

Chapter 3 — Geometry That Pretends

They walked for longer than necessary.

That was the first measurable deviation.

Not in distance.

In expectation.

Ace slowed first.

Not because she was tired.

Because her body had reached the point where something should have changed.

A corner.

An intersection.

A door that led somewhere different.

Instead—

The corridor continued.

Perfectly straight.

Perfectly lit.

Perfectly—

Unresponsive.

“Count it,” Ace said.

Mai was already doing that.

“Ceiling panels,” she replied.

Ace glanced up.

Uniform rectangles. Soft fluorescent glow. Repeating pattern that suggested order without requiring attention.

“Go.”

Mai didn't look away as she spoke.

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.”

She paused.

Then continued.

“Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.”

Ace stopped walking.

“That’s wrong.”

“Yes.”

They should have reached a junction at eight.

Mai knew that.

Not from memory.

From proportion.

“This is not mapped space,” Mai said quietly.

Ace exhaled once. “No kidding.”

Mai ignored that.

“Mapped space resolves,” she continued. “This doesn’t.”

Shammy hadn’t stopped.

She moved one step further than the others before pausing, as if she had been following something that wasn’t tied to their pacing.

Her head tilted slightly.

Not toward the corridor.

Toward the space *within* it.

“The air isn’t circulating,” she said.

Ace glanced at her. “No vents?”

“No,” Shammy replied. “No movement.”

Mai looked up.

There were vents.

Standard placement. Standard spacing.

Visually correct.

But—

She closed her eyes for half a second.

Listened.

Not to sound.

To absence.

Nothing moved.

Not even the microcurrents generated by their own bodies.

Mai opened her eyes.

“The system isn’t running,” she said.

Ace frowned. “Then how is it—”

She stopped.

Because the question didn’t finish.

“Exactly,” Mai said.

They moved again.

Not faster.

Not slower.

Just—

Continuing.

The corridor did not change.

They passed a door.

Then another.

Then another.

All identical.

All closed.

Ace stopped at the third.

“Try one?”

Mai nodded once.

Ace reached for the handle.

Turned.

Opened.

Inside—

A room.

Office layout.

Desk. Chair. Terminal. Filing cabinet.

Everything in place.

Everything—

Unused.

Ace stepped in.

Checked corners.

Nothing.

No disturbance.

No trace of occupation.

Mai followed.

Her gaze moved faster.

Not scanning for threats.

For inconsistencies.

The desk surface was clean.

Not wiped.

Not dusty.

Just—

Absent of interaction.

She touched it.

The surface did not respond.

Not cold.

Not warm.

Just—

There.

“Nothing’s ever been here,” she said.

Ace frowned. “That’s not possible.”

“No,” Mai agreed.

“It isn’t.”

Shammy stepped in last.

The air shifted again.

Barely.

A ripple that didn’t propagate.

She inhaled.

Paused.

“This room isn’t separate,” she said.

Ace glanced at her. “It’s a room.”

Shammy shook her head.

“No,” she said softly.

“It’s the corridor pretending to stop.”

That landed differently.

Mai looked around again.

Re-evaluating.

Same materials.

Same lighting.

Same proportions.

No transition.

No boundary.

She stepped back out.

Into the corridor.

Turned.

Looked at the doorway.

The room was still there.

But now—

It felt thinner.

“Close it,” she said.

Ace did.

The door shut without sound.

Mai waited.

Watched.

Nothing happened.

“Open it again.”

Ace did.

The room was still there.

Unchanged.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“That’s worse.”

Ace crossed her arms. “Why?”

Mai didn’t look at her.

“Because it doesn’t care whether we observe it or not.”

Silence settled.

They moved again.

The doors continued.

Evenly spaced.

Identical.

Ace stopped counting.

Mai didn’t.

“Twenty-one,” Mai said quietly.

Ace glanced sideways. “Still no junction?”

“No.”

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

Not frustration.

Recognition.

"This isn't space," she said.

Mai nodded.

"No," she agreed.

"It's repetition."

Shammy took another step forward.

Then stopped.

Again, slightly ahead of them.

Her fingers flexed once.

The air responded—

A fraction.

Then stilled.

She frowned.

"It's resisting," she said.

Ace looked at her sharply. "Resisting what?"

Shammy didn't answer immediately.

Then:

"Change."

That word stayed.

Mai's posture shifted.

Not alarm.

Alignment.

"Then we introduce it," she said.

Ace smiled faintly.

Not amusement.

Purpose.

"Finally," she said.

They didn't rush.

They continued.

And as they did—

The corridor remained exactly the same.

Behind them—

The door they had entered through was still there.

Still open.

Still showing the original hallway.

It had not moved.

It had not changed.

It had not—

Mai stopped.

Turned.

Looked at it.

Something in her expression sharpened.

Ace followed her gaze.

“What?”

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Then:

“It’s further away.”

Ace looked.

Measured.

It was.

Not by much.

Just enough.

Shammy didn’t turn.

She was still facing forward.

Listening.

“It’s closing,” she said.

Mai shook her head slightly.

“No,” she replied.

A beat.

“It’s not letting us leave.”

Silence.

The corridor did not react.

It did not acknowledge.

It simply—

Continued.

And this time—

They did too.

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