

ACE 37 — Predictable Damage (Act 4: Distributed Pressure)

The hallway didn't fight them anymore.

That was worse.

Ace slowed as they moved.

Not because she had to.

Because nothing *forced* her not to.

"...I don't like this," she muttered.

Mai didn't look up.

"You didn't like it before either."

"Yeah," Ace said. "That was different."

A beat.

"...that was him."

Shammy's gaze drifted ahead.

Not focused.

Listening.

"He's not gone," she said.

Mai nodded once.

"No."

A pause.

"He just stopped needing to be close."

That landed.

Harder than anything else so far.

They reached the junction.

Three paths.

All clear.

All viable.

All wrong.

Ace glanced left.

Then right.

Then forward.

"...okay," she said slowly. "That's new."

Mai stepped forward just enough to see all three angles.

"Before," she said, "he constrained outcomes."

A beat.

"Now he's expanding them."

Shammy exhaled.

The air didn't settle.

It spread.

"...he's giving us choices," she said.

Ace grimaced.

"Yeah," she said. "That's worse."

A crackle in the comms.

Not theirs.

Again.

“Unit 2 reporting—”

Static.

“...no contact, but—”

Cut.

Mai froze.

“Repeat that.”

Nothing.

Ace tapped her own comm.

“Say again.”

Silence.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“They’re still talking,” she said.

Ace frowned. “We’re not hearing it.”

“No,” Shammy replied.

“They’re not talking to us.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed.

“...segmented communication,” she said.

A beat.

“He’s splitting the field.”

Ace exhaled sharply.

“Great.”

Movement.

Left corridor.

Not fast.

Not hidden.

Just—

Present.

Ace shifted toward it immediately.

Then stopped.

Forced herself to.

“...too obvious,” she muttered.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“Which means...”

“Which means we still check it,” Ace said.

Shammy didn't argue.

They moved left.

Not together.

Not aligned.

The corridor narrowed slightly.

Lights dimmer.

Sound tighter.

At the far end—

A body.

Ace stopped.

“...again.”

This one wasn't clean.

Not like before.

He was alive.

Barely.

“Don't—” the man rasped as they approached. “Don't listen to—”

He choked.

Coughed.

Blood this time.

Real.

Ace crouched beside him.

“Easy,” she said. “Who did this?”

The man's eyes flicked past her.

Behind.

"...you already know," he whispered.

Ace didn't turn.

"...yeah," she said. "Humor me."

His breathing hitched.

"You'll... you'll go right next," he said.

A pause.

"Because this feels like a dead end."

Ace didn't react.

Didn't move.

Mai did.

Just slightly.

The man smiled.

Weak.

Broken.

Certain.

"...see?"

Shammy stepped forward.

The air tightened.

“No,” she said quietly.

The man’s expression faltered.

Just for a second.

Ace saw it.

“...you didn’t come up with that,” she said.

The man blinked.

Confused.

Mai leaned in.

“He did,” she said. “Earlier.”

A beat.

“You’re just following it now.”

The man’s breathing sped up.

Panic.

Real this time.

“I didn’t—” he started.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ace cut in.

She stood.

Slow.

“...we’re not finishing it.”

The man grabbed her sleeve.

Desperate.

“You have to—”

Ace pulled free.

“Yeah,” she said.

“We don’t.”

They stepped back.

Left him there.

Alive.

Unresolved.

The corridor held.

Nothing triggered.

No shift.

No trap.

Mai exhaled.

“...that’s new.”

Shammy nodded.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“He expected completion.”

Ace rolled her shoulder.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Too bad.”

A faint sound echoed from the other corridor.

Right.

Not movement.

Not voice.

Something else.

All three of them felt it.

“...there,” Shammy said.

Mai's eyes sharpened.

"That's not the same pattern."

Ace didn't hesitate this time.

She moved.

Right corridor.

Fast.

Wrong.

And for the first time since they'd entered—

Something reacted immediately.

The lights flickered.

Hard.

Sound snapped out of sync.

And the air—

Compressed.

Shammy's head snapped up.

"...no," she said.

Mai's voice cut in.

"That's not him."

Ace didn't slow.

"...good," she said.

"Then it bleeds."

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