

ACE 38 — Dead Channel (Act 2: Inside the Absence)

The door didn't creak.

Didn't resist.

Didn't even sound like it opened.

Ace noticed that first.

"...okay," she said quietly.

"...that's already wrong."

Mai stepped in behind her.

Paused.

Listened.

Nothing answered.

Not silence.

Just—

Nothing.

Shammy didn't cross the threshold immediately.

She stood there for a second too long.

"...it's not empty," she said.

Ace didn't turn.

"...yeah, you said that."

Shammy stepped inside.

The air didn't move.

That was new.

□ **THE ROOM**

It wasn't large.

Terminal station.

Old hardware.

Corporate-grade interface bolted onto something that didn't belong in Pacifica anymore.

Dust—

But not enough.

Cables—

But too clean.

Everything looked like it had been left alone.

And that was the problem.

Mai moved to the main terminal.

Didn't touch it yet.

"...no idle processes," she said.

Ace leaned against the wall.

"...so it's dead."

Mai shook her head.

"No."

A beat.

"Dead systems decay."

She gestured slightly.

"This isn't decaying."

Shammy's gaze drifted across the room.

"...it's holding," she said.

Ace frowned.

“...holding what.”

Shammy didn't answer.

□ **FIRST TEST**

Mai reached out.

Tapped the terminal.

The screen lit instantly.

No delay.

No boot sequence.

Just—

On.

Ace straightened slightly.

“...that was fast.”

Mai didn't respond.

She was already reading.

“...no logs,” she said.

A beat.

“No cache.”

Another.

“No trace of previous access.”

Ace blinked.

“...so it's new?”

Mai shook her head slowly.

“No.”

A pause.

“It has no past.”

Silence.

□ CONNECTION ATTEMPT

Mai opened a line.

Didn't route it.

Didn't connect.

Just—

Prepared it.

Ace watched.

"...we're not using it," she said.

Mai nodded.

"I know."

A beat.

"I'm not sending anything."

Shammy stepped closer.

The air didn't react.

"...it doesn't need input," she said quietly.

Mai's fingers hovered above the interface.

“...I’m aware.”

□ THE NON-EVENT

They waited.

Nothing happened.

No signal.

No echo.

No trace.

Just—

Time.

Ace shifted her weight.

“...this is it?” she muttered.

Mai didn’t answer.

Because something *did* happen.

Not in the system.

In them.

SUBTLE SHIFT

Ace blinked.

“...wait.”

Mai froze.

“...what.”

Ace frowned.

“...what were we doing.”

Silence.

Not confusion.

Interruption.

Shammy's head tilted sharply.

“...it took something,” she said.

Mai's eyes narrowed.

"...no."

A beat.

"...it didn't take anything."

Another.

"...it removed the moment before the decision."

Ace stared at her.

"...that's worse."

□ **SECOND TEST**

Mai pulled her hand back.

"No interaction," she said.

Ace nodded.

"Good."

Shammy stepped sideways.

Breaking the line.

The air didn't follow.

"...it's still affecting us," she said.

Mai's voice dropped.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Without input."

□ **EXTERNAL CHECK**

Ace tapped her comm.

"Status."

No response.

She frowned.

“Again.”

Nothing.

Mai checked her own.

“Signal’s fine,” she said.

A pause.

“They’re just not answering.”

Shammy looked toward the door.

“...or they’re not where they should be.”

That landed.

□ REALIZATION

Mai stepped back from the terminal.

“...this isn’t a system,” she said.

Ace crossed her arms.

“...what then.”

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because she didn't like the answer.

“...it's a gap,” she said finally.

A beat.

“A place where something should exist—”

Shammy finished it.

“...and doesn't.”

Silence.

□ **FIRST WARNING**

A faint sound.

From the hallway.

Not footsteps.

Not movement.

Just—

A shift.

Ace turned immediately.

“...someone’s there.”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“Someone should be there.”

Shammy exhaled slowly.

“...and isn’t.”

□ THE DOOR

Ace moved.

Fast.

Pulled the door open.

The hallway—

Empty.

Perfectly empty.

Too empty.

No sound.

No echo.

No presence.

Just—

Space.

Ace stepped out.

Paused.

Looked back.

“...okay.”

A beat.

“...that’s not better.”

□ FINAL BEAT

Behind her—

The terminal screen flickered.

Not on.

Not off.

Just—

Less there.

Mai saw it.

“...don’t touch it,” she said immediately.

Shammy didn’t move.

“...it’s learning how to stay empty,” she whispered.

Ace didn’t like that.

“...yeah,” she said.

“...we’re not staying here.”

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