

ACE 37 — Predictable Damage

Rain didn't clean Night City.

It just made everything look like it could be.

Ace stepped over the threshold first.

The delay hit again — soft, almost polite.

Boot. Contact.

Sound.

Late.

She didn't look back.

“Still there.”

Mai followed, slower this time. Not cautious — *measured*. Her eyes moved constantly, but not in the usual way. Not scanning for threats.

Tracking inconsistencies.

Shammy came last.

The air shifted when she entered.

Not enough to fix anything.

Just enough to make the wrongness... aware.

The hallway ahead was intact.

Lights steady. No flicker. No scorch marks.

No bodies.

Ace frowned.

“Rogue said people died.”

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She stepped forward, crouched near a wall panel.

There — faint.

A handprint.

Not smeared.

Pressed.

Clean.

“Not here,” Mai said. “Not in the way we expect.”

Ace exhaled. “Yeah, I’m getting that.”

They moved deeper.

Every step *almost* lined up.

Every sound *almost* belonged where it should.

That was worse than chaos.

Chaos you could fight.

This—

This felt like a mistake that had decided to stay.

A door on the right stood half open.

Ace pushed it the rest of the way.

Inside:

Three bodies.

No blood spray. No torn chrome. No sign of forced entry.

One sat against the wall, weapon still in hand.

Another lay on the floor, angle wrong — not broken, just... *misplaced*.

The third—

Ace stepped closer.

“Shot twice,” she said.

Mai nodded. “By two different shooters.”

Ace glanced at her. “And?”

Mai’s jaw tightened slightly.

“They fired at the same time.”

A pause.

“At the same target.”

Ace looked back at the bodies.

“...and missed.”

“Correctly,” Mai said.

Shammy moved to the center of the room.

She didn’t look at the bodies.

She looked at the space between them.

“They didn’t choose wrong,” she said quietly.

“They chose what fit.”

Ace leaned against the doorframe, arms folding loosely.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “That’s the problem.”

“Three steps.”

The voice came from the hall.

Not loud.

Not hidden.

Placed.

Ace didn’t turn.

“Try me.”

A pause.

“Three steps forward,” the voice continued. “Then you’ll angle left. You’ll think the door ahead is a choke point.”

Mai went still.

Ace didn’t move.

“...keep talking,” she said.

Footsteps.

Measured.

He stepped into view like he’d been there the whole time.

Average height. No visible weapon. Chrome minimal — at least, visibly.

Eyes—

Not scanning.

Settling.

“You already adjusted once,” he said, looking at Ace. “You won’t do it again immediately. That would feel forced.”

Ace smiled faintly.

“Wanna bet?”

She moved.

Not forward.

Right.

Wrong angle.

Fast.

He reacted instantly—

Shifted—

Stopped.

Half-step.

Just enough to avoid committing.

Ace didn’t follow through.

She reset.

Watching him.

“...there it is,” she said.

For the first time, something in his expression changed.

Not emotion.

Adjustment.

“You’re breaking pattern earlier than expected,” he said.

“Yeah,” Ace replied. “You talk too much.”

Mai stepped forward slightly, voice calm but tight.

"You're not reacting to us," she said. "You're pre-building the outcomes."

He glanced at her.

"Of course."

No hesitation.

"No point waiting for decisions that are already determined."

Shammy moved then.

One step.

The air shifted with her.

Subtle.

But enough.

He noticed.

"...you," he said.

A beat.

"You're distorting the field."

Shammy tilted her head.

"Am I?"

He didn't answer immediately.

He was watching her now.

Not fully.

But not ignoring her anymore.

That was new.

Ace moved again.

Messy.

Too wide. Too obvious.

A mistake.

He took it.

Stepped to intercept—

Ace stopped short.

Again.

Wrong timing.

Wrong follow-through.

The space between them lost its clean lines.

Mai shifted her stance — deliberately inefficient.

Shammy let the pressure drift.

Not centered.

Not stable.

For a moment—

Nothing aligned.

He exhaled slowly.

“...good.”

Ace blinked. “That’s new.”

“You’re learning,” he said.

Not impressed.

Not threatened.

Just... noting.

“I was wondering how long it would take.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed.

“You set this up.”

“Yes.”

Again — no hesitation.

“You walked into a solved problem.”

He glanced around the hallway, the room behind them.

“The variables were fixed.”

A small pause.

“Now they aren’t.”

Ace tilted her head.

“So you’re losing.”

He shook his head once.

“No.”

His gaze moved between them again.

Slower now.

More deliberate.

“I have enough.”

Shammy’s voice cut in, soft but firm.

“For what?”

He looked at her fully, now.

First time.

“To see where you break,” he said.

Silence.

Ace’s grip tightened.

“...try me.”

He didn’t respond to that.

Didn’t need to.

Movement.

Above.

Behind.

Angles closing.

Ace didn’t look.

Didn’t have to.

“Company,” she said.

The breach hit fast.

Concrete cracked. Entry points forced.

Theta-24 didn't wait.

They never did.

"Target confirmed."

"Pattern active."

"Execute—"

Gunfire.

Precise.

Coordinated.

Wrong.

Shots crossed paths that should have been clean.

Angles overlapped.

Timing slipped.

Just enough.

One round sparked off a surface it should have missed.

Another cut too close to a teammate's line.

"—adjust!"

"Negative, it's—"

"Hold your—"

They weren't panicking.

They were *correcting*.

Too late.

Ace moved.

Not toward the target.

Between.

Cutting lines.

Breaking sight.

Forcing space where there wasn't any.

Mai dropped low, shifting position not for advantage — but for disruption.

Shammy—

The air snapped.

Not violently.

Just—

Aligned wrong.

The pressure field collapsed just enough to throw everything off.

He watched it all.

Didn't move.

Didn't need to.

"This is better," he said quietly.

No one answered.

They were too busy not dying.

Then—

Silence.

Not total.

But close.

The kind that comes right before something decides to happen.

Ace felt it first.

Shift in the space.

Tension without direction.

"Move," she said.

Too late.

The door behind them slammed.

Not shut.

Just enough.

Just wrong enough.

Angles tightened.

Lines crossed.

Every exit—

Almost viable.

None clean.

He stepped back.

Calm.

Unhurried.

“I don’t need to finish this,” he said.

Mai looked up, sharp.

“Then why stay?”

A small pause.

“For confirmation.”

His gaze flicked between them one last time.

Ace. Mai. Shammy.

Locking something in.

“...got it,” he said.

And then—

He left.

Not fast.

Not hidden.

Just...

Gone from where they expected him to be.

The pressure eased.

Slightly.

Enough to breathe.

Enough to think.

Theta-24 pulled back just as fast as they came in.

Not retreat.

Recalibration.

“Target disengaged.”

“Pattern incomplete.”

“Next pass required.”

Silence settled.

Real this time.

Or close enough.

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...I don't like him.”

Mai didn't answer.

She was still staring at the space he'd occupied.

“He wasn't trying to win,” she said.

Shammy nodded faintly.

“No.”

A small shift in the air followed.

Subtle.

But there.

“He was checking if we could lose.”

Ace glanced at both of them.

Then toward the hallway.

Rain tapped faintly somewhere outside.

This time—

It sounded right.

“...next time,” Ace said quietly, “we don’t play his game.”

Mai finally looked away.

“That assumes we have a choice.”

Shammy’s gaze drifted toward the exit.

“We will,” she said.

A beat.

“Or he wouldn’t need to test it.”

Ace didn’t smile.

But something close passed through her expression.

“Good,” she said.

“Because next time...”

She adjusted her grip.

“...I’m not being predictable.”

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