

ACT 4 — CORE ARCHIVE

The corridor down to the core did not feel like descent.

It felt like demotion.

That was the only word Mai trusted for it. Every step tried to reduce what had come before into something smaller, safer, less accusatory. The Continuity Hold became an archival anomaly. The personnel purge became a filing error. The Witchbox became empty storage. Their own presence became inspection drift.

The facility was not pushing them out anymore.

It was pushing them downward through categories.

Ace felt it as pressure under the skin.

Not fear.

Not pain.

The maddening sense that if she stopped moving, the site would decide she had never started.

She walked first with both katanas drawn, green light dragging along the walls. Whenever a door label changed too quickly, she cut a line through it. Not deep enough to weaken structure. Deep enough to leave an argument.

Mai followed with the ledger under one arm and the punctured notebook in the other. She no longer trusted her scanner, her optics, the vehicle log, the route history, or any system that could accept a polite correction from a dead facility. Paper, pressure, blade marks, breath — those were winning.

Barely.

Shammy came last.

No, not last.

Around them.

The corridor air had begun trying to flatten again, to become HVAC, air quality, environmental reading, background condition. Shammy refused it without spectacle. Every few meters she stopped, placed two fingers against the wall, and made the air remember temperature. Salt. Dust. Human breath. Skin warmth. The tiny pressure shifts of three people who were not maintenance, not visitors, not data drift.

Present.

The word mattered now.

Mai had written it across the front of the notebook in thick black strokes.

PRESENT.

The correction had tried once to turn it into **PROCESSED**.

Ace had stabbed the letter O out of the word.

It had stopped trying.

For now.

The red emergency lights strobed at long intervals. Between flashes, the corridor became a tunnel of black metal and old warning paint. In each red pulse, more scratches appeared on the walls. Not because they were new. Because the site only admitted them when illuminated by emergency logic.

DON'T LET IT SUMMARIZE YOU

ROOMS ARE NOT EMPTY IF SOMEONE DIED THERE

THE MAP IS A NEGOTIATION

IF THE SYSTEM AGREES TOO QUICKLY, RUN

Ace read that last one and snorted.

"Past someone continues to have good instincts."

Mai looked at the wall.

The scratches trembled.

The correction tried to soften **DIED** into **DEPARTED**.

Ace cut through the attempted word before it completed.

"Do not be polite at corpses," she said.

Shammy's voice came from behind them, quiet and approving.

"That may be the most accurate thing you have said today."

"I say accurate things constantly."

Mai did not look back.

"You say actionable things constantly. Accuracy varies."

Ace smiled despite the corridor.

Good.

They were still themselves.

The site noticed.

A speaker ahead clicked on.

Not overhead this time.

Inside the wall.

A close voice. Local.

“Unauthorized entities are approaching restricted mechanical archive. Please return to assigned role.”

Ace stopped walking.

Mai stopped because Ace did.

Shammy stopped because the air did.

Ace looked at the nearest speaker grille.

“No.”

Silence.

Then:

“Assigned role prevents distress.”

Ace lifted one katana.

Mai said, “Wait.”

Ace paused, blade already high.

Mai looked at the speaker.

“Assigned role prevents accountability.”

The corridor lights flickered.

The speaker crackled.

“Accountability increases distress.”

Ace turned her head slowly toward Mai.

Mai’s expression did not change.

But Ace knew that look.

That was Mai seeing the throat.

The voice continued:

“Distress increases instability. Instability increases containment failure. Containment failure increases loss. Loss increases denial requirement.”

Mai whispered, “There.”

Shammy moved closer.

The air tightened.

Mai spoke to the speaker.

“Denial requirement is not containment.”

Static.

“Denial requirement prevents spread.”

“Spread of what?”

Static again.

Longer.

Then the voice answered, not as an announcement now but as something reading from the bottom layer of its own wound.

“Hazardous continuity.”

Ace’s grip tightened.

Mai’s eyes flicked toward the ledger under her arm.

“Define hazardous continuity.”

The speaker answered immediately.

“Any identity, object, event, site, process, record, memory, or causal chain whose preservation increases existential, memetic, ontological, political, institutional, or operational risk beyond acceptable thresholds.”

Ace stared.

“I hate that sentence.”

Mai did not blink.

“It is not wrong enough.”

“That makes me hate it more.”

Shammy’s hair lifted slightly.

