

# ACT 5 — DIRTY CONTAINMENT

Leaving was worse than entering.

Ace had expected that, which did not make it less irritating.

Entering had been an argument with a place that wanted to deny itself.

Leaving was an argument with a place that had learned them.

The corridor outside the core no longer looked the same. Not fully. The red emergency lights remained, but the scratches along the walls had changed density, like some had become embarrassed and withdrawn. The warning lines were still there, but several had softened at the edges.

**DON'T LET IT SUMMARIZE YOU** had become:

**DO NOT ACCEPT SUMMARY WITHOUT DAMAGE**

Ace stopped in front of it.

Mai nearly walked into her.

"What?"

Ace pointed.

Mai read the line.

Her eyes narrowed.

"That changed."

"Yes."

"Meaning?"

Ace looked down the corridor.

"It is learning our language."

Shammy stood behind them, one hand lightly against the wall. Her breathing had steadied, but the effort in her face had not completely faded. She looked less like she had spent power and more like she had spent weather.

"The site is not only correcting now," she said. "It is adapting."

Mai opened the ledger.

The final line from the core still held:

**STATUS: CONTAINED DISPUTE.**

Under it, a new sentence had appeared in smaller handwriting.

Not hers.

Not printed.

Not entirely foreign.

**Containment accepts local contradiction. Personnel may exit.**

Ace read it.

"No."

Mai looked at her.

Ace tapped the page with one fingertip.

"Too agreeable."

Mai nodded slowly.

"Yes."

Shammy's eyes moved toward the corridor ahead.

"It is offering a safe shape."

That was not comfort.

The facility had tried to make them visitors. Then inspectors. Then roles. Then non-personnel. Now it was offering something more dangerous: successful operators.

People who had done a job, reached a resolution, and could leave because the story was finished.

Ace hated finished stories offered by hostile buildings.

She looked at Mai.

"What did we actually do?"

Mai answered without hesitation, which meant she had been asking herself the same thing.

"We severed the external correction pathway. We created a local contradiction lock between preservation and denial. We prevented immediate propagation toward Night City."

"Did we contain Site-5?"

"No."

"Did we solve 963?"

"No."

"Did we classify the Witchbox?"

“No.”

“Did we recover full personnel records?”

Mai’s jaw tightened.

“No.”

Ace looked back at the ledger.

“Then anyone saying ‘personnel may exit’ is being cute.”

Shammy smiled faintly.

“That may be the first time bureaucracy has been accused of flirting.”

Ace glanced at her.

“If it flirts again, I’m cutting deeper.”

Mai wrote beneath the unauthorized sentence:

**EXIT DOES NOT IMPLY COMPLETION.**

The ink held.

The ledger trembled once.

Then stilled.

The corridor lights dimmed by a fraction, as if the facility had decided sulking was a valid operational state.

Ace smiled.

“Better.”

They moved upward.

---

The Continuity Hold door was closed when they reached it.

Its label read:

**EMPTY ROOM**

Under that, still scratched from the inside:

**PENDING.**

The word had not changed.

Mai stopped.

Ace did too.

Shammy stepped closer to the door and rested two fingers against the metal.

No lights came on. No speaker woke. No wrong Bright voice slid through the seams with borrowed humor. The door remained closed and silent.

That silence was not peace.

It was restraint enforced by damage.

Mai placed one hand on the ledger.

"I am not opening it again."

Ace nodded. "Good."

Shammy's fingers stayed on the door.

"Something inside is no longer asking to be answered."

Mai looked at her.

"Better?"

"Not better." Shammy lowered her hand. "Less cruel."

Ace accepted that as the best kind of answer they were likely to get.

As they turned away, the door label flickered.

For one second:

**BRIGHT PROTOCOL: DO NOT RESTORE WITHOUT CONSENT**

Then back:

**EMPTY ROOM**

Then:

**PENDING**

Mai did not write it down.

Ace noticed.

Mai looked at the door one last time.

"I already have enough."

That was not true in the factual sense.

It was true in the survival sense.

They kept walking.

---

The Witchbox chamber waited exactly where they had left it.

Ace had hoped, irrationally and with full awareness of the irrationality, that the corridor might route around it on the way out.

It did not.

Of course it did not.

The sealed door stood on the left side of the descending corridor, now ascending from their direction. Ace's carved word remained on the metal.

**NO.**

The label above it read:

**EMPTY STORAGE**

Then:

**NON-ESSENTIAL STORAGE**

Then:

**NO OBJECT STORED**

Then, almost reluctantly:

**NO.**

Mai stopped walking.

