

ACT 2 — APPROACH TO THE NONEXISTENT SITE

The basin did not want footsteps.

That was the first thing Ace decided about it.

Not that it was alive. Not yet. She had learned to be careful with that word because the universe had a nasty habit of taking metaphor as permission. But the basin resisted presence in small, practical ways.

Salt crust cracked under her boots and then settled too smoothly behind her. Wind erased their tracks faster than wind had any right to. The slope down from the road looked shallow from above, but stretched underfoot, lengthening by irritation rather than distance. Every few dozen meters, Mai glanced back toward the vehicle, and every time the vehicle looked less certain.

Not farther away.

Less applicable.

Ace hated that more.

Things were allowed to be distant. They were not allowed to become administratively irrelevant while she was still looking at them.

“Mai.”

“I see it.”

“Good. I was hoping the desert was not gaslighting me personally.”

Mai held the analog photo in one hand and a scanner in the other. The scanner had stopped pretending to be useful and now displayed a blank grid with a polite error message:

Environmental interference. Please recalibrate.

Every ten seconds, the message changed to:

No survey target detected.

Then:

Routine weather delay.

Then back.

Mai turned it off.

Ace glanced at her. “That bad?”

“That insulting.”

“Worse.”

“Yes.”

Shammy walked a few steps ahead of them, tall silhouette pale against the dead basin. Her hair moved with the wind, then against it, then settled in a way that suggested the wind had apologized and backed away. She had not drawn a weapon. Shammy rarely looked armed until the room remembered air could become pressure.

“This place has edges,” she said.

Mai looked up. “Physical edges?”

“No.” Shammy stopped and looked toward the facility below. “Attention edges.”

Ace frowned. “That sentence is doing a lot of crime.”

Shammy smiled faintly without turning. “It becomes more itself when noticed from the side.”

Mai’s expression sharpened.

“Peripheral recognition.”

“Maybe.”

Ace looked between them. “I am going to hit the next abstract noun.”

Mai kept walking. “Please do not. We may need those.”

The facility grew larger as they descended.

Or perhaps it had been large all along and the basin had lied about scale.

The outer wall curved in a long, brutal arc, made from layered composite plating and old sea-corroded steel. It was not built like a desert installation. It had the thick lower mass of something meant to stand against waves, not wind. Barnacle-like mineral clusters clung to the lower hull, dry and dead but too detailed to dismiss as texture. Rust bled down in black-orange rivers. Narrow windows lined the upper sections, most shattered, some sealed from inside by plates stamped with warnings that refused to stay legible.

Mai stopped ten meters from the first access causeway.

There should have been water under it.

Instead there was salt and dust.

Ace stepped onto the causeway first.

The metal groaned.

Real metal. Real weight. Real weakness.

Good.

That helped.

She crossed halfway, crouched, and scraped one katana tip lightly across the surface. A bright line appeared in the corrosion.

Mai watched.

The line stayed.

Ace looked back.

“Physical mark holds.”

Mai lifted the analog camera Sable had sent with the packet and took a photograph.

The camera clicked.

She waited.

Then pulled the instant film free.

The photo developed slowly in the Badlands light.

Causeway. Corrosion. Ace’s scratch.

No facility.

Just Ace standing over empty desert metal, the mark apparently carved into nothing.

Mai’s eyes narrowed.

Ace stared at the photo.

“I am literally in the picture.”

“Yes.”

“The bridge is in the picture.”

“Yes.”

“The giant murder-island is not.”

“Yes.”

Ace pointed at the facility behind her without looking away from the photo.

“That is petty.”

Mai slid the photo into a shielded analog sleeve.

“Important, though.”

“How?”

“The correction does not remove all evidence. It removes category-relevant evidence.”

Ace looked at the photo again.

"So it lets me exist."

"Yes."

"Lets the bridge exist."

"Yes."

"But not the reason."

Mai nodded.

Ace turned toward the facility.

"That feels personal."

Shammy stepped onto the causeway and paused beside Ace's mark. She lowered one hand near it but did not touch.

"The cut remembers better than the image."

Mai looked at her.

Shammy's expression was distant.

"This place dislikes being recorded. It dislikes being named more. But damage..." She tilted her head. "Damage is harder for it to persuade."

Ace smiled.

Finally.

"That I understand."

At the end of the causeway stood the first sign.

It had once been mounted over a reinforced gatehouse. Half of it had collapsed, leaving the letters crooked, stained, and partially obscured by salt growth.

