

## Chapter 2 — Observation Error

The sound of the door closing doesn't echo.

It should.

The hallway ahead is long enough to carry it, bounce it back, distort it.

Instead, it's swallowed.

Like the space refuses to repeat itself.

---

Mai is already moving.

Not toward the sound — toward the nearest wall panel.

She runs her fingers along it, slow, deliberate.

"Material degradation is inconsistent," she says. "This section is newer than the rest of the structure."

Ace doesn't look at the wall.

She looks at the hallway.

Depth again.

Wrong depth.

It stretches further than it should, the far end just out of reach of clear vision.

---

Shammy steps forward last.

The air shifts with her.

Pressure equalizes, just slightly, like the building resists her presence and then gives up trying.

"It's not expanding," she says.

A beat.

"It's reinterpreting distance."

---

Mai glances back at her.

"Based on what?"

Shammy tilts her head.

---

“Expectation.”

---

The lights flicker again.

This time in sequence.

One. Two. Three.

Leading deeper into the building.

---

Ace moves.

No hesitation.

She follows the light pattern.

---

Mai exhales once, sharp.

“Don’t assume pathing.”

Too late.

---

The hallway narrows as Ace walks it.

Not physically.

But functionally.

The walls feel closer. The ceiling lower.

---

Behind her—

the dining area is gone.

---

Mai stops.

Turns.

The entrance they came through—

is not there.

---

No door.

No frame.

Just uninterrupted wall.

---

“Okay,” Mai says quietly.

“That’s not acceptable.”

---

Shammy doesn’t react outwardly.

But the air tightens.

Micro-pressure spikes ripple outward, subtle but controlled.

The space resists.

Then settles.

---

“We didn’t lose the entrance,” Shammy says.

“We lost the version of the space where it exists.”

---

Ace stops walking.

Not because of that.

Because something ahead changed.

---

At the far end of the hallway—

a figure.

---

Bonnie.

---

Standing where the hallway bends.

---

Facing them.

---

No movement.

No transition.

Just—

there.

---

Mai's voice lowers.

“Document posture.”

Ace doesn't answer immediately.

She studies it.

Angle of the head.

Arm position.

Weight distribution.

---

“Forward-facing. Slight tilt. Left arm lower than right.”

---

Mai steps forward.

One step.

Then another.

---

The figure doesn't move.

---

Shammy's gaze drifts—not to Bonnie, but to the air around it.

The pressure is different there.

Denser.

Like a pocket.

---

“It’s not waiting,” she says softly.

---

Ace shifts her stance.

Hand resting near the hilt of one blade.

Not drawn.

Ready.

---

“Then what is it doing?”

---

Shammy’s eyes narrow slightly.

“Responding.”

---

Mai stops.

Mid-step.

---

“That implies interaction,” she says.

“We haven’t engaged.”

---

Shammy shakes her head.

Barely.

---

“We already did.”

---

The lights flicker again.

---

For a fraction of a second—

Bonnie is closer.

---

Not moving.

Not stepping.

---

Just—

closer.

---

Ace's hand tightens.

Blade hum almost audible.

---

"Movement confirmed," she says.

---

"No," Mai snaps.

"Observation mismatch."

---

She steps sideways.

Changes angle.

Forces perspective shift.

---

Bonnie—

is still at the end of the hallway.

---

Same distance.

---

Mai's breathing slows.

Controlled.

Measured.

---

"It's not approaching," she says.

---

Ace doesn't relax.

---

"It's aligning."

---

Silence.

---

Then—

from somewhere behind Bonnie—

laughter.

---

Not mechanical.

Not distorted.

---

Children.

---

Ace moves before the sound finishes.

---

Fast.

Direct.

---

The hallway stretches.

---

Not physically—  
but functionally.

---

The distance doesn't close.

---

Ace stops.

---

That's wrong.

---

She *should* have reached it.

---

Mai is already recalculating.

"Distance variable is not spatial," she mutters.

"It's conditional."

---

Shammy exhales slowly.

The air responds again—

flattening slightly, like she's pressing down on something invisible.

---

"They're not moving toward us," she says.

---

A pause.

---

"We're failing to reach the version of them that exists."

The laughter stops.

---

The lights go out.

---

Complete darkness.

---

No ambient glow.

No external light.

---

Just—

absence.

---

Ace doesn't move.

---

Mai doesn't speak.

---

Shammy's presence expands.

Not visibly.

But the air stabilizes around them.

A pocket.

A bubble.

---

Then—

a click.

---

The cameras come online.

---

Monitors flicker to life along the wall that wasn't there before.

Old CRT screens.

Static crawling across each one.

---

One stabilizes.

---

Shows the hallway.

---

From above.

---

Three figures standing mid-corridor.

---

Ace.

Mai.

Shammy.

---

Perfectly still.

---

Another screen stabilizes.

---

Same hallway.

---

Empty.

No one there.

---

A third screen—

---

Bonnie.

---

Standing directly behind them.

---

No one turns.

---

Because none of them—

see the same thing.

---

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