Ace looked at her.

"No."

Mai lifted one hand. "I did not say anything."

"You were thinking."

"I do that."

"You were thinking near the Witchbox."

"That is not yet a crime."

Ace pointed at the carved word.

"It is under review."

Shammy looked at the door with a complicated expression.

Not fear.

Respect, maybe.

Dislike with boundaries.

The air near the chamber was still too still. Not dead. Patient. The kind of stillness that made a person aware of their own capacity to make a mistake.

Mai did not approach the door.

But she did open the notebook.

Ace's eyes narrowed.

Mai said, "I am only checking the note."

"Out loud."

Mai gave her a look.

Ace stared back.

Mai sighed through her nose and read the page.

"Origin: external / Okeri-layer — do not negotiate."

The words remained.

No correction.

No crawl.

No substitution.

Mai frowned.

"This entry is still stable."

Ace folded her arms.

"You sound bothered."

"I am."

"Because the murder building cannot erase it?"

"Because I do not know whether that means the Witchbox is resistant, irrelevant, or allowing the record to remain for its own reasons."

Shammy's voice was very soft.

"It likes being known by the right refusal."

Ace looked at her.

"That sentence is not allowed to be accurate."

Shammy did not smile.

This time, that made it worse.

A small sound came from behind the door.

Not a knock.

Not a scrape.

A click.

Like a latch deciding not to open.

Ace drew one katana.

The door remained shut.

The carved **NO** glowed faintly green from reflected blade-light.

Mai closed the notebook.

"We leave it."

Ace did not take her eyes off the door.

"Yes."

"No sample."

"Yes."

"No further classification attempt."

"Yes."

"No later curiosity."

Ace glanced at Mai then.

"That one was for you."

Mai's mouth tightened.

"I know."

Shammy stepped between them and the door, not blocking, only balancing the air.

"The right containment is sometimes not making a relationship."

Ace lowered the blade slightly.

"Exactly. No relationship with the creepy polite box."

The label flickered once more.

## **NO OBJECT STORED**

Then beneath it, in tiny letters that had not been there before:

## **NO AGREEMENT REACHED**

Ace stared.

Mai stared.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

Ace carved under it:

## **GOOD.**

The door stopped changing.

They left quickly after that.

Not running.

Running would have implied the Witchbox had won a kind of pursuit.

They simply refused to remain available.

---

The paper archive had changed.

When they reached the file cabinet room, the door label still read:

## **NO ROOM ASSIGNED**

But Ace's katana scar across the metal remained, and because it remained, the room remained just enough.

Inside, the rows of cabinets were quieter.

The ledger shelf had collapsed.

Several drawers had sealed themselves shut.

A few stood open, empty.

Mai entered slowly.

Ace followed, watching the corners.

Shammy paused at the threshold and kept one hand against the frame, as if holding the room in place by acknowledging its boundary.

Mai went to the desk where they had found the physical retention log.

The desk was bare.

Ace saw her face.

“What?”

“The first ledger is gone.”

Ace looked at the pouch under Mai’s arm.

“You have ours.”

“Yes.”

“Does that count?”

Mai looked at the empty desk.

“It has to.”

That hurt more than it should have.

Ace did not like watching Mai accept incomplete evidence. Mai was good at incompleteness when she had to be, but she hated it the way Ace hated locked doors that smiled.

A drawer near the desk slid open.

All three turned.

Inside lay a single metal tag.

No folder. No note. No dramatic glow.

Just a corroded identification tag, rectangular, heavy, Foundation-issue by shape if not by readable markings.

Mai did not pick it up.

Ace did.

The moment her fingers closed around it, the room lights flickered.

The tag tried to become blank.

Ace pressed her thumb hard into its surface.

The metal edge cut skin.

One drop of blood ran across the corroded face.

Letters emerged under it.

Not all.

Enough.

**SITE-5**  
**FOUNDATION**  
**PERS—**

The rest was gone.

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai looked at the tag.

“No.”

Ace’s expression did not change.

“We need something touchable.”

“It is contaminated.”

“So are we.”

“Ace.”

“If every clean record lies, we bring back a dirty one.”

Mai had an answer.

Then did not use it.

Because Ace was right.

Not safely right.

Not comfortably right.

But right.

Shammy stepped closer and looked at the tag in Ace’s hand.

“It wants to be either erased or archived.”

Ace closed her fist around it.