SITE-5 SCP FOUNDATION

As the three of them approached, the lower line blurred.

Not visually.

Worse.

Ace could see the letters and feel her mind trying to file them elsewhere.

Secure construction platform.

Subsurface corrosion project.

Standard cleanup procedure.

Nothing worth remembering.

Nothing worth—

Mai snapped her fingers once.

Hard.

Ace blinked.

The letters came back.

Mai's voice was crisp.

"Read it out loud."

Ace looked at the sign.

"Site-5. SCP Foundation."

The air tightened.

Shammy inhaled sharply through her nose.

Mai repeated, "Site-5. SCP Foundation."

The sign flickered again.

Shammy said it last, quieter.

"Site-5. SCP Foundation."

For a moment the whole facility seemed to hold still.

Then somewhere deep inside, a relay clicked.

Once.

Then another.

Then many.

Not powering up.

Acknowledging.

Ace drew one katana halfway.

Mai lowered the scanner and switched to a paper notebook.

Ace glanced at her. "Going old school?"

"Old school is currently winning."

"Embarrassing for the future."

"The future deserves it."

Mai wrote the name by hand.

SITE-5.

The ink held for three seconds.

Then the letters crawled.

SITE-S.

SITE.

STORAGE.

Mai pressed the pen harder, writing over the correction.

SITE-5.

The paper tore slightly.

The letters held.

Mai looked at Ace.

"Physical pressure helps."

Ace brightened. "Stabbing paperwork is back on the table?"

"Not as first option."

"But on the table."

Mai did not answer.

That was basically yes.

The gatehouse door stood open.

Not invitingly.

Open in the way a mouth remained open after death.

Beyond it, a decontamination corridor sloped downward into stale dark. Emergency lights flickered at floor level, red-orange and weak. The walls were coated in old hazard paint, flaking in strips. Symbols sat beneath grime and correction layers: biohazard, memetic hazard, thaumaturgic containment, cognitohazard warnings, something with black triangles, something that looked like a stylized eye before it became a ventilation notice when Ace tried to focus on it.

Ace stopped at the threshold.

Not because of fear.

Because thresholds were honest. They divided before from after.

She looked at Mai.

Mai had the notebook open, pen ready, expression calm enough to worry anyone sensible.

Shammy stood slightly behind them, eyes on the darkness.

Ace said, "Once we go in, our ride may decide it was never waiting."

Mai nodded. "Likely."

"Our notes may change."

"Yes."

"The site may try to convince us we came here to inspect plumbing."

"Also possible."

Ace looked into the corridor.

Then she smiled.

"Good. If I start talking about plumbing, hit me."

Mai said, "With what level of force?"

"Emotional or physical?"

"That was my question."

Shammy's smile was small and bright in the dead air.

Ace stepped inside.

The corridor lights flickered.

A speaker crackled overhead, dry with age.

For a moment there was only static.

Then a calm recorded voice said:

"Welcome to Site—"

The audio glitched.

"Welcome to the hazardous materials storage annex. Personnel are reminded that no Foundation facility exists at this location."

Ace looked up.

"Rude."

The voice continued.

“Unauthorized visitors are advised to proceed to intake for correction.”

Mai wrote that down.

The ink tried to change **correction** into **decontamination**.

Mai stabbed the word with the pen tip.

It stopped changing.

Ace noticed and grinned.

Mai said, without looking up, “Do not make this a personality trait.”

“Too late.”

They moved deeper.

The first checkpoint had three dead turnstiles, one collapsed guard station, and a wall map that was still lit.

That was impossible.

Nothing else in the corridor had stable power. Wires hung from the ceiling. Moisture had dried into mineral veins along the wall seams. The air tasted stale, salty, and faintly chemical.

But the map glowed cleanly behind cracked glass.

It showed a simplified facility layout:

HAZARDOUS MATERIAL STORAGE ANNEX 5

Sections:

Intake

Decontamination

Waste Processing

Archive Support

Inactive Mechanical

No Further Access Required

Mai stopped in front of it.

Ace watched the map instead of Mai.

She had learned.

A thing that changed wanted you to watch either it or what it was changing away from.

The heading flickered.

SITE-5

Then:

STORAGE ANNEX 5

Then:

NO FURTHER ACCESS REQUIRED

Then back to the annex label.

Mai drew the layout by hand.

The map changed while she copied it.

Rooms vanished from the glass.

But not from her first lines.

She kept drawing.

Ace leaned closer to the wall map.

