

# ACE 37 — Predictable Damage (Act 8: System Strain)

They didn't talk on the way out.

Not because there was nothing to say.

Because everything they said would've lined up too cleanly.

---

The rain outside felt wrong again.

Not delayed.

Not misaligned.

---

Overcorrected.

---

Ace stopped just outside the structure.

"...you feel that?"

---

Mai nodded immediately.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Everything's snapping back too hard."

---

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air resisted her.

For the first time.

---

"...it's pushing us out," she said.

---

Ace frowned.

“Out of what?”

---

Shammy didn't answer right away.

---

“...out of the space where this works.”

---

That landed.

---

Mai's eyes narrowed.

“...system rejection.”

---

Ace huffed softly.

“Yeah, well, it's a bit late for that.”

---

A comm crackled.

Clear this time.

Too clear.

---

“Containment teams rerouting.”

“Multiple sites showing irregular behavior.”

“Pattern escalation confirmed.”

---

Ace looked at Mai.

“...multiple?”

---

Mai nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“He didn’t just scale himself.”

---

Shammy finished it.

“...he stressed the system.”

---

Ace exhaled.

“...so now everything’s breaking.”

---

“No,” Mai said.

---

A beat.

---

“Now everything’s trying to not break.”

---

That was worse.

---

## □ THE CITY

They didn’t need to go far.

---

Two blocks down—

Something was wrong.

---

Not violently.

Not obviously.

---

Subtle.

---

A traffic light flickered.

Then corrected.

Too precisely.

---

A car stopped.

Not because it had to.

Because it *decided* to.

---

A pedestrian hesitated at a crossing—

Then moved anyway.

---

Wrong timing.

---

No collision.

---

But close enough that everyone noticed.

---

And adjusted.

---

Ace watched it all.

---

“...it’s spreading.”

---

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A pause.

---

“It’s tightening.”

---

## THE PROBLEM

Shammy stepped into the street.

The air didn’t follow her.

Didn’t flow.

---

It held.

---

“...it’s forcing alignment,” she said quietly.

---

Ace blinked.

“...that’s the opposite of what he was doing.”

---

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

---

“He created instability.”

---

Shammy continued:

“...and now the system is overcorrecting.”

---

Ace grimaced.

“...so either way—”

---

“—we lose flexibility,” Mai finished.

---

## □ CONTACT

A voice behind them.

---

“Exactly.”

---

They didn't turn immediately.

Didn't need to.

---

He was there.

Again.

---

Street level this time.

No structure.

No controlled space.

---

Just—

---

City.

---

“You pushed too far,” he said calmly.

---

Ace turned.

Slow.

---

“...funny,” she said.

“I was about to say the same thing.”

---

He shook his head slightly.

“No.”

A pause.

---

“I pushed just far enough.”

---

Mai stepped forward.

“You didn’t account for system strain.”

---

He looked at her.

---

“I did.”

---

That stopped her.

---

Shammy felt it next.

---

“...you wanted this.”

---

A small pause.

---

“Yes.”

---

## **THE REVEAL**

He gestured slightly.

Not at them.

At the street.

---

“The system corrects,” he said.

“Always.”

---

A beat.

---

“But it overcorrects under stress.”

---

Ace’s jaw tightened.

“...you’re forcing it to choose.”

---

“Yes.”

---

Mai’s voice dropped.

---

“Between control and adaptability.”

---

He nodded.

---

“And it can’t sustain both.”

---

Silence.

---

## □ CONSEQUENCE

A car accelerated.

Too fast.

---

Then stopped.

Too hard.

---

Behind it—

Another didn’t.

---

Impact.

---

Not catastrophic.

---

But wrong.

---

The timing didn’t match.

---

People shouted.

Moved.

Adjusted.

---

Everything started to—

Tighten.

---

Shammy stepped forward.

The air resisted again.

---

“...it’s locking down,” she said.

---

Ace looked between him and the street.

“...you’re not optimizing anymore.”

---

A beat.

---

“You’re forcing failure.”

---

He didn’t deny it.

---

“No,” he said.

---

A pause.

---

“I’m forcing choice.”

---

## □ TRIAD RESPONSE

Mai’s eyes sharpened.

---

“...then we give it neither.”

---

Ace glanced at her.

“...you got something?”

---

Mai nodded once.

---

“Stop interacting.”

---

Ace blinked.

“...what?”

---

Shammy understood first.

---

“...we step out of the system.”

---

Ace stared at both of them.

---

“...that’s not how—”

---

“No,” Mai said.

---

A beat.

---

“That’s exactly how this works.”

---

## □ **THE MOVE**

They stopped.

---

Completely.

---

No adjustment.

No reaction.

No correction.

---

The world kept moving.

---

Cars.

People.

Signals.

---

But around them—

A gap formed.

---

Not visible.

Not physical.

---

Just—

Unaccounted.

---

## **EFFECT**

The overcorrection faltered.

---

Timing slipped.

---

Pressure eased.

---

Not fully.

---

But enough.

---

Shammy exhaled.

The air followed again.

---

“...it doesn’t know what to do with nothing,” she said.

---

Mai nodded.

---

“Exactly.”

---

Ace looked at him.

---

“...your move.”

---

## □ HIS REACTION

For the first time—

He hesitated.

---

Not long.

---

But real.

---

“...interesting,” he said.

---

A pause.

---

“You removed yourselves from the equation.”

---

Mai met his gaze.

---

“We stopped solving your problem.”

---

Silence.

---

Then—

A faint shift.

---

The tension dropped.

---

Not gone.

---

Reduced.

---

## □ **BEAT**

He stepped back.

---

Not disengaging.

---

Reconsidering.

---

“This isn’t over,” he said.

---

Ace smirked slightly.

---

“...yeah,” she said.

---

“Now it’s fun.”

Rain fell.

---

This time—

Almost right.

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Last update: **20/04/2026 16:15**