“It can be evidence instead.”

Mai stared for another second.

Then she took out a strip of cloth, wrapped the tag without touching it directly, and tied it tight.

“Keep it on you. Not in a bag. Not in a device. Physical contact seems to slow correction.”

Ace looked at her bleeding thumb.

“Noted.”

Mai’s eyes softened by a fraction.

"Also, do not bleed on every artifact we need to preserve."

"It worked."

"That is not a methodology."

"It is absolutely a methodology. Primitive, but peer-reviewed by the room."

Shammy made a tiny sound.

Mai tried not to smile.

Failed slightly.

Good.

Ace tucked the wrapped tag inside her jacket.

Against skin.

The tag was cold.

Too cold.

But it stayed.

The archive room label changed as they exited.

## **PAPER STORAGE**

Then:

## **EMPTY STORAGE**

Then:

## **EVIDENCE ROOM**

Then it stuck there.

Mai stopped and looked back.

Ace followed her gaze.

The label held.

Not because the site had accepted truth.

Because the dirty containment had made a new category it could not immediately deny.

Evidence room.

Not enough.

Enough.

They found the first real body three corridors later.

Not a skeleton.

Not a corpse in the normal sense.

A shape under a collapsed section of ceiling, half-covered by concrete, rusted rebar, and salt mineral growth. The uniform had fused into the floor. The body had dried into something between preservation and ruin.

Ace saw the hand first.

Human hand. Gloved. Fingers curled around a pen.

Mai knelt despite the dust.

The badge was unreadable.

The wall beside the body was not.

Someone had written there, repeatedly, in pen, blood, and what looked like scraped sealant:

**I WAS HERE**

**I WAS HERE**

**I WAS HERE**

**I WAS HERE**

The correction had tried to change it.

Some lines read:

**I WAS ASSIGNED**

Others:

**I WAS TRANSFERRED**

One:

**NO PERSONNEL**

But the first line, closest to the hand, remained:

**I WAS HERE**

Ace looked away for half a second.

Not because she could not handle death.

Because she could.

Too well.

Mai did not touch the body.

She wrote in the ledger:

**UNIDENTIFIED FOUNDATION PERSONNEL BODY LOCATED. EXISTENCE CONFIRMED. NAME UNRECOVERED. FINAL SELF-ANCHOR: "I WAS HERE."**

The wall flickered.

The correction tried to alter the quote.

Shammy stepped forward, and the air around the body became still.

Not sterile.

Respectful.

Ace took out one katana and carved beneath the writing:

**YES.**

The corridor lights dimmed.

Then steadied.

Mai closed the ledger gently.

"Thank you."

Ace did not ask who she meant.

The dead did not answer.

The site did not correct the line.

They moved on.

---

The intake corridor tried one final strategy.

Familiarity.

As they approached the original decontamination zone, the facility began to look less damaged.

Not repaired.

Remembered wrong.

The floors appeared cleaner. The walls straighter. Emergency lights more functional. Warning signs more generic. The salt smell faded under disinfectant. The air warmed by one degree, enough to feel like ordinary climate control.

Ace stopped.

“Absolutely not.”

Mai’s notebook had already begun to update:

**Exit through intake. Routine inspection complete. No hostile irregularity observed.**

Mai stared at the sentence.

Her eyes did not glaze this time.

They hardened.

She crossed out the entire line until the paper tore.

Then wrote beneath it:

**WE ARE NOT FINISHED JUST BECAUSE THE SITE WANTS A CLEAN ENDING.**

Ace smiled.

“That one is going in my personal doctrine.”

Shammy looked toward the final checkpoint.

The dead turnstiles now stood upright.

The guard station looked almost intact.

The wall map glowed politely.

## **HAZARDOUS MATERIAL STORAGE ANNEX 5**

Sections:

Intake

Decontamination

Waste Processing

Archive Support

Inactive Mechanical

No Further Access Required

No Continuity Hold.

No Witchbox chamber.

No Core Archive.

No Evidence Room.

No body in the corridor.

No personnel purge.

No Site-5.

Mai walked to the map.

Ace stayed beside her.

Shammy's presence filled the checkpoint slowly, pressure settling into corners, under turnstiles, behind the glass.

Mai looked at the map for a long time.

Then she took out the pen.

Ace said, "Glass."

Mai handed her the pen and stepped back.

Ace used the pommel of one katana to smash the map glass.

The sound cracked down the corridor, sharp and satisfying.

No alarm answered.