“There are scratches here.”

Mai looked.

Under the glass, behind the glowing schematic, someone had carved into the metal backing:

DO NOT TRUST CURRENT LABELS

Below that, in smaller letters:

IF THE ROOM HAS NO PURPOSE, ASK WHAT PURPOSE WAS REMOVED

Ace read it out loud.

The map immediately dimmed.

The carved message remained.

Shammy touched the glass lightly.

The lights flickered.

“This was written by someone inside the correction,” she said.

Mai nodded. “And it survived because it damaged the backing physically.”

Ace tapped the glass with one knuckle.

“Past us had good instincts.”

“We do not know who wrote it.”

“Past someone with good instincts.”

The corridor beyond the checkpoint split into three routes.

The left door was labeled:

WASTE MANAGEMENT

The center:

INTAKE AND PERSONNEL PROCESSING

The right:

NO ACCESS REQUIRED

Ace pointed right.

“That one.”

Mai nodded.

“Obviously.”

Shammy glanced at both of them. “Because it says not to?”

Ace and Mai answered together.

“Yes.”

The right door had no handle.

It had a biometric panel, a keycard slot, a mechanical override, and a strip of old Foundation-grade sealant that had cracked down the middle.

Mai examined the panel.

“No power.”

Ace looked at the door.

“Good.”

She drove the katana tip into the cracked sealant and pulled downward.

Metal screamed.

Somewhere in the facility, an alarm tried to start and failed, producing a single embarrassed chirp.

The door opened six centimeters.

Cold air moved through the gap.

Not desert cold.

Deep-building cold.

Server-room cold.

Morgue-adjacent cold.

Ace widened the gap by force. Shammy placed one hand against the upper frame, and the air pressure shifted just enough to keep rust flakes and old seal dust from pouring into their faces.

They entered.

The hallway beyond had no lit map.

No helpful labels.

No voice.

That was better.

Until the first door on the right slowly updated its sign as their flashlights crossed it.

CONTAINMENT RECORDS

Then:

ARCHIVAL OVERFLOW

Then:

NON-ESSENTIAL PAPER STORAGE

Then:

EMPTY ROOM

Ace touched the door.

It was locked.

She looked at Mai.

Mai sighed.

"Yes."

Ace opened it.

The room beyond was full of file cabinets.

Physical file cabinets.

Rows and rows of them, stacked tight in a chamber that smelled of paper mold, salt, and hot dust. Some cabinets had collapsed under rust. Some drawers hung open. Some were bound shut with tape bearing Foundation seals that peeled into blank white strips when Mai's light touched them.

Ace stepped in slowly.

"Paper wins again."

Mai's face had gone still with something close to reverence and dread.

"Not wins. Resists."

Shammy entered last and immediately looked toward the far corner.

"What?"

"There."

A desk sat beneath a dead wall terminal.

On the desk lay a ledger.

Closed.

Untouched by visible dust.

Mai did not approach immediately.

Ace noticed.

"Trap?"

"Everything here is a trap. The question is whether it is also evidence."

Ace smiled. "Mai, that may be the most Foundation sentence you've ever said."

Mai gave her a look.

"Do not insult me in abandoned facilities."

"That was praise."

"It was structurally ambiguous."

Shammy drifted toward the ledger, stopped one step short, and looked back.

"It wants to be opened."

Ace's smile vanished.

"Define wants."

Shammy's expression tightened. "Not like the Witchbox."

Mai looked up sharply.

Ace turned fully.

"That word again."

Shammy's eyes remained on the ledger.

"No. Not here." She swallowed once. Rare. "But something deeper has the same waiting-shape."

Mai made a note.

Ace did not like the motion.

"You're writing Witchbox down?"

"Yes."

"Do we know what that is?"

"No."

"Then why are you writing it down?"

"Because she said it before the site did."

That was fair.

Annoyingly fair.

Mai opened the ledger.

The first page read:

SITE-5 PHYSICAL RETENTION LOG
Emergency Copy — Do Not Digitize

The words held.

Underneath:

This document has been altered by SCP-4182. Personnel are to be reminded that there is no Site-5.

The ink looked different.

Not handwritten.

Not printed.

Imposed.

Ace leaned over Mai's shoulder.

"So it admits the document is altered."

"Or the alteration admits itself."

"Is that better or worse?"

"Yes."

Mai turned the page.

Entries filled the ledger in tight handwriting. Different hands. Different dates. Some pages were crossed out so heavily they had become black fields. Others had been torn out. A few had lines rewritten in competing inks.