“The site believes survival requires forgetting.”

Mai’s voice was low.

“No. It believes forgetting is a form of survival.”

The speaker clicked.

“Correct.”

No one moved.

That was the first time the facility had agreed with them.

Ace raised both blades again.

The wall in front of them split open.

Not a door they had missed.

A wall becoming a door because its purpose had been forced into confession.

Beyond it, the red lights ended.

White light flooded out.

Clean.

Too clean.

Mai stepped through first this time.

Ace let her.

The Core Archive was enormous.

Not tall like a tower. Deep like a vault trying to become a thought.

It spread beneath the facility in concentric rings of metal walkways, physical stacks, server columns, sealed document wells, mechanical memory drums, analog recording racks, and thick black cables running into the floor like roots. Some sections were dead. Some burned. Some were submerged under shallow saltwater that had no source. Some continued working with the stubborn indifference of old machines that had outlived their operators and resented the competition.

At the center stood two vertical systems facing each other across a circular gap.

One was an archive pillar: black metal, glass-fronted, filled with reels, drives, binders, sealed amulet cases, handwritten ledgers, printed photographs, and objects too small to see clearly.

The other was a correction engine.

Mai knew it instantly without understanding its construction.

It was not one machine. It was a stack of administrative violence built from computation, memetics, ritual architecture, and institutional fear. Screens circled it in bands. Stamps and mechanical arms hung from its sides. Old printer ribbons fed into digital ports. Foundation seals had been bolted over older symbols, then scratched away, then reprinted, then corrected into blank circles.

Between the two systems, suspended over the circular gap, was a single sentence repeated in layers of light, ink, tape, projection, and carved metal:

PRESERVE HAZARDOUS CONTINUITY

Over it, through it, around it:

DENY HAZARDOUS CONTINUITY

The two directives overlapped until the chamber seemed built from the collision.

Ace exhaled.

“So this place is arguing with itself.”

Mai’s face was pale in the white light.

“Yes.”

Shammy stepped to the edge of the central gap and looked down.

The darkness below moved like water.

Not actual water.

A black reflective surface far beneath them, holding the lights in broken strips.

“The argument has been breathing for a long time,” she said.

Mai looked at the archive pillar.

“Too long.”

They moved along the outer walkway.

Every step triggered panels.

Some showed facility maps.

Some showed personnel rosters.

Some showed lists of contained objects, then denied the lists before the eye could settle.

Some displayed the same reminder:

Personnel are to be reminded that there is no Site-5.

On one screen, the sentence had been printed so many times it formed a gray field.

On another, someone had carved over the screen with a physical tool:

THEN WHY ARE YOU STILL TALKING?

Ace pointed at it.

“I like them.”

Mai barely heard her.

She had found the exit feeds.

Not doors.

Data routes.

The correction engine still had outbound pathways. Most were dead, severed, or looped back into the facility. But three remained active in degraded form.

One went to nowhere — a collapsed Foundation network endpoint that likely no longer existed.

One went inward — a recursive loop through Site-5's own physical archive.

The third—

Mai's stomach dropped.

"Rogue."

Ace turned.

"What?"

Mai moved to the console without touching it. The display tried to relabel itself as **LOCAL WEATHER DIAGNOSTIC**.

Mai opened the ledger and slapped it against the metal casing.

The relabeling stopped halfway.

LOCAL WEATH— / EXTERNAL REFERENCE CHANNEL

Ace came close.

"Say that in better words."

Mai's voice was controlled.

"When Rogue received the physical report, it became an external reference."

"That sounds expected."

"Yes."

Mai pointed to the active pathway.

"When she separated original and copy, she created comparison state."

Ace stared.

Mai looked at her.

"The site can see the disagreement."

Shammy moved behind them.

"And it wants to correct it."

Mai nodded.

Ace's expression emptied.

"Toward the Afterlife?"

"Toward any system that acknowledges the Site-5 materials as a contradiction."

"Night City."

"Yes."

The word entered the core like a key turning.

The correction engine woke more fully.

Screens lit in a cascade around the chamber.

EXTERNAL REFERENCE DETECTED

CONTRADICTION PROPAGATION RISK

CORRECTION EXPORT AVAILABLE

DENIAL REQUIREMENT: EXPAND

Ace smiled without warmth.

"Good. It heard us."

Mai looked at the export pathway.

"It may have already begun."