Mai stepped forward and wrote directly on the glowing map surface.

**MISSING SECTIONS: CONTINUITY HOLD / WITCHBOX CHAMBER / CORE ARCHIVE / EVIDENCE ROOM / UNIDENTIFIED PERSONNEL BODY**

The map flickered.

The words tried to fade.

Ace placed one bleeding thumb against the corner of the map.

Shammy exhaled, and the air pressed gently into the wall like the whole room had decided to lean closer.

Mai wrote one final line:

**SITE-5 EXISTS IN DISPUTE.**

The map changed.

Not corrected.

Changed.

A new section appeared.

Small. Unlabeled.

Then another.

Then a red line leading from intake toward the deeper core.

Then the map failed entirely, screen going black.

On the dead glass, Mai's ink remained.

Ace looked pleased.

"Vandalism has been unusually productive today."

Mai glanced at her thumb.

"So has poor artifact hygiene."

"You're welcome."

The intake speaker crackled.

The same calm recorded voice from their entrance returned, warped now by damage and contradiction lock.

"Thank you for visiting hazardous materials storage annex—"

Static.

"Thank you for visiting Site—"

Static.

"Personnel are reminded—"

Static.

The voice broke.

Then, very quietly:

"Personnel were present."

No one spoke.

The speaker died.

Ace looked toward the exterior gate.

"Accepted."

They walked out.

---

The facility exterior had peeled itself thinner.

That was the only way Ace could describe it.

The ruined walls still rose from the salt basin. The towers still leaned. The causeway still stretched toward open desert. But the edges looked less committed. In direct sight, Site-5 was real. In peripheral vision, it became weather-stained industrial scrap. In memory, it was already trying to become a detour.

The outer sign above the gatehouse had lost most of its letters.

**S\_TE-  
S\_P F\_UND\_T\_ON**

Mai photographed it with the analog camera.

The developed image showed:

Ace.

Mai.

Shammy.

The broken sign.

No facility behind it.

Mai laughed once.

Not happily.

Ace looked at the photo.

"That is almost impressive."

"It is infuriating."

"Also that."

Shammy stood on the causeway and looked back into the gatehouse.

The air around her was calmer now, but not relaxed.

"The site is smaller when we do not need it to be complete."

Mai nodded.

"The contradiction lock localized its claim. It cannot fully deny itself, but it can limit how much of itself remains externally coherent."

Ace looked at her.

"Less words."

Mai considered.

"We made it choke on its own paperwork."

Ace smiled.

"Beautiful."

They crossed the causeway.

Halfway across, Ace looked down at the scratch she had made when they arrived.

It was still there.

Beside it, something new had appeared.

Not carved by her.

Not written by Mai.

A thin line etched into the corrosion:

## **PRESENT**

Ace crouched.

Mai stopped.

Shammy came back two steps.

Ace touched the word with the back of one finger.

The metal was cold.

“Did either of you—”

“No,” Mai said.

“No,” Shammy said.

The word did not change.

Ace stood slowly.

“Okay.”

Mai took one last photograph.

This time the developed image showed the scratch.

And the word.

Nothing else.

Mai slipped it into the evidence sleeve with more care than she had used for any other photo.

They reached the basin floor.

The salt crust cracked underfoot again, but this time their tracks remained longer.

Not permanent.

Longer.

Ace accepted that as an insult successfully returned.

The climb up toward the vehicle took twice as long as it should have and half as long as the site wanted it to feel.

When they reached the top, the vehicle was still there.

Mostly.

Its onboard log displayed:

**ROUTINE WEATHER DELAY. NO ARRIVAL.**

Mai opened the door, leaned in, and wrote over the screen with a grease marker:

**ARRIVED. ENTERED. RETURNED.**

The system tried to auto-clean the glass.

Ace unplugged the display with one hard pull.

Mai looked at her.

“What?”

“That screen had opinions.”

“It also had the route memory.”

“Now it has humility.”

Shammy sat in the passenger seat and closed her eyes.

For a second, she looked genuinely tired.

Ace climbed into the back, then immediately leaned forward.

“You okay?”

Shammy opened one eye.

“Yes.”

Ace stared.

Shammy sighed.

“I am not fully okay.”

“Better.”

Mai got into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

It coughed once.

Then caught.

The vehicle’s digital navigation remained dead.

The analog compass spun three times, then pointed toward Night City.

Mai looked at it suspiciously.

Ace looked over her shoulder toward the basin.

