

## Chapter 2 — The Wrong Entrance

The building did not look different.

That was the first confirmation.

Same exterior lines. Same glass reflecting the dim spill of city light. Same quiet, controlled perimeter that suggested nothing inside required urgency.

Mai stepped through the main entrance without slowing.

No alarms.

No containment seals.

No deviation in access protocols.

Everything acknowledged them exactly as it should.

Ace glanced once down the main corridor.

“Feels normal,” she said.

Mai didn't answer.

Because it did.

That was the problem.

---

Level 3 was unchanged.

Fluorescent lighting. Neutral walls. That faint institutional hum that never fully resolved into a single source. The kind of place designed to be ignored by the senses so attention could be directed elsewhere.

Shammy's presence shifted the air slightly as she stepped out of the elevator.

Not enough to trigger sensors.

Just enough that the silence didn't feel entirely static.

She paused for half a second, eyes drifting along the corridor.

Then moved.

No comment.

---

They reached the section marked in the report.

---

Nothing.

No tape.

No isolation field.

No residual marker.

Just—

A hallway.

Ace exhaled slowly. "So where is it?"

Mai didn't look at her.

She was already scanning.

Not with tools.

With expectation.

"That's the wrong question," she said.

Ace gave a faint, humorless half-smile. "Then give me the right one."

Mai stopped.

Turned slightly.

"Where would it not be noticed?" she asked.

Ace didn't answer immediately.

Because that—

That reframed it.

---

They walked the corridor once without stopping.

Second pass, slower.

Third—

Mai halted.

"There."

She didn't point.

Didn't need to.

The door was—

Ordinary.

Off-white. Unmarked. Set flush into the wall without indentation or emphasis. It didn't draw attention. It didn't avoid it either.

It simply—

Occupied space.

Ace stepped closer.

"You're sure?" she asked.

"No," Mai said.

A beat.

"Good," Ace replied.

---

Shammy remained a step back.

Not disengaged.

Just—

Offset.

Her gaze wasn't on the door.

It was on the air around it.

There was no visible distortion.

No ripple.

No displacement.

And yet—

The stillness was tighter there.

Like a held note that hadn't resolved.

---

Mai reached for the handle.

Stopped.

Not out of fear.

Out of precision.

---

She looked at Ace.

“You first,” she said.

Ace didn’t hesitate.

Her hand closed around the handle.

It turned.

No resistance.

No mechanism engaging.

Just—

Motion.

The door opened.

---

On the other side—

A corridor.

Ace leaned slightly, eyes narrowing.

“Same architecture,” she said.

“Not the same space,” Mai replied.

Ace stepped through.

No shift.

No pressure change.

No visual distortion.

Just—

Inside.

---

Mai followed immediately.

Shammy last.

The door remained open behind them.

---

Silence.

Not the absence of sound.

The absence of *variation*.

Their footsteps didn't echo.

Didn't dampen.

Didn't carry.

They simply—

Occurred.

---

Ace took three steps forward.

Stopped.

Turned her head slightly.

"This is wrong," she said.

"Yes," Mai replied.

---

The corridor stretched ahead.

Perfectly straight.

Perfectly lit.

Perfectly—

Unresolved.

Mai took a slow breath.

The air entered her lungs without resistance.

Without texture.

Without temperature variation.

Neutral.

Too neutral.

---

She turned.

The door was still there.

Open.

The original hallway visible beyond it.

Continuity intact.

For now.

---

“Check distance,” Mai said.

Ace didn’t ask how.

She stepped back toward the door.

One step.

Two.

Three—

The distance didn’t close.

Ace stopped.

Not surprised.

Just—

Confirmed.

---

“Still visible,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Still accessible?”

Mai didn’t answer.

Because that was not the same question.

---

Shammy moved.

Just a step.

---

But the air shifted with her, a faint pressure adjustment that made the corridor feel... less absolute.

She tilted her head slightly, watching the doorway.

"It's already separating," she said.

Ace glanced at her. "We just walked in."

Shammy didn't look at her.

"That doesn't matter," she replied.

---

Mai stepped closer to the threshold.

Not crossing.

Observing.

The hallway beyond the door was still there.

Unchanged.

But—

It felt further.

Not visually.

Structurally.

Like something had inserted distance without moving space.

---

Mai spoke quietly.

"Continuity is decaying."

Ace's jaw tightened slightly. "Then we go back. Now."

Mai shook her head once.

"If we could, we already would have."

---

Ace didn't argue.

She stepped forward anyway.

Directly toward the door.

---

Three steps.

Four.

Five—

It didn't get closer.

---

Ace stopped.

Turned.

Looked at Mai.

“Say it.”

Mai met her gaze.

“We didn't enter a room,” she said.

A beat.

“We entered a condition.”

---

Silence settled again.

Not heavier.

Just—

More defined.

---

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air responded this time.

Barely.

A slight shift.

A fraction of movement.

Then—

Still again.

She frowned, just slightly.

---

“That’s not good,” she said.

---

Mai glanced at her. “What changed?”

Shammy looked down the corridor.

Then back at the door.

Then at the space between.

“It didn’t respond,” she said.

---

Ace’s eyes narrowed.

“To what?”

Shammy didn’t answer immediately.

Then:

“To me.”

---

That landed.

---

Mai turned back to the corridor.

Her posture adjusted—not tense, not defensive, but precise.

“Okay,” she said.

Not to reassure.

To anchor.

“We proceed.”

Ace gave a short nod.

“Forward?”

“Yes.”

“Because?”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

---

“Because standing still won’t change anything.”

---

Ace accepted that.

She moved.

Not rushing.

Not slow.

Measured.

---

Shammy followed.

Still watching the space more than the path.

---

Mai stepped last.

And as she did—

She glanced back one more time.

---

The door was still there.

Still open.

Still showing the original hallway.

Exactly as before.

---

And yet—

For a fraction of a second—

It looked like a photograph.

---

Then the moment passed.

And it was just a doorway again.

---

Mai turned away.

---

They moved deeper.

---

Behind them—

The door remained open.

---

No one came through it.

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