Mai scanned quickly but did not read everything aloud.

Good.

The room did not deserve that much cooperation.

Then she stopped.

Ace saw her shoulders change.

“What?”

Mai turned the ledger slightly.

A list of contained materials.

Not full entries. Not enough to become a catalog.

Names only.

Some she recognized. Some she did not. Some seemed to resist being read, sliding sideways in comprehension until the eye gave up.

SCP-001

SCP-001-EX

SCP-1661

SCP-2193

SCP-2923

SCP-3280

SCP-3963

SCP-3980

SCP-8110

Below them, in another hand:

Inventory unstable. Object count disputed. Absence count increasing.

Ace read that twice.

“Absence count.”

Mai nodded slowly.

“That is new.”

Shammy’s gaze moved toward the cabinets.

“No,” she said. “That is old.”

A drawer opened by itself.

Not quickly.

No jump scare.

It slid out five centimeters with the tired dignity of old metal.

Ace drew her katana.

Mai did not stop her.

Inside the drawer was a single folder.

The label read:

INCIDENT: OBJECTS RECLASSIFIED AS NEVER-CONTAINED

Mai took it.

The folder resisted her hand for half a second.

Then yielded.

Inside were photographs.

Analog.

Containment chambers.

Empty.

Each chamber had a number plate.

Each photo had a handwritten note:

Contained at 0900.

Not contained at 0913.

No breach.

No transfer.

All staff remember containment until asked to document it.

Another:

Object still audible behind wall. Room classified as architectural void.

Another:

Recovered blood on floor. No personnel assigned.

Ace's hand tightened around the katana.

"Okay."

Mai looked at her.

Ace's voice had gone flat.

"I hate this place."

"Reasonable."

"No. I mean cleanly. Not irritated. Not bored. Not 'this city is stupid.' I hate it."

Shammy nodded once.

"The building is polite to violence and cruel to proof."

That sentence landed in the paper room and stayed there.

Mai closed the folder.

"We need deeper access."

Ace looked at her.

"Because of course we do."

Mai held up the ledger.

"There is a Continuity Hold."

The words changed as she watched.

Continuity Hold

Then:

Personnel Archive

Then:

Wellness Storage

Then:

No Access Required

Ace smiled without humor.

"There's that phrase again."

Shammy looked toward the corridor.

"The site is louder when it says nothing is needed."

Mai tucked the ledger into a physical evidence pouch and wrote the original words on the outside in heavy ink.

Ace noticed she pressed hard enough to dent the material.

Good.

They left the archive room.

Behind them, the door label updated.

EMPTY ROOM

Then:

PAPER STORAGE

Then:

NO ROOM ASSIGNED

Ace carved one line into the door with her katana.

Not words.

Just a scar.

The label stopped changing.

For now.

The next section tried to make them bored.

That was more frightening than alarms.

The corridor stretched straight ahead, lit by emergency strips that flickered in a slow, harmless rhythm. Doors on either side bore labels so generic they slid off the mind.

Maintenance.

Storage.

Utility.

Inspection.

Records.

Restroom.

Staff Support.

Nonessential Access.

After the tenth door, Ace stopped.

“No.”

Mai turned. “What?”

“This hallway is trying to become paperwork.”

Mai looked down the corridor.

She had felt it too. The flattening. The subtle reduction of urgency. The sense that nothing ahead required action, that all meaningful decisions had been deferred to departments no longer staffed.

Shammy's face had gone pale in a way that had nothing to do with color.

"The air is losing edges."

Mai pulled out her notebook.

The last three lines had changed.

Not fully.

But enough.

Entered restricted corridor had become **continued routine inspection**.

Evidence of correction process increasing had become **environmental labeling inconsistent**.

Maintain identity anchors had become **maintain professional conduct**.

Mai stared at the page.

Ace looked over her shoulder.

The words continued to crawl.

Ace stabbed the notebook.

Not through Mai's hand. Barely.

The katana tip pinned the page to the clipboard.

The crawling stopped around the puncture.

Mai looked at the blade.

Then at Ace.

"Warn me next time."

"You were being edited."

"I noticed."

"You were staring at it politely."

"I was analyzing."

"You can analyze after stabbing."

Shammy made a small sound that might have been laughter if the corridor had deserved laughter.

Mai pulled the page free carefully, leaving the puncture as an anchor.

"Thank you," she said, tightly.