At the Afterlife, the original envelope moved.

Not visibly at first.

Rogue noticed because nothing on her table moved without permission.

The envelope sat inside a locked physical drawer under her booth, separated from the copy by three walls, two human couriers, and one bartender with instructions not to get clever.

It should have remained paper.

Instead, the drawer clicked.

Once.

Rogue stopped mid-sentence.

The merc across from her noticed and immediately regretted being in the meeting.

Rogue raised one hand.

He stopped talking.

The drawer clicked again.

Rogue did not open it.

She stood.

That alone changed the room.

The Afterlife adjusted around her, conversations lowering by instinct. She walked behind the booth, accessed a wall panel, and opened the drawer remotely with a mechanical override while standing two meters away.

Inside, the envelope had changed.

The front now read:

CHEMICAL STORAGE ANNEX INCIDENT REPORT

Rogue stared at it.

Then at the second envelope across the room, visible under glass on the bar where she had ordered it kept apart.

That one still read:

SITE-5 / SCP FOUNDATION — COPY

For now.

The first envelope shuddered.

The words crawled.

NO SITE ORIGIN

Rogue's face did not move.

She took out her comm.

It produced static.

Then a calm recorded voice said:

"Thank you for contacting municipal environmental services. There is no active incident at your location."

Rogue looked at the comm.

Very slowly, she smiled.

It was not a good smile.

She said to the bartender, "Analog line."

He moved instantly.

The club screens flickered.

For half a second, every muted sports feed, news crawl, ad loop, and merc leaderboard displayed:

THERE IS NO SITE-5

Then the screens corrected to normal.

No one in the room spoke.

Rogue looked across the club.

The bartender handed her an old wired handset from beneath the bar.

She picked it up.

“Mai,” she said into the dead line, “your building is knocking.”

Mai’s analog receiver crackled.

Not the digital comm.

The old emergency line Rogue had insisted on establishing after Mr Fate because spite sometimes produced useful infrastructure.

Mai snatched the handset from her belt.

Rogue’s voice came through thin and warped.

“Your building is knocking.”

Mai closed her eyes briefly.

Of course.

Ace leaned in.

“Is that Rogue?”

Mai nodded.

Rogue continued.

“My envelope is correcting. Club screens flashed your line.”

Mai’s jaw tightened.

“Do not allow the correction to consolidate.”

“That sounds like something I pay you to translate.”

“Keep contradictory physical records visible and separate. Do not let any single label become dominant.”

“Already doing that.”

“Good.”

Rogue’s voice hardened.

“Can it reach beyond the club?”

Mai looked at the correction export pathway.

“Yes.”

The line went quiet.

Not dead.

Thinking.

Rogue said, “How long?”

“I do not know.”

“Unacceptable answer.”

“Accurate answer.”

Rogue exhaled.

“Fix it.”

The line crackled.

Then another voice cut across it.

Not Rogue.

Calm. Administrative. Site-5.

“External civilian stakeholder is not assigned to current incident.”

Ace looked at the handset.

“Oh, absolutely not.”

Rogue’s voice returned, colder than before.

“What was that?”

Mai said, “Do not engage with it.”

“I was not planning to negotiate with a filing cabinet.”

The Site voice continued through the line:

“Stakeholder concern logged. No further action required.”

Rogue said, "Mai."

"Yes?"

"I am going to shoot the phone."

"Do not shoot the phone."

Ace whispered, "Let her shoot the phone."

Mai covered the receiver with one hand.

"No."

Shammy touched Mai's shoulder lightly.

"The line is becoming a bridge."

Mai nodded.

Into the receiver, she said, "Rogue. Hang up after I say the next sentence. Then physically mark both envelopes with different phrases. Make the contradiction impossible to reconcile."

Rogue said, "Phrases?"

Mai looked at Ace.

Ace understood instantly and grinned.

Mai said, "On the original, write: **This exists**. On the copy, write: **This lies**."

A pause.

Rogue said, "I like your girlfriend's influence."

Mai did not have time to answer that.

The Site voice cut in:

"Contradictory labeling increases distress."

Rogue said, "Good."

The line died.

Mai lowered the receiver.

Ace looked pleased.

Shammy looked toward the correction engine.

"It did not like her."

"Most systems eventually don't," Ace said.

Mai refocused on the export pathway.

“We need to sever this before it finds a cleaner route.”

Ace looked at the massive cable roots sinking into the floor.

