

Chapter 4 — Time Without Decay

They did not stop.

That was deliberate.

Stopping would have implied a boundary.

A place where something could be measured against itself.

This space did not offer that.

So they continued.

Ace's pace remained steady.

Not fast.

Not slow.

Exactly what it had been since entry.

Mai matched it.

Not consciously.

Just—

Automatically.

Shammy followed half a step behind, the air around her maintaining that faint, almost imperceptible tension, like a storm waiting for a reason to exist.

Nothing changed.

That was the next problem.

Ace dragged her fingers along the wall as they walked.

Not enough to mark.

Just enough to feel texture.

There was none.

Not smooth.

Not rough.

Not worn.

Just—

Surface.

She stopped.

Turned.

Pressed her palm flat against it.

No temperature difference.

No material response.

No micro-vibration.

“This isn’t a wall,” she said.

Mai didn’t stop walking.

“No,” she replied.

Ace frowned.

“But it is.”

“Yes.”

That answer did not resolve anything.

Ace pulled one of her katanas free.

The emerald edge hummed faintly, a frequency that didn't belong to the audible spectrum but insisted on being noticed anyway.

Mai stopped.

Not to prevent.

To observe.

Ace drove the blade into the wall.

No resistance.

No impact.

No sound.

The blade entered—

And stopped.

Not because it hit something.

Because it reached a point where further motion did not occur.

Ace pushed.

Nothing.

Pulled.

The blade came free.

No mark remained.

Ace stared at the wall for a second longer than necessary.

Then she sheathed the weapon.

“Okay,” she said.

Not satisfied.

Not reassured.

Just—

Updated.

“It doesn’t accept force.”

Mai nodded once.

“Correct.”

They moved again.

Time passed.

Not measured.

Not tracked.

But—

Experienced.

Ace checked her internal clock.

Then checked it again.

“No drift,” she said.

Mai glanced at her.

“Confirm.”

“Heart rate stable. No fatigue increase. No metabolic shift.”

Mai looked ahead.

“That’s wrong.”

“Yes.”

Shammy slowed slightly.

Not stopping.

Just—

Adjusting.

She lifted her hand.

Held it in front of her.

Waited.

Nothing happened.

No microcurrents.

No air displacement.

No interaction with motion.

She lowered it.

"This space isn't processing time," she said.

Ace glanced back. "We're moving."

"Yes," Shammy replied.

A beat.

"It isn't."

That sat.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“Time is occurring,” she said. “But it’s not accumulating.”

Ace frowned. “Explain.”

Mai didn’t look at her.

“If time accumulated,” she said, “we would see change.”

She gestured slightly.

“Wear. Drift. Deviation.”

There was none.

Ace looked down the corridor.

Same light.

Same color.

Same—

Everything.

“So we’re stuck in a loop,” Ace said.

Mai shook her head immediately.

“No.”

That came sharper than before.

“Loops repeat,” she said. “This doesn’t repeat.”

Ace narrowed her eyes.

“Then what is it?”

Mai answered without hesitation.

“It doesn’t progress.”

Silence.

That was worse.

They reached another door.

Identical.

Ace didn’t stop.

She passed it.

Then the next.

And the next.

Mai slowed.

Not because something had changed.

Because something hadn't.

She stopped.

Turned.

Looked behind them.

The doors they had passed were still there.

Same spacing.

Same number.

Same—

She counted.

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five.”

That was wrong.

There had been more.

Ace noticed her stillness.

“What?”

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Then:

“We lost distance.”

Ace turned.

Looked.

The corridor behind them was shorter.

Not dramatically.

Just—

Compressed.

Shammy finally turned as well.

Her expression didn't change.

But the air around her shifted—

A fraction more than before.

"It's not letting the past exist," she said.

Ace blinked once.

"That's not how anything works."

"No," Mai agreed.

"It isn't."

She stepped backward.

One step.

The corridor did not extend.

Another.

Still no change.

The space behind them did not grow.

It remained—

Fixed.

Ace watched this.

Then stepped back herself.

Same result.

She stopped.

Turned forward again.

“Okay,” she said quietly.

Now there was something else in her voice.

Not fear.

But—

Acknowledgment.

“This place isn’t just wrong.”

Mai met her gaze.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

“It’s incomplete.”

Shammy took a slow breath.

The air did not respond.

That—

More than anything so far—

made her expression shift.

Just slightly.

“It’s holding everything at the moment before change,” she said.

Ace exhaled slowly.

“So nothing ends.”

Mai nodded.

“And nothing begins.”

Silence.

The corridor stretched ahead.

Unchanged.

Behind them—

Shorter than it should be.

And for the first time—

The idea formed, unspoken but shared:

They were not moving through it.

It was deciding how much of itself existed around them.

They didn't stop.

Because there was nowhere to stop.

And nothing—

Anywhere—

Showed any sign of having been there before.

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