Ace nodded. "You're welcome, bureaucratically."

Mai gave her a look.

Ace did not regret it.

Shammy stepped closer to both of them. The temperature changed.

Not warmer exactly.

More present.

The stale corridor air gained weight again. Dust became smell. Metal became cold. Ace's boots became pressure against the floor. Mai's breathing became audible.

The hallway's flattening eased.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

"It was making us into visitors."

Mai nodded.

"Visitors leave."

Ace looked ahead.

"We are not visitors."

The corridor lights flickered.

A speaker crackled overhead.

"Personnel without assigned purpose are advised to exit through the nearest available route."

Ace pointed upward.

"See? It agrees with me."

Mai wrote:

SITE ATTEMPT: ASSIGN PURPOSELESSNESS. COUNTERED BY PHYSICAL ANCHOR + ATMOSPHERIC PRESENCE.

The ink held.

Mostly.

They moved on.

At the end of the corridor, they found a sealed blast door.

This one had not corrected its label.

It had been scratched beyond correction.

Hundreds of marks cut through paint, metal, rust, and sealant. Some were words. Some were tally

marks. Some were symbols. Some were just damage inflicted by people who had run out of language and kept using their hands.

In the center, beneath layers of crossing scars, one line remained readable:

IF YOU CAN READ THIS, IT HAS FAILED TO MAKE YOU LEAVE.

Ace smiled.

“Past someone had very good instincts.”

Mai touched the blast door panel.

No power.

No prompt.

No visible route.

Then the panel lit under her hand.

A line of text appeared:

STATE PURPOSE OF ACCESS.

Mai did not answer immediately.

Ace leaned in.

“Don’t say investigation.”

“I know.”

“Don’t say inspection.”

“I know.”

“Don’t say plumbing.”

Mai looked at her.

Ace lifted both hands.

Shammy stepped closer to the panel.

The air around her tightened.

Mai looked at the blast door.

Then at her notebook.

Then at Ace’s katana scar across the last door.

Finally she spoke.

“Contradiction preservation.”

The panel flickered.

Invalid purpose.

Mai said, “Evidence retention.”

Invalid purpose.

Ace folded her arms.

“Try being rude.”

Mai ignored her.

Shammy placed one hand near the panel, not touching.

“The site wants a safe purpose.”

Mai’s eyes sharpened.

Of course.

A safe purpose would be corrected. Inspection. Maintenance. Archive review. Decontamination. Anything that the site could file, dilute, and absorb.

Mai looked at the panel again.

“Our purpose is to determine whether Site-5 can affect Night City.”

The panel went dark.

For three seconds, nothing happened.

Then text appeared.

THERE IS NO SITE-5.

Ace stepped forward.

“And yet,” she said, and drove the katana through the panel.

The blast door unlocked.

A low mechanical boom echoed through the corridor as ancient bolts withdrew one after another.

Mai stared at the ruined panel.

Then at Ace.

Ace smiled.

“You tried structure. I provided punctuation.”

The door opened into darkness.

Cold air rolled out.

This time it carried no salt.

It carried ozone.

Old plastic.

And something faintly sweet underneath, like flowers left too long in a sealed room.

Shammy's expression changed.

Not fear.

Recognition without familiarity.

Mai noticed.

"What is it?"

Shammy looked into the dark beyond the blast door.

"The waiting-shape."

Ace's hand tightened.

"Witchbox?"

Shammy nodded once.

"Maybe."

Ace looked into the darkness.

Every instinct she had, including several that had no business using language, said no.

Not retreat.

Not panic.

No.

A complete refusal before argument.

Mai saw her face.

"Ace?"

Ace did not step across the threshold.

Her voice was low.

"If that thing is in there, I am not going near it."

Mai did not question the refusal.

That mattered.

Instead, she turned her light into the room.

The beam cut through dust.

Rows of containment alcoves emerged from the dark.

Most empty.

One was not.

At the far side of the chamber, inside a nested frame of metal, bone-white ceramic, black glass, and something that made the light bend away at the edges, sat a small black object.

Palm-sized.

Box-like only because the mind needed mercy.

Its seams shifted like closed eyelids.

The label beneath it flickered.

WITCHBOX

Then:

UNCLASSIFIED EXTRADIMENSIONAL RELIQUARY

Then:

NON-FOUNDATION RITUAL OBJECT

Then:

EXTERNAL CONTINUITY HAZARD

Then:

NO OBJECT STORED IN THIS CHAMBER

The object remained.

