” she said.

A beat.

“It will fail.”

He laughed—

soft.

“Yeah,” he said.

“...eventually.”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

She reached—

not for him—

for the implant.

The moment her hand moved—

it reacted.

Tried to resolve.

Tried to act—

before the action existed.

But now—

there was no clean path.

No singular outcome.

Too many contradictions.

Too much noise.

It failed.

Just long enough.

Ace ripped it free.

No flash.

No surge.

Just—

absence.

The black surface—

collapsed inward—

then—

nothing.

Gone.

The room—

stabilized.

Slowly.

Imperfectly.

The air—

aligned.

Shammy exhaled.

Relief—

small.

Controlled.

Mai stepped back.

Processing—

still faster—

but now—

clear.

The figure on the floor didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Didn't act.

For the first time—

he was fully—

in sequence.

V let out a breath.

“...Okay,” they said.

“...that’s done.”

Ace looked at what remained in her hand.

Nothing.

No implant.

No object.

Just—

the absence where it had been.

“That’s wrong,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“It does not remain.”

That mattered.

Because Objects of Power—

didn’t disappear.

And as the room settled—

and time—

finally—

held—

something else—

somewhere else—

was already

one step ahead.

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