

Chapter 3 — Reconstruction Attempt

The monitors hum softly.

A low, persistent buzz — old electronics fighting to stay alive without power.

Mai steps closer.

Careful.

Not toward the hallway.

Toward the screens.

“Don’t trust them,” Ace says.

Mai doesn’t look at her.

“I don’t,” she replies.

A beat.

“I’m comparing them.”

Three feeds.

Same corridor.

Different truths.

Mai studies them like equations.

Not images.

Not events.

Variables.

“Left screen,” she says quietly.

“Observer present.”

Ace and Shammy remain still.

“Middle screen — absence model. No observers.”

Static crawls.

Shifts.

Almost—

corrects itself.

“And the third—”

Mai stops.

Leans in slightly.

Bonnie stands behind them.

Closer than before.

Too close.

Mai exhales slowly.

“That one assumes a narrative.”

Ace’s voice is flat.

“What narrative?”

Mai's eyes flick between the feeds.

"That something is *behind us*."

Silence.

No one turns.

Shammy's voice comes low.

Careful.

"Good."

A flicker of confusion crosses Ace's expression.

"Good?"

"If you turn," Shammy says, "you confirm it."

The third monitor flickers.

Bonnie's head tilts.

No movement.

But the angle—

is wrong now.

Mai straightens.

Steps back.

“We need a baseline,” she says.

Ace shifts her weight.

“Define.”

Mai gestures to the screens.

“We’re assuming this is a crime scene.”

Ace doesn’t respond.

Mai continues.

“Five children. Disappearance. Contained environment.”

She pauses.

“That assumption is being accepted.”

The lights flicker.

The third monitor stabilizes further.

Image sharpens.

Bonnie's outline becomes clearer.

More defined.

Ace's hand tightens slightly.

"Accepted by what?"

Shammy answers.

"The space."

Silence.

Then—
something changes.

Subtle.

The air pressure dips.

Just slightly.

Like something in the room is relieved.

Mai notices immediately.

“That’s feedback,” she says.

She turns away from the screens.

Not reacting to them.

Rejecting them.

“New model,” she says.

Ace watches her.

“Go.”

Mai closes her eyes.

Just for a second.

Then:

“No murder.”

Nothing happens.

The room holds.

She continues.

“No violence.”

A flicker.

The third monitor distorts.

Bonnie’s image warps.

Shammy exhales.

“That mattered.”

Mai opens her eyes.

“No bodies,” she says.

The hallway—

breathes.

Not metaphor.

Not imagination.

The walls expand outward a fraction.

The ceiling lifts.

Space—

relaxes.

Ace's gaze sharpens.

"Say it."

Mai hesitates.

This is the part that matters.

She feels it.

Not logic.

Not certainty.

Weight.

"They weren't killed here."

The monitors glitch.

Hard.

Static floods all three screens—

then clears.

Bonnie is gone.

Every feed.

Gone.

Silence drops into the room like a physical object.

Shammy's shoulders lower slightly.

The pressure eases.

"That's closer," she says.

Ace doesn't relax.

"What changed?"

Mai stares at the empty screens.

"We stopped lying."

A sound.

Soft.

From deeper in the building.

Music.

Faint.

A children's tune.

Distorted—
but recognizable.

Ace turns toward it immediately.

Mai grabs her wrist.

Hard.

"Not yet."

Ace's eyes flash.

"We follow."

"No," Mai says.

Firm.

"If we follow the sound, we accept its framing."

Ace pulls free.

“And if we don’t?”

Shammy answers.

“It comes to us.”

The music grows louder.

Not approaching.

Resolving.

Like it was always there—
just out of sync.

Mai breathes in.

Slow.

“Then we choose how it resolves.”

The lights flicker again.

But this time—

they don't go out.

They stabilize.

For the first time since they entered—

the building stops shifting.

Just for a moment.

A narrow window.

Ace notices.

"Temporary," she says.

Mai nods.

"Conditional stability."

Shammy's gaze drifts down the hallway.

"Something else is coming."

Not a guess.

Not intuition.

Observation.

The air tightens again—
but differently.

Not pressure.

Presence.

And this time—
it isn't waiting for them to be wrong.

It's waiting for them—
to choose.

The music stops.

Total silence.

Then—
a door opens.

Not behind them.

Ahead.

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