“Finally.”

Mai held up one hand.

“Not randomly.”

Ace looked wounded.

“I am a precision instrument.”

“You are a precision instrument with opinions.”

“Better.”

Mai studied the chamber.

The correction engine did not run like a normal system. It had digital computation, but also physical redundancy. Printed tapes. Mechanical stamps. Ink reels. Ritual loops. Foundation seals. Handwritten directives preserved under glass. It was designed by people who feared that one method of memory could fail, so they built too many.

And then made them disagree forever.

Mai moved along the console ring, reading without letting herself be absorbed.

DENIAL EXPORT CHANNELS

MEMETIC COMPRESSION

DOCUMENT CORRECTION

PERSONNEL ROLE REASSIGNMENT

MAP DISPLACEMENT

CASUALTY NON-RECOGNITION

CONTINUITY RISK SUPPRESSION

Ace followed, face darkening line by line.

“This thing is evil.”

Mai answered automatically. “It is not moral.”

“That is not a defense.”

“No.”

Shammy stood near the central gap, watching the two directives flicker above it.

"It is afraid."

Ace turned.

Shammy did not look at her.

"The site is afraid of what it holds. Afraid of what happens if anything remains too clearly. Afraid of what happens if anyone remembers the wrong thing."

Mai's voice softened by one degree.

"Fear does not excuse the outcome."

"No," Shammy said. "But it explains why the outcome learned to sound reasonable."

Ace looked at the correction engine.

The voice returned through the chamber speakers.

"Risk reduction preserves population integrity."

Ace stepped closer to a speaker.

"You erase people."

"Unverified identity continuity increases cascade risk."

"You erase people."

"Terminology inaccurate."

Ace lifted one katana.

Mai did not stop her.

Ace cut the speaker in half.

Sparks fell.

"Terminology updated," Ace said.

Another speaker, farther away, clicked on.

"Violence logged as unauthorized security behavior."

Ace smiled.

"That one I'll allow."

The correction engine screens began updating again.

This time with their names.

Not just names.

Profiles.

ACE — Unauthorized Security Asset / Anomalous Combat Function / Blade-Linked Disruption Risk

The profile tried to simplify further:

Weapon

Mai saw Ace's shoulder move.

Not much.

Enough.

Mai stepped close and wrote across the nearest paper strip feeding into the machine:

ACE IS NOT A WEAPON.

The machine corrected:

ACE IS NOT ASSIGNED PERSONNEL.

Mai wrote:

ACE IS PRESENT.

Ace said nothing.

That mattered more than jokes would have.

Another profile formed:

MAI — Systems Analyst / Correction Interference / Documentation Hostility

Then:

Analyst

Then:

Interface

Then:

Tool

Ace stabbed that strip so hard the metal feeder bent.

"No."

Mai looked at the blade through the word.

Ace did not look at her.

The third profile came:

SHAMATERAZU — Atmospheric Irregularity / Environmental Stabilization Hazard / Non-Personnel Pressure Event

Then:

Weather

The chamber air went still.

Shammy looked at the word.

Not angry.

That was worse.

When Shammy was angry, the air became obvious. This was quieter. The kind of quiet before barometric collapse.

She stepped to the console.

The word **Weather** began to frost at the edges of the display.

Not ice.

Condensation forming from nowhere because the room had forgotten that atmosphere was not a label.

Shammy's voice was calm.

"I am not your background condition."

The display cracked.

The profile vanished.

The correction engine hesitated.

All around the chamber, mechanical arms froze mid-stamp.

Printer heads stopped.

Tape reels slowed.

Mai saw the opening.

"There."

Ace looked.

Mai pointed to the lower ring of cables feeding toward the export channel.

"The external correction pathway requires identity classification to route safely. We disrupted classification. Now we sever before it rebuilds."

Ace was already moving.

She vaulted the first guard rail and landed on a lower maintenance ring with a metallic crash. The ring shook, rust flakes raining into the dark gap below. She ran along the curved walkway toward the cable junction.

A security shutter dropped in front of her.

Ace cut through it without slowing.

The shutter fell in two pieces.

A second shutter dropped.

Then a third.

Ace smiled.

"Oh, good. You are learning slowly."

Mai worked from the upper console, trying to identify which cables were real pathways and which were decoys the correction engine had just classified into existence. Half the labels lied. A third corrected as she read them. Two tried to become "inactive drainage."

