

## CHAPTER 2 — Insertion

The corridor outside the briefing room didn't change.

That was the first thing Mai checked.

Not visually — visually everything was identical. Angles, lighting, spacing. Foundation architecture repeated itself with enough precision that deviation was always easier to feel than to see.

She walked three steps.

Counted.

Matched.

Correct.

---

Ace didn't count.

She watched the intersections.

Movement patterns. Sightlines. The way personnel flowed around them without quite acknowledging them. Standard clearance behavior. No hesitation, no deviation.

Normal.

---

Shammy slowed for half a step.

Not enough to break formation.

Just enough to listen.

---

"It's ahead," she said.

---

Mai didn't ask what.

She already knew the answer.

---

They reached the lift without being stopped.

Of course they did.

---

The doors opened before anyone touched the panel.

Inside, the air felt... heavier.

Not in pressure.

In intention.

---

The descent began immediately.

---

No music.

No voice.

Just motion.

---

Mai tracked the time.

Not because she needed to — the system would be precise — but because timing was one of the few anchors that didn't lie when space did.

---

"Eleven minutes," she said quietly.

---

Ace nodded once.

---

Shammy leaned back slightly, eyes half-lidded.

Listening again.

---

"Less."

---

The lift didn't accelerate.

Didn't change.

---

But something did.

---

The moment the doors opened, the difference became measurable.

---

The staging area was active.

Teams moving. Equipment checks. Weapons loaded, checked again, cleared. Controlled urgency — not panic, not even stress. Just compression. Everything pushed closer to the point where it would matter.

---

But underneath it—

---

Mai stopped.

Half a step.

---

Ace noticed.

Immediately.

---

“What.”

---

Mai didn't answer right away.

Her gaze moved across the room, not focusing on people, but on space.

Distances.

Alignment.

---

“It's off,” she said.

---

Ace followed her line of sight.

Nothing moved incorrectly.

No visible distortion.

---

“Where.”

---

“Spacing.”

A beat.

“Between groups.”

---

Ace watched again.

Longer.

---

There.

---

Two operators crossing paths.

Distance between them—

slightly too short.

Or too long.

It corrected itself as they moved.

---

Like it hadn't decided yet.

---

Shammy exhaled.

The air around her flattened, subtly.

Stabilized.

---

“It’s not holding,” she said.

---

No one nearby reacted.

They couldn’t feel it.

Not yet.

---

A handler approached.

Efficient. Focused.

Didn’t waste motion.

---

“Team designation confirmed,” he said. “You’re moving with Secondary Entry.”

---

Mai nodded.

“Vector.”

---

The handler brought up a projection.

Minimal.

No unnecessary detail.

---

“Lower substructure,” he said. “Ritual activity confirmed below primary access corridors.”

A pause.

“Primary teams engage from upper levels. You move after breach begins.”

---

“Delay?” Mai asked.

---

“Thirty seconds.”

---

Ace’s expression didn’t change.

But that was longer than it should have been.

---

“Why.”

---

“Unknown variables.”

No hesitation.

“Command wants primary disruption first.”

---

Translation:

They didn’t trust the data.

---

Mai accepted it.

Didn’t agree.

---

Shammy tilted her head again.

Listening deeper this time.

---

“They’ve already started,” she said.

---

The handler didn’t react.

Didn’t understand.

---

Mai did.

---

“Define ‘started.’”

---

Shammy’s eyes didn’t focus on anything in the room.

“They’re not building it.”

A beat.

“They’re maintaining it.”

---

That changed the timeline.

---

Mai looked back at the projection.

The convergence point.

Still stable.

Still mapped.

---

But if Shammy was right—

---

“Then the anchor exists,” Mai said.

---

Ace’s gaze sharpened.

---

“Then we’re late.”

---

No one corrected her.

---

The handler’s comm unit crackled.

---

Brief.

Compressed.

---

“Primary teams moving,” he said.

---

Right on schedule.

---

Too late.

---

The room shifted again.

Not physically.

Functionally.

---

This time, it was noticeable.

---

A crate near the far wall—

its edge didn't line up with the floor markings.

Just for a moment.

Then it did.

---

Ace saw it.

Didn't comment.

---

Mai stepped closer to the projection.

Adjusted the scale.

Measured again.

---

The coordinates still held.

---

“Surface consistency degrading,” she said.

---

The handler frowned.

Didn't understand.

---

“Meaning.”

---

“It means your map is about to be wrong.”

---

The first impact hit somewhere above them.

Muted.

Contained.

---

Primary breach.

---

The room didn't shake.

It absorbed it.

---

That was worse.

---

Shammy's fingers twitched slightly.

Static crackled — soft, almost inaudible.

---

“It’s accelerating,” she said.

---

The projection flickered.

---

Not a glitch.

A correction.

---

The convergence point shifted—  
less than a meter.

---

Then snapped back.

---

The handler saw that.

This time, he reacted.

---

“Update—”

---

The projection froze.

---

For half a second.

---

Then resumed.

---

Mai stepped back.

Decision made.

---

“We don’t wait.”

---

The handler hesitated.

Protocol.

Orders.

---

Ace moved.

---

That decided it.

---

“Go,” the handler said.

---

Too late to enforce anything else.

---

They moved.

---

The corridor beyond the staging area was narrower.

Lower.

Utility architecture.

---

Lights overhead.

Evenly spaced.

---

At first.

---

Mai counted again.

---

One.

Two.

Three—

---

The fourth light was slightly closer than it should have been.

---

She didn't stop.

Didn't slow.

---

Ace noticed anyway.

---

"Pattern break."

---

"Confirmed," Mai said.

---

Shammy's voice was quieter now.

---

"It's pulling."

---

"Where," Ace asked.

---

Shammy didn't answer immediately.

---

Then:

"Not forward."

---

A beat.

“Everywhere.”

---

That was worse.

---

They reached the access point.

---

Door already open.

---

Not forced.

Not breached.

---

Just...

open.

---

Ace paused at the threshold.

---

Not hesitation.

Measurement.

---

Mai checked the frame.

Alignment.

---

Wrong.

---

Not visibly.

---

But enough.

---

“Anchor is below,” she said.

---

Shammy stepped closer.

---

The air shifted again.

---

Stronger this time.

---

“It’s deeper than that,” she said.

---

Ace stepped through.

---

No waiting.

---

No signal.

---

Mai followed.

---

Shammy last.

---

Behind them, the corridor remained exactly as it had been.

---

Ahead—

---

---

It didn't quite decide what it was yet.

---

And somewhere below, something was already holding itself together—

---

just well enough

to break.

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