

ACE 37 — Predictable Damage (Act 5: Pattern Collision)

The pressure hit before the light stabilized.

Ace felt it in her chest — not impact, not force.

Compression.

Like the space ahead had decided to take a step closer without moving.

She didn't slow.

The corridor narrowed into a junction that shouldn't have been there.

Mai saw it immediately.

"This isn't architectural," she said. "This wasn't in the layout."

Shammy didn't answer.

The air was wrong.

Not guided.

Not shaped.

Just—

Pushed.

"Contact ahead," Ace said.

Not a guess.

A certainty.

The lights flickered again.

Harder this time.

And then—

Movement.

Not controlled.

Not measured.

Violent.

A figure slammed into the far wall.

Hard enough to crack it.

Wrong enough that the crack didn't spread correctly.

He pushed himself up.

Fast.

Too fast.

Chrome visible now — more than before. Neural lines lit unevenly across his neck, flickering in patterns that didn't match any standard load.

His eyes—

Not focused.

Not tracking.

Jumping.

"...okay," Ace muttered.

"That's new."

The man lunged.

No warning.

No positioning.

Just raw acceleration.

Ace met him halfway.

The impact was clean.

Too clean.

Her blade connected—

And he didn't stop.

Not because he blocked.

Because his body didn't process the hit the way it should.

Mai's voice cut in:

"He's not aligning to damage!"

The man swung.

Wild.

But fast enough to matter.

Ace twisted aside.

Barely.

"Yeah," she snapped. "I see that."

Shammy stepped forward.

The air tried to settle—

Failed.

“...he’s not part of the same field,” she said.

That was bad.

Very bad.

The man hit the wall again.

Pushed off.

Came back harder.

No pattern.

No rhythm.

No predictability.

Ace adjusted.

Not fighting him.

Tracking him.

“Not him,” she said under her breath.

Mai nodded.

“He didn’t build this.”

A beat.

“He can’t use it.”

The man screamed.

Not rage.

Not pain.

Something else.

A misfire.

He charged again—

And this time—

Everything snapped.

The corridor twisted.

Not physically.

But—

Logically.

Two angles existed at once.

Ace moved through one.

He moved through the other.

They collided anyway.

The impact broke something.

The man staggered back—

And for a second—

He aligned.

Just enough.

Shammy felt it instantly.

“There!”

Mai moved.

Fast.

Precise.

Not to strike.

To **fix the frame**.

She forced the space into one outcome.

One angle.

One version.

For a fraction of a second—

Everything made sense.

Ace didn't hesitate.

She struck.

Clean.

Final.

The man dropped.

This time—

He stayed down.

Silence hit.

Hard.

The corridor snapped back.

Too fast.

Too clean.

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...that wasn’t him.”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A pause.

“That was what happens when the pattern breaks without control.”

Shammy looked down at the body.

The air around it didn't move right.

Not like before.

Not like him.

"...he didn't plan this," she said.

"No," Mai replied.

A longer pause.

"He'll be interested."

Ace glanced down the corridor.

Back the way they came.

"...yeah," she said.

"Then let's not give him time to be."

A voice answered.

Not close.

Not far.

Placed.

"You already did."

All three turned.

He stood at the far end of the corridor.

Untouched.

Unharmed.

Watching.

No rush.

No urgency.

"...that wasn't yours," Mai said.

"No," he replied.

A small pause.

"But you brought it into alignment."

Ace stepped forward.

"Yeah," she said.

"Didn't look like you needed help."

He tilted his head slightly.

"Correction," he said.

"I needed to see what happens when something doesn't follow the rules."

Shammy's gaze sharpened.

"And?"

He looked at her.

Really looked.

"It breaks everything," he said simply.

A beat.

"...unless someone fixes it."

Mai's voice dropped.

"You're scaling."

"Yes."

No hesitation.

"Local patterns were sufficient," he continued. "Now they aren't."

Ace's grip tightened.

"...you're done testing," she said.

He considered that.

"No," he said.

A pause.

"I'm done starting small."

Silence.

The air tightened.

Not wrong.

Not unstable.

Just—

Heavy.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

“...we don't let you expand this.”

He didn't respond immediately.

Then:

“You don't get to decide that.”

Ace smiled.

Just slightly.

“...watch us.”

A longer pause.

Then—

He stepped back.

Not retreating.

Not escaping.

Just—

Leaving the space where they expected him to be.

Again.

The corridor settled.

But something had changed.

Mai felt it first.

“...he’s not probing anymore,” she said.

Shammy nodded.

“No.”

Ace exhaled.

“...good,” she said.

Then, quieter:

“...means next time—”

Mai finished it.

“—he’s not asking questions.”

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