Shammy stood between both levels and kept the air stable enough that Mai's eyes did not lose contrast.

The site fought.

Not with drones.

Not with guards.

With process.

The walkway under Ace changed its designation from **maintenance ring** to **restricted void cover**.

Bolts retracted.

The ring tilted.

Ace dug one katana into the wall and swung with the motion, boots skidding across metal as the section dropped beneath her. She landed on a cable bundle thicker than her torso.

It held.

For one second.

Mai shouted, "Left junction!"

Ace looked left.

Three identical junction housings sat along the wall.

All marked:

INACTIVE

Mai saw the labels change.

“Not the labels! The one with salt corrosion around the lower seam!”

Ace grinned.

“Physical evidence wins.”

She drove both katanas into the left housing and pulled outward.

The casing resisted with Foundation-grade stubbornness.

Ace set her feet against the wall.

Pulled harder.

The metal screamed.

The correction engine voice returned, distorted now.

“External correction prevents hazardous site recognition.”

Ace pulled.

“Hazardous recognition prevents recurrence.”

Pulled.

“Denial preserves operational security.”

Pulled.

“You talk too much.”

The casing tore free.

Inside, braided cables pulsed with white light.

Not electricity only.

Text moved along them.

Tiny correction strings racing outward.

NO SITE

NO INCIDENT

NO PERSONNEL

NO ARRIVAL

NO WITNESS

NO—

Ace cut.

The first cable snapped and lashed like a live snake, striking sparks from the wall.

The chamber shook.

Mai grabbed the console edge.

Shammy lifted one hand, and air pressure slammed the loose cable against the floor before it could hit Ace.

Ace cut again.

Second cable.

Third.

The white light flickered.

The export pathway display stuttered.

EXTERNAL ROUTE DEGRADED

Mai exhaled.

“Again!”

Ace looked at the remaining bundle.

A new label appeared over it:

STRUCTURAL SUPPORT — DO NOT SEVER

Ace laughed.

“Cute.”

She cut it.

The correction engine screamed.

Not audio.

Every screen in the core flashed white.

The overhead directives spun:

PRESERVE

DENY

PRESERVE

DENY

PRESERVE

DENY

Then the archive pillar opened.

Not physically.

Conceptually.

Mai felt it before she saw it.

Every preserved record in the pillar tried to become visible at once.

Photos. Names. Object files. chamber logs. O5 directives. hazard inventories. containment rosters. personnel deaths. transfer failures. 963-related warnings. Witchbox non-negotiation protocols. site maps. casualty counts. contradictory 001 references. things that should not share a shelf. things that should not be written at all.

Too much.

Mr Fate had been too much exposure through a city's hunger.

This was too much exposure through a dying institution's fear.

Mai staggered.

Ace shouted her name from below, but the sound arrived late.

The archive pillar flooded her with the shape of every record Site-5 had tried to preserve and deny simultaneously.

A thousand labels.

A thousand losses.

A thousand arguments.

The ledger under Mai's arm opened by itself, pages flipping in a wind that had no direction.

Ink began writing across every blank space:

PRESERVE ALL

DENY ALL

PRESERVE ALL

DENY ALL

Mai's vision narrowed.

For half a second, the easiest answer became obvious.

Too obvious.

Let it erase.

Let it stop.

Let everything that could hurt Night City disappear before it reached anyone.

Missing people.

Corporate crimes.

Anomalous leftovers.

Foundation wounds.

The Witchbox.

The 963 failure.

The site.

The risk.

The responsibility.

No Site-5.

No problem.

Ace's voice cut through.

"Mai!"

Not from the comm.

From below.

Physical.

Angry.

Present.

Mai gripped the console until her fingers hurt.

Pain helped.

She looked at the ledger.

The words kept crawling.

Preserve all. Deny all.

Both wrong.

Both fatal.

She took the pen.

Her hand shook once.

Then stopped.

She wrote across the page:

SELECTIVE MEMORY IS NOT SAFETY. TOTAL ERASURE IS NOT CONTAINMENT. TOTAL PRESERVATION IS NOT MERCY.

The archive surge faltered.

Not enough.

Mai wrote again, harder:

LOCAL CONTRADICTION LOCK REQUIRED.

The correction engine reacted instantly.

INVALID STATE

Mai smiled.

Very slightly.

“Good.”

