

ACE 37 — Predictable Damage (Act 3: Pattern Persistence)

They left the body where it fell.

Not because it didn't matter.

But because moving it felt like the wrong move.

Ace noticed that first.

"...we touch that," she said quietly, "something else lines up wrong."

Mai didn't argue.

Because she was already seeing it.

The hallway wasn't unstable anymore.

That was the problem.

Everything behaved.

Doors opened when they should. Lights held steady. Sound landed where it belonged.

Perfect.

Too perfect.

"He's not here," Ace said.

"Correct," Mai replied.

A beat.

"...that doesn't help."

Shammy moved first.

Not forward.

Sideways.

Across the corridor, crossing lines that didn't need crossing.

The air shifted.

Subtle.

But enough.

“Don’t walk straight,” she said.

Ace frowned. “Why?”

Shammy didn’t look back.

“Because he expects that.”

Mai’s head tilted slightly.

“...no,” she said.

Shammy paused.

Mai continued:

“He doesn’t expect anything now.”

A beat.

“He doesn’t need to.”

Silence.

They moved anyway.

Not together.

Not clean.

Ace took the left side of the corridor, cutting angles that made no tactical sense.

Mai slowed down instead of speeding up, deliberately desyncing her own timing.

Shammy let the air drift again, uneven, refusing to let it settle into a stable pattern.

It helped.

For a while.

They reached the next room without incident.

That was the first warning.

Ace stopped at the threshold.

"...no way."

Mai nodded.

"Agreed."

Inside:

Nothing.

Clean.

Empty.

No bodies. No damage. No signs of conflict.

Perfectly untouched.

"That's not possible," Ace said.

"It is," Mai replied.

A pause.

"If no one made the wrong decision yet."

Shammy stepped inside.

The air didn't react.

That was new.

“...it’s waiting,” she said.

Ace followed.

Slow this time.

Careful.

Nothing moved.

Nothing shifted.

Mai entered last.

And the door behind them—

Closed.

All three turned at once.

No sound.

No force.

Just—

Closed.

Ace moved to it immediately.

Pulled.

Nothing.

Locked.

Mai checked the panel.

“No power fluctuation,” she said.

“Manual override is... still functional.”

She pressed it.

The door didn't move.

"...okay," Ace said flatly. "That's not normal."

Shammy didn't touch the door.

She was looking at the room.

Still empty.

Still perfect.

"No," she said.

A beat.

"This is correct."

Ace looked at her.

"What?"

Shammy took a slow breath.

"He didn't trap us."

Another pause.

"He removed the exit."

Mai's eyes sharpened.

"...same result," she said.

"No," Shammy replied quietly.

A small shift in the air followed.

“This one is stable.”

That word again.

Ace didn't like it any more the second time.

“...so what,” she muttered, “we just sit here until it opens?”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

She stepped into the center of the room.

Slow.

Deliberate.

“He's testing continuation,” she said.

Ace frowned. “In English?”

Mai didn't look at her.

“He wants to see what we do,” she said.

“When nothing forces a decision.”

Silence stretched.

Ace exhaled sharply.

“...great,” she said. “A thinking problem.”

Shammy moved.

Not toward the door.

Not toward the walls.

Toward the center.

The air shifted again.

Soft.

Uncertain.

“He expects resolution,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“Which means...”

Ace’s eyes narrowed.

“...we don’t give him one.”

That hung there.

Heavy.

Mai didn’t move.

Shammy didn’t adjust the air further.

Ace didn’t push the door again.

Nothing happened.

Seconds passed.

Then more.

The room held.

Perfect.

Silent.

And then—

A flicker.

Not in the lights.

In the space.

Small.

Almost invisible.

The air *corrected itself*.

Shammy felt it instantly.

“There,” she said.

Mai’s head snapped toward the point.

“...instability,” she whispered.

Ace moved.

Fast.

Direct.

Wrong.

Her hand hit the wall where nothing had been before.

Something shifted.

Hard.

The door behind them clicked.

Unlocked.

All three froze.

Ace looked back.

“...we broke it.”

Mai shook her head slowly.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

“We refused to complete it.”

Shammy exhaled.

The air settled properly this time.

For real.

“...he needed us to finish the pattern,” she said.

Ace pushed the door open.

It gave immediately.

They stepped out.

Back into the hallway.

Everything felt normal again.

Too normal.

Ace glanced at Mai.

"...he's not done."

Mai met her gaze.

"No," she said.

A pause.

"He just confirmed something."

Shammy looked down the corridor.

Farther this time.

Deeper.

"...so did we," she said quietly.

Ace adjusted her grip.

Not tense.

Not relaxed.

Ready.

“Good,” she said.

“Next time—”

She stopped.

Just for a second.

“...we don’t wait for him to start.”

Somewhere ahead—

Something moved.

Not a person.

Not a sound.

A decision.

And this time—

It wasn’t theirs.

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