

ACE 37 — Predictable Damage (Continues)

They didn't leave immediately.

That would've been the smart move.

Which was exactly why none of them did.

The hallway had settled.

Not back to normal — not completely — but close enough that the delay was gone from the sound of their steps. The air moved again. Light behaved.

Almost.

Ace rolled her shoulder once, slow.

"...he planned that exit."

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Not just the path," she added. "The timing. The pressure shift. Theta-24's entry."

Ace huffed softly. "Yeah, noticed."

Shammy didn't move.

Her attention was still somewhere behind them — not where he had stood, but where he *hadn't*.

"He's still here," she said quietly.

Ace turned.

"No, he—"

"Not physically."

That stopped her.

Shammy's gaze didn't change.

"He left structure behind."

Mai exhaled slowly.

“Residual patterning.”

She didn’t sound convinced.

Ace crossed her arms.

“Meaning?”

Mai gestured toward the corridor.

“Meaning he doesn’t need to be present to influence outcomes anymore.”

A pause.

“He just needs us to keep behaving the way we already do.”

Ace didn’t like that.

Didn’t hide it.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “Let’s not do that, then.”

A faint crackle came through the comms.

Not theirs.

Theta-24.

“Perimeter holding.”

“Target not reacquired.”

“Reviewing engagement failure.”

Ace smirked faintly. “That’s one way to put it.”

Mai didn’t smile.

“They weren’t wrong to engage.”

“No,” Shammy said.

“They were just... expected.”

Movement, deeper in the structure.

Not fast.

Not aggressive.

Just—

Present.

All three of them turned at once.

A figure stepped into view.

Hands up.

Unarmed.

Shaking.

“Don’t—” the man started. “Don’t shoot, I—”

Ace didn’t lower her stance.

“Stop there.”

He did.

Immediately.

Too immediately.

Mai’s eyes narrowed.

“Who are you?”

“Security,” he said, breath uneven. “I was— I didn’t—”

He swallowed hard.

“They told us to hold position.”

Ace’s gaze flicked to Mai.

“‘They’?”

The man shook his head quickly.

“No— I mean— I don’t know, it was just— it came through—”

His words stumbled over each other.

Wrong order.

Wrong emphasis.

Shammy stepped slightly to the side.

The air shifted.

The man flinched.

Hard.

Like something had just snapped out of alignment around him.

"...okay," Ace said slowly. "Start again."

He blinked.

Confused.

"I— I stayed where I was supposed to," he said. "I didn't move. I didn't break formation."

A pause.

"That's what they told us."

Mai's voice dropped.

"Who told you?"

The man opened his mouth—

Stopped.

Closed it.

His eyes flicked to the side.

Then back.

"...I don't know."

Silence.

Heavy.

Ace took one step forward.

Slow this time.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "You do."

He shook his head again.

Too fast.

"I don't—"

"You just don't know why you know," Mai cut in.

He froze.

That hit.

Shammy moved closer.

Careful.

Measured.

"You followed the instruction," she said softly.

"Yes."

"You trusted it."

"Yes."

Another pause.

"...even though it didn't feel right."

The man's breathing hitched.

"...yes."

Ace exhaled through her nose.

"Great," she muttered. "He's not even here and he's still giving orders."

Mai straightened slowly.

"No," she said.

They both looked at her.

"He isn't giving orders."

A beat.

“He’s leaving *paths*.”

The man’s hand twitched.

Just slightly.

Ace saw it.

“Don’t.”

Too late.

The man moved.

Not fast.

Not aggressive.

Just—

Wrong.

He stepped back.

Into the line of sight he *shouldn’t* have taken.

A shot rang out.

Clean.

Precise.

From behind.

Theta-24.

The man dropped.

No scream.

No fight.

Just—

Gone.

Ace spun.

“Hold fire!”

“Negative,” came the reply. “Unverified actor—”

“He wasn’t—”

“Every variable is compromised.”

Mai’s voice cut through.

“He wasn’t the target!”

“Doesn’t matter,” the comm snapped back. “He was part of the pattern.”

Silence.

Again.

Ace looked down at the body.

Jaw tight.

“...yeah,” she said quietly.

“That’s exactly what he wanted.”

Shammy closed her eyes briefly.

The air shifted.

Subtle.

Regret, almost.

“He didn’t need to be here,” she said.

“He just needed someone to follow through.”

Mai nodded.

Slow.

Precise.

“He set the condition,” she said.

“And we completed it.”

Ace let out a breath.

Sharp.

Frustrated.

“...next time,” she said, “we break it earlier.”

No one disagreed.

Somewhere outside—

Rain hit metal.

Perfect timing.

For once.

And that was worse than before.

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