

ACE 20 — Structural Override

Prologue — The Wrong Kind of Quiet (Rewritten)

The corridor lights didn't flicker.

That was the first thing Larkin noticed.

Site-19 had a reputation for it—old wiring, overloaded circuits, containment fields bleeding into infrastructure they were never meant to touch. Flicker was normal. Buzzing was normal. The low, constant hum of something bigger than the building itself pretending to be electricity—normal.

But this—

The light above him held steady.

Too steady.

Larkin slowed without realizing it, boots soft against polished concrete that had been scrubbed clean often enough to forget what stains used to live there. The hallway stretched ahead in perfect symmetry—white panels, black seams, reinforced doors set at identical intervals like punctuation marks in a sentence nobody wanted to read twice.

He checked the tablet in his hand.

Readouts: nominal.

Power: stable.

Containment: stable.

Air pressure: stable.

Everything said stable.

He exhaled—

—and paused halfway through it.

“...no.”

The air didn't move.

Not wrong.

Just... absent.

Like the system had decided airflow was unnecessary and updated reality to match.

Larkin frowned, eyes drifting to the nearest seam where wall met floor. He watched it longer than he should have.

A clean line.

Perfect.

Manufactured perfection, measured in microns and enforced by budgets that could fund a small country.

Except—

It wasn't perfectly straight.

He blinked.

It corrected.

Not snapped.

Corrected.

As if the line had briefly failed to meet specification—and then complied.

"...yeah, no, I'm not doing this tonight."

He adjusted his grip on the tablet, thumb hovering over the comms icon, then pulling back. Not yet. There were rules about this sort of thing. Not written ones—those were useless in places like this—but the kind you picked up after enough shifts spent pretending everything made sense.

Rule one:

If it corrects itself, it's either harmless—

—or it's enforcing something.

Larkin rolled his shoulders, forcing tension out of them with a small, habitual movement. He'd done worse rotations. Had worked deeper wings. Had seen things that didn't bother pretending to be subtle.

This wasn't that.

This wasn't subtle.

This was compliant.

He started walking again.

Each step sounded normal.

Too normal.

No echo drift. No delayed reflection from the angled surfaces. Just a clean, immediate response—boot to floor, sound to ear, nothing in between.

No loss.

No distortion.

No space.

The corridor didn't feel like a place anymore.

It felt like a resolved calculation.

Larkin tapped the tablet awake again, pulling up the localized sensor grid.

Temperature: 21.3°C

Humidity: 38%

Pressure: 101.2 kPa

All within expected parameters.

No anomalies flagged.

No alerts pending.

Nothing.

He stared at the pressure reading.

Then inhaled again.

Still nothing.

"...that's not how pressure works."

The number held steady.

Then—

101.2 → 101.1

A dip.

Fractional.

Momentary.

Then—

101.2

Corrected.

The graph didn't log it.

It adjusted for it.

Larkin's grip tightened.

"...nope."

He didn't hesitate this time.

He tapped the comms.

“Control, this is—”

Static.

Not loud.

Not sharp.

Just... present.

Like the channel had already been filled, and his signal was being normalized out of it.

“Control?”

No response.

The static didn't change.

Didn't spike.

Didn't fade.

It simply maintained.

Baseline noise.

Unremovable.

Larkin lowered the tablet slowly.

“...okay.”

He turned his head toward the nearest containment door.

Designation plate:

SCP-████ — STORAGE / LOW PRIORITY

The text looked normal.

He knew it did.

He read it again anyway.

The spacing was—

Consistent.

Perfectly consistent.

Too consistent.

No micro-variance. No print deviation. No mechanical error.

Like the concept of imperfection had been excluded from the font.

Larkin stepped closer.

The seam around the door was cleaner than the rest of the corridor.

Not newer.

Not repaired.

Aligned.

He reached out, hesitated for half a second, then pressed his palm flat against the reinforced surface.

Cold.

Expected.

Solid.

Also expected.

But beneath that—

There was resistance.

Not physical.

Not force.

Something closer to... refusal.

Like the surface wasn't pushing back—

it was declining deviation.

Larkin swallowed.

"...there is no recorded fluctuation."

His voice sounded wrong in the corridor.

Not muffled.

Not echoed.

Contained.

As if it had been trimmed to fit.

He leaned in slightly, forehead almost touching the door.

"Then why does it feel like—"

He stopped.

Because this time, the thought did finish.

Not as words.

As alignment.

The answer wasn't behind the door.

Wasn't in the corridor.

Wasn't in the air.

It was in the system.

Everything here—

was already corrected.

And he—

wasn't.

Larkin stepped back.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

The kind of movement you made when you realized you were the only variable in a space that did not allow them.

His hand tightened around the tablet.

The static remained.

Unchanged.

"...yeah."

He turned.

Started walking away.

Didn't look back.

Didn't run.

Running introduced error.

This—

this was still pretending not to notice him.

He reached the corner.

Paused.

Just for a second.

Then glanced back.

The corridor looked normal.

Perfect symmetry.

Clean lines.

Stable light.

Everything in compliance.

Exactly how it should be.

Larkin stared at it.

Long enough for doubt to start creeping back in.

Long enough for logic to try and overwrite instinct.

Long enough—

—for the seam along the containment door to adjust.

Not shift.

Not move.

Adjust.

A fraction of a millimeter.

To meet a standard that hadn't been there a moment ago.

Larkin didn't wait.

He turned the corner.

And this time—

he didn't slow down.

—

Back in the corridor, the light held steady.

The pressure reading remained constant.

The system logged nothing.

Nothing had changed.

There was nothing to log.

Nothing to correct.

Nothing to fix.

The system was stable.

It had always been stable.

Inside the parameters—

everything already was.

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