

CHAPTER 4 — Negative Time

The room didn't reset.

It thinned.

Like something had been taken out of it—

but not removed.

Ace stood where she was.

Didn't chase.

Didn't reposition.

That wouldn't work.

Mai didn't look at the exits.

She looked at the gaps.

Not where things were—

where they failed to connect.

“He is not faster,” she said.

Flat.

“He is operating outside sequence.”

V exhaled.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...that was already pretty obvious.”

“No,” Mai said.

A beat.

“Not outside time.”

Another.

“Outside order.”

That mattered.

Shammy stepped slowly across the room.

The air—

followed—

then didn't.

Lagged.

Then corrected—

wrong.

“He’s not moving through it,” she said.

A pause.

“He’s skipping parts of it.”

Ace nodded once.

“Then we stop the skip.”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

Immediate.

“He doesn’t skip randomly.”

A beat.

“He selects.”

Silence.

That locked it.

V frowned.

“...Selects what.”

Mai didn't hesitate.

“The outcome.”

A pause.

“Before the process.”

That was worse.

Ace’s gaze shifted slightly—

not searching—

tracking something that hadn’t happened yet.

“Object,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“Implant.”

That narrowed it further.

Not external.

Not optional.

Integrated.

Shammy turned toward the space where he had been.

The air—

tightened.

Then—

collapsed inward—

just slightly.

“There,” she said.

Ace moved immediately.

No hesitation.

No adjustment.

She stepped into the space—

before it stabilized.

And he was there.

Again.

Not arriving.

Already present.

Too close.

The black implant—

visible now—

clear.

It didn't reflect the room.

Didn't reflect light.

Didn't reflect anything.

It removed it.

A void—

embedded in flesh.

Wrong.

"You're catching on," he said.

Almost approving.

Ace didn't answer.

She struck.

Not fast—

not early—

direct.

He moved—

before the motion existed.

The hit missed.

Of course it did.

Mai stepped in—

not aligned—

not optimal.

The system—

didn't form.

Didn't resolve.

For the first time—

his movement—

stuttered.

Just a fraction.

That was enough.

Shammy pushed—

not against him—

against the sequence.

The air—

lost continuity.

Pressure—

out of order.

Alive.

He frowned again.

More visible now.

“You’re breaking it,” he said.

Not angry.

Interested.

Mai didn’t respond.

Because she wasn’t breaking it.

She was removing predictability.

Ace stepped again—

closer—

not chasing—

occupying.

The space—

collapsed.

Not physically—

structurally.

No clean “next.”

No clear “before.”

The implant—

reacted.

Not activating—

straining.

The black surface—

didn't change—

but the space around it did.

Edges—

undefined.

Wrong.

“He needs sequence,” Mai said.

A beat.

“To remove it.”

That was the key.

Shammy exhaled—

slow—

uneven.

The air—

refused to align.

No pattern.

No rhythm.

Nothing to select.

The figure stepped back—

not smoothly.

Not correctly.

For the first time—

he was late.

Just a fraction.

But real.

Ace saw it.

“That’s it,” she said.

Flat.

Final.

She moved—

not faster—

not earlier—

wrong.

The strike—

didn't follow sequence.

Didn't resolve cleanly.

And this time—

it landed.

Not perfectly.

Not decisively.

But enough.

He staggered—

just slightly.

The implant—

held.

But strained.

“You can’t hold that,” he said.

Still calm.

Still certain.

But not completely.

Mai didn’t answer.

Because she didn’t need to.

They didn’t have to hold it.

They just had to make sure—

he couldn't either.

And for the first time—

the gap between action and outcome—

existed again.

Small.

Fragile.

But real.

And that—

was enough

to end it.

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