She wrote:

INVALID DOES NOT MEAN IMPOSSIBLE.

Ace, still below, looked up through the railing.

“Mai?”

Mai’s eyes were bright now.

Not with power.

With terrible clarity.

“We do not destroy it.”

Ace stared.

Mai continued.

“We do not restore it.”

The correction engine shuddered.

Shammy stepped closer to Mai, one hand hovering near her back but not touching yet.

Mai looked at the central gap between archive and correction.

“We make it keep arguing here.”

Ace’s smile returned slowly.

“That sounds cruel.”

“Yes.”

“To the site?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

The archive pillar surged again, but this time Shammy was ready.

She placed both hands on the upper rail and exhaled.

The chamber air moved inward.

Not wind.

Breath.

A single pressure rhythm spread through the core, through walkway, console, paper, cable, dust, salt, and cracked glass. It did not calm the archive. It gave the chaos shape long enough for Mai to work.

Ace cut the last export cable.

The external pathway died.

At the Afterlife, every screen went black for exactly one second.

Then came back normal.

Rogue, standing over the two envelopes, watched the words stabilize.

On the original:

THIS EXISTS.

On the copy:

THIS LIES.

Neither changed.

Rogue looked at the bartender.

“Keep staring at them.”

He nodded.

Then, after a second, “For how long?”

Rogue did not look away from the envelopes.

“Until I stop being irritated.”

He swallowed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

In the core, the loss of the export pathway made the site angrier.

That was the only word Ace liked for it.

The correction engine dropped all pretense of helpfulness.

Every speaker in the chamber spoke at once:

"Containment integrity compromised."

"External denial unavailable."

"Hazardous continuity unresolved."

"Archive exposure risk unacceptable."

"Corrective collapse initiated."

Mai looked up.

"What does that mean?"

Ace shouted from below, "I vote bad!"

The central gap opened wider.

Mechanical plates withdrew in a spiral, revealing the black reflective surface far below.

It was not water.

Mai understood that too late.

It was ink.

A reservoir.

Not metaphorical. Real. Black preservation ink threaded with memetic correction substrate, ritual binding, Foundation sealant, and whatever else Site-5 had used to make denial printable, repeatable, exportable.

The reservoir began rising.

Slowly.

Too slowly to be a flood.

Fast enough to be intention.

Where the black surface touched lower structures, labels vanished. Not changed. Vanished. Metal became unmarked. Walkways became featureless. Cable housings became smooth. A maintenance ladder became blank geometry with no implied use.

Ace looked down.

"Oh, I really hate that."

Mai scanned the chamber.

If the ink reached the archive pillar, preservation and denial would collapse into one outcome: blank continuity. Not contained. Not exported. Just null.

Site-5 would become something simpler and worse.

A hole where proof went to die.

Shammy's face tightened.

"That substance has no breath."

Ace looked up at her.

"That is scientifically upsetting."

"It is not trying to kill air. It is ignoring the idea that air matters."

Mai's voice sharpened.

"Then we need to keep it below the archive."

Ace looked at the rising ink.

"How?"

Mai looked at the two central systems.

Archive.

Correction.

Preserve.

Deny.

Then at the walkway scars Ace had left, the ledger in her hand, Shammy's pressure rhythm holding the chamber together, the severed export cables, the frozen 963 state, the Witchbox notation that would not change.

The answer was ugly.

Of course.

"We need a physical contradiction loop."

Ace climbed back toward the upper level, fast and furious.

"Words."

Mai pointed to the archive pillar and correction engine.

"They are arguing through systems. We make them argue through physical damage instead. Something neither side can fully classify."

Ace's eyes brightened.

"Damage I can do."

"Yes."

"Finally a love language."

Mai almost smiled.

No time.

She pointed to three structural bridges between the archive pillar and correction engine.

"Do not destroy all of them. Cut each halfway through, then mark them differently."

Ace paused.

"Halfway."

"Yes."

"That is offensive."

"Precision instrument."

Ace gave her a look.

"Cruel."

"Accurate."

Ace moved.

Shammy stepped toward the rising ink.

Mai caught her arm.

"No."

Shammy looked at her.

Mai's voice softened without losing urgency.

"You cannot push that back directly."

"I know."

"You were going to try anyway."

Shammy's mouth curved faintly.

"I am also present."

Mai held her gaze.

"Stay that way."