From the ridge, Site-5 was still visible.

Huge.

Ruinous.

Wrong.

Then dust crossed the basin.

For one second, the facility vanished.

When the dust cleared, it was still there.

But smaller in the mind.

Not smaller in matter.

Smaller in reach.

Ace touched the wrapped tag inside her jacket.

Still cold.

Still real.

Still trying to decide whether it was allowed to be evidence.

She pressed her palm against it.

"No," she said quietly.

Mai heard.

Shammy heard.

The site, far behind them, maybe heard.

The vehicle began moving.

No one spoke until the basin disappeared behind the ridge.

Then Ace leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Next time Rogue says Badlands, we ask if there are islands."

Mai's hands stayed steady on the wheel.

"Reasonable."

Shammy, eyes still closed, added, "And polite boxes."

Ace opened one eye.

“No. We do not ask about polite boxes. Asking is how they win.”

Mai’s mouth curved.

“Noted.”

The Badlands stretched ahead in dry gold and rust, empty in the way places became empty after hiding too much.

Behind them, Site-5 remained in dispute.

Ahead, Night City waited.

Not safe.

Never safe.

But still visible.

For now, that mattered.

---

Rogue had not moved from the booth.

That was an exaggeration, technically. She had moved enough to threaten two people, redirect three information flows, order the bartender to stop asking reasonable questions, and personally mark the original envelope three more times when the ink began to fade.

But in the important sense, she had not moved.

The original envelope lay on the table in front of her now, under a knife.

Not because knives had special anti-anomalous properties.

Because the envelope had tried to become “chemical annex correspondence” again and Rogue had decided symbolism could borrow steel.

The copy lay across from it under an empty glass.

On the original:

**THIS EXISTS.**

On the copy:

**THIS LIES.**

On the table between them, Rogue had added a third card in her own handwriting:

**BILLABLE PROBLEM.**

The card had not changed.

Rogue considered that a small victory.

When the Triad entered the Afterlife, the room felt them before it saw them.

Ace came first, dusty, salt-streaked, with a wrapped shape tucked inside her jacket and a small cut on one thumb. Mai followed, paler than when she had left, carrying a ledger, a torn notebook, and the expression of someone who had personally argued with a dead institution and not enjoyed the quality of its reasoning. Shammy came last, tall and quiet, hair carrying faint static, air around her heavy with fatigue held upright by dignity.

Rogue looked them over.

"You look terrible."

Ace slid into the booth.

"Branding."

Mai sat beside her.

Shammy lowered herself into the booth more slowly than usual.

Rogue's eyes paused there, noted the fatigue, and did not comment.

Smart.

Mai placed the ledger on the table.

Not the tag.

Ace kept that.

Rogue noticed.

Also did not comment.

Smarter.

Mai said, "The export pathway is severed."

Rogue glanced at the envelopes.

"They stopped changing."

"For now."

"Everything is for now."

Mai accepted that.

Rogue tapped the knife holding down the original envelope.

"Can it affect Night City?"

Mai took a breath.

The whole booth seemed to lean toward the answer.

“Yes,” she said.

Ace looked at her.

Rogue’s expression did not change.

Mai continued.

“But not cleanly. Not now. We forced the correction process into a local contradiction lock. Site-5 cannot fully export denial logic through the physical reference chain you created unless someone reopens the pathway or gives it a cleaner external archive.”

Rogue stared.

Ace leaned toward her.

“She means: don’t digitize the murder island.”

Rogue looked at Mai.

Mai sighed.

“Yes. That is one operational takeaway.”

Rogue nodded.

“See? Useful translation.”

Mai opened the ledger to the final entry.

Rogue read silently.

Her face remained still through:

**PRESERVE HAZARDOUS CONTINUITY**  
**DENY HAZARDOUS CONTINUITY**  
**PENDING**

Then:

**SITE-5 EXISTS IN DISPUTE.**

Rogue looked up.

“That is not comforting.”

“No,” Mai said.

“Is it true?”

“Yes.”

Rogue leaned back.

"Then I'll take uncomfortable and true."

Ace smiled faintly.

"That is disturbingly healthy."

Rogue looked at her.

"Do not spread rumors."

Shammy touched the edge of the table.

The envelopes rustled.

Both of them.

Rogue's eyes narrowed.

Mai went still.

Ace's hand moved toward the wrapped tag.

The original envelope changed first.

**THIS EXISTS** blurred.

Letters crawled.

**THIS—**

Rogue drove the knife deeper through the paper and into the table.