Ace took one step back.

Not much.

Enough.

Mai's flashlight trembled by a millimeter.

Shammy whispered, "It does not want to open."

Mai's voice was equally quiet.

"Then what does it want?"

Shammy's hair lifted in air that had gone perfectly still.

"To be asked."

The room offered no sound.

No pulse.

No whisper.

No vision.

That was the worst part.

It was polite.

Ace's jaw tightened.

"No."

The Witchbox did nothing.

Which somehow felt like it had heard her.

Mai lowered the flashlight slightly but did not take her eyes off it.

"This is not Foundation."

"No," Shammy said. "Site-5 tried to teach it Foundation."

Ace's voice stayed flat.

"Looks like it learned how to wait instead."

A thin black line appeared across the containment label.

For one second, beneath all corrections, a final classification surfaced:

ORIGIN: EXTERNAL / OKERI-LAYER — DO NOT NEGOTIATE

Then the words vanished.

Mai had already written them down.

The ink did not change.

Ace noticed.

"So it can't edit that?"

Mai looked at the page.

“Or it does not want to.”

“Again, worse.”

“Yes.”

The Witchbox sat in its chamber, contained by restraints that looked less like locks and more like agreements nobody living should sign.

Ace refused to enter.

Mai did not ask her to.

Shammy stood between Ace and the room, not blocking her view, but changing the air enough that the invitation lost shape before it crossed the threshold.

For once, no one made a joke.

After a long moment, Mai closed the chamber door manually.

Slowly.

The Witchbox remained visible until the final centimeter.

Then the door shut.

The label on the outside read:

EMPTY STORAGE

Ace carved one word into the metal.

NO.

The label flickered.

Then stopped.

Shammy exhaled.

Mai looked at the carved word.

“Elegant.”

Ace sheathed her katana.

“Precise.”

Behind the sealed chamber, something did not knock.

That was good.

That was terrible.

They moved on.

The route beyond the Witchbox chamber descended.

Not by stairs.

By a ramp wide enough for heavy containment transport. The walls here were cleaner. Fewer correction labels. Fewer scratches. More silence.

Mai kept glancing at her notebook.

Ace noticed.

"Still there?"

Mai knew what she meant.

"Yes."

"Witchbox?"

"Yes."

"Ok-eri-layer?"

"Yes."

Ace frowned. "Why would that hold?"

Mai's expression stayed troubled.

"Because the site may not fully own that category."

Shammy walked ahead, one hand grazing the air rather than the wall.

"It does not belong to this argument."

Ace looked back toward the chamber they had left behind.

"Lucky thing."

Shammy did not answer.

Mai did.

"For us, maybe."

The ramp ended at another sealed door.

This one still had power.

A small green indicator blinked beneath a scratched label.

CONTINUITY HOLD / PERSONNEL PERSISTENCE

As they watched, the label corrected.

ARCHIVAL STORAGE

Then:

PERSONNEL WELLNESS

Then:

NO ACCESS REQUIRED

Ace stepped closer.

The label switched back to **CONTINUITY HOLD** for half a second.

Long enough.

Mai's face went still.

"This is it."

Ace rolled one shoulder.

"Bright?"

"Maybe."

Shammy stood behind them, eyes fixed on the door.

"The memory is breathing harder here."

Ace gave the door a thin smile.

"Then let's see what it forgot to kill."

The green indicator turned red.

A speaker woke overhead.

This time, the recorded voice was not calm.

It was fractured.

Overlapping.

One layer said:

"Access denied."

Another:

"Authorized personnel only."

Another, deeper and degraded:

“Do not restore without consent.”

Mai froze.

Ace looked at her.

“What?”

Mai did not answer.

The speaker crackled again.

A new voice entered, almost human, almost amused, almost wrong.

“Dr. Jack Bright credentials accepted—”

Static.

“No such personnel assigned to Site-5.”

Static.

“There is no Site-5.”

The door unlocked.

Not open.

Unlocked.

Ace drew both katanas.

Mai lifted her disruptor.

Shammy’s hair rose around her shoulders in pale electric threads.

For a moment, none of them moved.

Then Ace smiled without humor.

“Well.”

Mai’s voice was quiet.

“Do not trust anything that sounds like him.”

Ace looked at her.

“You know him better than me.”

“No,” Mai said. “That is the problem.”

The door opened inward.

Darkness waited beyond it.

Not empty.

Corrected.

And somewhere inside, something old tried to remember a name it had been ordered never to have.

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