

Ace 24 — The Rooms That Stayed

Prologue — The Door That Should Not Exist

Midnight had already settled into the building, not as silence, but as a kind of administrative pause. The fluorescent lights remained on out of habit rather than necessity, humming faintly above rows of identical desks. Papers were stacked where they had been left hours earlier. A coffee cup sat half-finished near a terminal that had gone to sleep without being told to.

Nothing was wrong.

That was the problem.

Agent Kessler stood in the middle of the corridor and frowned, not because he could identify a threat, but because something in the geometry of the place refused to settle in his mind. He had walked this floor dozens of times. Enough that his body moved through it without needing conscious direction. Left at the corner. Three doors down. Break room on the right.

He had just passed the break room.

He stopped.

Turned.

Walked back three steps.

The break room door was where it should be. Slightly ajar. Light off inside. The faint smell of stale coffee drifting out like a memory that hadn't quite dissipated. He stared at it for a moment longer than necessary, then shook his head once, as if clearing static.

"Everything good?" Ruiz's voice came from behind him, casual, already halfway to bored.

Kessler didn't answer immediately. He stepped forward again, continuing down the corridor.

Then stopped a second time.

"There's... a door here."

Ruiz snorted softly. "Yeah. It's an office."

"No."

Kessler didn't turn this time. He just stood there, looking at it.

It was a door. Standard issue. Matte paint, slightly off-white, the kind that never quite looked clean no matter how often it was wiped down. Metal handle. No window. No marking.

No number.

Ruiz stepped up beside him, hands in his jacket pockets, giving it a cursory glance.

“Looks like a door,” he said.

“It wasn’t here.”

That got a pause.

Not a dramatic one. Just enough for Ruiz to shift his weight and actually look instead of dismissing it outright.

“You sure?”

Kessler nodded once.

“I walked this route twenty minutes ago.”

Ruiz leaned closer, examining the frame, the hinges, the edge where it met the wall.

No dust displacement. No fresh paint. No seam lines.

If it had been installed, it hadn’t been installed recently.

“Maintenance?” Ruiz offered.

“At midnight?”

Ruiz shrugged. “Foundation.”

That almost worked. Almost.

Kessler reached out and ran his fingers along the surface. Smooth. Cool. No vibration. No hum. Nothing behind it that announced itself as active or dangerous.

Just a door.

He glanced over his shoulder.

Two more agents were further down the hall, mid-conversation, their voices low and unconcerned. The building was alive in the way all Foundation spaces were alive—quiet systems operating behind walls, distant footsteps, the constant suggestion of oversight.

Nothing here warranted escalation.

Not yet.

Kessler exhaled slowly.

“Protocol?”

Ruiz tilted his head.

“For a door?”

“For something that wasn’t there.”

Ruiz considered that. Not flippantly. Not entirely seriously either.

“Check it,” he said. “We’re not calling this in unless it does something.”

Kessler nodded. That was reasonable. Measured. The kind of decision that kept things moving.

He reached for the handle.

It turned without resistance.

That, more than anything, made him hesitate.

Most secured doors here resisted something—badge access, code, at least a mechanical weight. This one moved like it had been waiting.

“You feel that?” he asked quietly.

Ruiz stepped closer. “What?”

Kessler didn’t answer. He pushed the door open.

The hinges made no sound.

On the other side—

A corridor.

Not unusual.

Same fluorescent lighting. Same color temperature. Same institutional blandness. The walls were the same shade of neutral. The floor the same low-pile carpet that muffled footsteps just enough to feel deliberate.

It looked like the rest of the building.

Perfectly.

Ruiz leaned past him, peering in.

“Okay,” he said. “So it’s—what—an extension? Overflow space?”

Kessler didn’t move.

Something was wrong.

Not visibly. Not in any way he could point to. But the corridor beyond the door felt... aligned. Too aligned. Like a photograph that had been corrected one step past realism.

“Smell that?” Ruiz asked.

Kessler inhaled.

Nothing.

No coffee. No cleaning chemicals. No trace of the building’s usual lived-in residue.

Just air.

Clean, flat, almost... unused.

Ruiz stepped forward, one foot crossing the threshold.

"Probably nothing," he said.

Kessler caught his sleeve.

"Wait."

Ruiz glanced down at the grip, then back up.

"For what?"

Kessler opened his mouth.

Paused.

Closed it again.

There was nothing to say.

No reading. No anomaly spike. No audible shift. No visual distortion. Every instrument he carried remained stubbornly normal.

Normal.

That word again.

He let go.

Ruiz stepped fully inside.

His footsteps made no sound.

That registered a fraction too late.

"Ruiz—"

"I'm right here," Ruiz said, already a few steps in, turning slightly. "It's just—"

He stopped.

Not dramatically. Not with fear.

Just... stopped.

"What?" Kessler asked.

Ruiz didn't answer immediately.

He turned his head, looking further down the corridor, then back at Kessler.

"It's longer than it should be."

Kessler stepped through the doorway.

The shift was imperceptible.

No pressure change. No flicker. No sense of crossing a boundary.

Just—

Inside.

The door behind them remained open.

He checked that instinctively. Turned. Looked.

Same hallway behind them. Same break room door in the distance. Same faint hum of lights.

Continuity intact.

Good.

He turned back.

Ruiz had moved further down.

“Hey,” Kessler said, sharper now. “Stay within line of sight.”

Ruiz lifted a hand in acknowledgment without turning.

The corridor stretched ahead, straight and unbroken.

Kessler counted the ceiling panels.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Too many.

He frowned.

They should have reached an intersection by now.

“Ruiz.”

No response.

Not silence.

Just—

No response.

Kessler walked forward, pace increasing slightly.

The air didn't move. Not even with his own motion. It pressed against him evenly from all sides, like a held breath that refused to release.

“Ruiz.”

Still nothing.

The corridor remained perfectly lit.

Perfectly straight.

Perfectly—

Wrong.

Kessler turned.

The door behind him was still open.

He could see the original hallway. The break room. The faint suggestion of the rest of the world continuing as it always had.

Safe.

Accessible.

Unchanged.

He exhaled, tension easing just a fraction.

“Okay,” he muttered. “We step back. Log it. Call it in.”

He took one step toward the door.

Then another.

The distance didn’t close.

He stopped.

Looked again.

The door was still there.

The hallway beyond it was still there.

But it was—

Further.

Not much.

Just enough.

Kessler’s hand tightened slightly.

“Ruiz,” he said again, quieter now.

Somewhere ahead, too far to see clearly, something shifted.

Not a figure.

Not movement.

Just—

A suggestion that the corridor did not end where it appeared to.

Kessler didn't move.

Didn't advance.

Didn't retreat.

For the first time since he'd joined the Foundation, he felt something that didn't map to any protocol he knew.

Not fear.

Not yet.

Something worse.

Uncertainty without escalation.

Behind him, the door remained open.

No one came through it.

No one called his name.

No alarm sounded.

No system flagged the anomaly.

The building continued as if nothing had changed.

As if this space—

Did not exist.

Kessler took a slow breath.

The air did not move.

The lights did not flicker.

The corridor did not end.

And somewhere, impossibly close and infinitely far at the same time—

Ruiz was no longer answering.

The door remains open.

No one comes back.

—

© 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace24:chapter0>

Last update: **03/04/2026 17:42**