The letters froze.

The copy under the glass trembled.

**THIS LIES** became:

**THIS COMPLIES**

Ace stood halfway.

Shammy placed one hand flat against the table.

The glass cracked.

Not from force.

From pressure difference.

The copy stopped changing.

Mai opened her notebook and wrote on a fresh page:

**ROGUE'S REPORT REMAINS EXTERNAL CONTRADICTION ANCHOR. DO NOT RECONCILE**

**ORIGINAL AND COPY. DO NOT DIGITIZE. DO NOT CONSOLIDATE.**

The booth lights flickered.

Then steadied.

Rogue looked at the cracked glass.

"That was still connected."

Mai nodded.

"Residual pressure through reference objects."

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai held up a finger.

"Not that phrase as a pipeline issue. Different use."

Ace sat back down.

"Allowed."

Rogue looked between them.

"I am not asking."

"Wise," Shammy said.

Rogue took the ledger and closed it.

"How do I store this?"

Mai answered immediately.

"Physically. Separately. With contradictory labels. No single archive. No scan. No summary file. No clean report."

Rogue considered.

"That will annoy everyone."

"Yes."

"Good."

Ace pulled the wrapped tag from inside her jacket and placed it briefly on the table, still under her hand.

Rogue's eyes went to it.

"What is that?"

Ace did not uncover it.

"Proof dirty enough to survive."

Mai looked at her but did not object.

Rogue stared for a long moment.

Then nodded once.

"Keep it."

Ace blinked.

"I was expecting an argument."

"I am not stupid enough to centralize evidence from a place that eats centralized evidence."

Ace looked at Mai.

"She learns."

Rogue said, "I bill."

Shammy smiled faintly.

For a moment, the booth held something almost like relief.

Not safety.

Never safety.

But the absence of immediate correction.

That was enough for one breath.

Then Rogue looked at Mai.

"What was inside?"

Mai's answer came slowly.

"Foundation infrastructure. Empty containment. Personnel erasure. A continuity system tied to SCP-963."

Rogue's eyes sharpened at the number, because she knew enough to know which things should make other people careful.

"Bright?"

"Not confirmed."

Ace said, "Something tried to sound like him."

Rogue's mouth tightened.

"And?"

Ace's voice was flat.

"It was wrong."

Rogue accepted that answer more seriously than a longer explanation.

Mai continued.

"There was also an external artifact. Not Foundation. Not ours. Site-5 contained it but did not understand it."

Rogue looked at Ace.

"You look like you hated that one personally."

Ace smiled without warmth.

"I made a professional decision not to have a relationship with it."

Shammy added, "It was polite."

Rogue stared.

Then she looked at Mai.

Mai nodded.

"That was the problem."

Rogue leaned back very slowly.

"I hate that I understood that."

Ace said, "Good. Do not ask about the polite box."

"I was not planning to."

"Keep that plan."

Rogue's gaze returned to the envelopes.

After a while, she said, "So this Site-5 is contained."

Mai answered, "No."

Rogue waited.

Mai corrected with precision.

"Site-5 is prevented from becoming Night City's problem today."

Rogue smiled faintly.

"That is the most honest invoice description I have ever heard."

Ace leaned back.

“Charge extra.”

“I always do.”

Shammy looked toward one of the Afterlife screens.

It was showing an advertisement for waterproof chrome joints.

For half a second, the screen flickered.

White text appeared over the ad:

**PERSONNEL ARE REMINDED—**

Ace’s hand hit the wrapped tag.

Mai grabbed the ledger.

Shammy’s hair lifted.

Rogue reached for the knife.

The screen blinked.

The ad resumed.

Nothing else happened.

No one in the booth moved for three seconds.

Then the bartender shouted from across the room, “Power hiccup!”

Rogue did not look away from the screen.

“Fire him?”

Ace considered.

Mai said, “No.”

Shammy said, “Not yet.”

Rogue nodded.

“Not yet.”

The words sounded less like mercy than policy.

Outside, Night City continued being Night City.

Inside the booth, the ledger stayed closed.

The envelopes stayed contradictory.

Ace kept one hand on the hidden tag.

Mai kept one hand near the notebook.

Shammy kept the air around them just present enough.

And somewhere beyond the Badlands, in a basin where maps preferred emptiness, a ruined island facility remained exactly what they had forced it to be.

Not forgotten.

Not proven.

Not safe.

**Pending.**

—

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Last update: **26/04/2026 16:07**