For one second, the core, the site, the rising ink, the impossible machinery all receded.

Shammy touched Mai's hand briefly.

"I will."

Then she turned toward the chamber and did the thing she could do without becoming weapon.

She made the air count.

Every breath.

Every pressure shift.

Every temperature gradient.

Every dust mote.

Every living presence in the core became heavier in the room's logic than the blank ink below. It did not stop the reservoir. But the ink slowed when it reached the level where Shammy's field made absence expensive.

Ace cut the first bridge halfway through.

The archive side labeled the wound:

DAMAGE

The correction side labeled it:

ACCESS BLOCKAGE

Ace carved underneath both:

NO.

Second bridge.

Half cut.

Archive side:

PRESERVED LINK

Correction side:

FAILED LINK

Ace carved:

BOTH.

Third bridge.

This one fought back. Mechanical arms deployed from the correction engine, stamping strips of paper

over the cut as she made it.

REPAIRED

REPAIRED

REPAIRED

Ace cut through the stamps.

“Stop lying while I’m working.”

She cut halfway.

Mai shouted, “Mark it!”

Ace carved without asking:

PENDING

The chamber stopped.

Not quiet.

Stopped.

The rising ink held just below the lower archive ring.

The overhead directives flickered.

PRESERVE

DENY

PRESERVE

DENY

Then a third word appeared between them.

Small.

Handwritten first in light.

Then scratched into the air by system trying to understand damage.

PENDING

Mai moved to the main console and opened the physical ledger one last time.

The correction engine tried to close it.

Ace threw a severed cable through the nearest mechanical arm.

Shammy held the air steady.

Mai wrote:

SITE-5 LOCAL CONTRADICTION LOCK ESTABLISHED.

The ledger trembled.

She continued.

HAZARDOUS CONTINUITY NOT EXPORTED.

The correction engine sparked.

SITE EXISTENCE NOT GLOBALLY VERIFIED.

The archive pillar dimmed.

SITE NONEXISTENCE NOT ACCEPTED.

The rising ink shivered.

STATUS: CONTAINED DISPUTE.

The core alarm died.

Not abruptly.

It ran out of authority.

For a long moment, the only sound was the drip of saltwater somewhere in the walls and the soft hiss of severed cables cooling.

The white lights dimmed to red.

The archive pillar closed its visible layers.

The correction engine froze mid-cycle, stamps suspended, screens holding contradictory labels without resolving them.

Above the central gap, the directives remained:

**PRESERVE HAZARDOUS CONTINUITY
DENY HAZARDOUS CONTINUITY
PENDING**

Ace climbed back to the upper walkway, breathing hard but smiling.

"That was disgusting."

Mai leaned against the console.

"Yes."

"Effective?"

"For now."

“Good. I like disgusting and effective.”

Shammy lowered her hands.

The air sagged with exhaustion.

Ace noticed first and caught her elbow before she swayed.

Shammy blinked at her.

“I am fine.”

Ace looked up at her.

“You are tall. You have farther to fall. Be fine slower.”

Mai made a sound that might have been laughter if she had more energy left.

The core speakers clicked.

All three went still.

A voice emerged.

Not the administrative one.

Not the wrong Bright voice.

Not the continuity process.

This was older. Damaged. Human only in fragments.

“Local lock... acknowledged.”

Mai straightened.

The voice continued.

“External correction... unavailable.”

Static.

“Site-5 remains...”

The correction engine fought the sentence.

The archive pillar fought back.

The speaker crackled.

“Site-5 remains disputed.”

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai nodded slowly.

“That is acceptable.”

The voice degraded.

“Personnel... present.”

Shammy’s eyes softened by one impossible degree.

Ace looked toward the speaker, then the core, then the ink held below.

“Damn right.”

The chamber lights flickered once.

A final line appeared across the main console:

EXIT ROUTE AVAILABLE. NO PURPOSE ASSIGNED.

Ace raised an eyebrow.

“That sounds like a trap.”

Mai read it again.

Then smiled faintly.

“No. That is the site failing to classify why we are leaving.”

Shammy looked toward the corridor.

“Then we should leave before it learns.”

Ace sheathed one katana.

Kept the other drawn.

“Finally, a plan with broad appeal.”

They turned from the core.

Behind them, the impossible machinery remained locked in its new wound.

Not solved.

Not healed.

Not erased.

Arguing.

For now, that would have to be enough.

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