

CHAPTER 7 — Arrival

The door was already open.

It shouldn't have been.

Mai noticed it before she noticed anything else.

The frame—

correct.

The hinges—

aligned.

The opening—

too clean.

No lock.

No resistance.

Just—

access.

Ace didn't slow.

She stepped through.

The air changed.

Not violently.

Not even immediately.

Just enough—

that the next breath didn't match the last.

Shammy felt it first.

The pressure—

was stable.

But not natural.

"It's held together," she said quietly.

Mai followed Ace through the doorway.

Her eyes moved instantly—

not across objects—

across relationships.

Walls.

Spacing.

Distance.

Everything—

consistent.

But not built the way she expected.

“This isn’t Foundation architecture,” she said.

Ace glanced once.

Didn’t need more than that.

“Obviously.”

The space was narrow.

Concrete.

Surface wear that wasn't regulated.

Marks that hadn't been removed.

That alone was enough.

Foundation didn't allow that.

Shammy stepped through last.

The moment she crossed the threshold—

the air settled.

Not perfectly.

But—

enough.

The door behind them remained open.

Mai turned.

Measured it.

Still there.

Good.

For now.

Ace moved forward.

The corridor extended—

straight.

No drift.

No correction.

Each step landed exactly where it should.

After what they had just been through—

that felt wrong.

Mai counted.

One.

Two.

Three.

Perfect.

She didn't like it.

Shammy exhaled.

The air responded.

Late—

but correctly.

“This place breathes,” she said.

Ace didn’t turn.

“Everything does.”

Shammy shook her head slightly.

“Not like this.”

That mattered.

The corridor opened.

Not into a chamber.

Into space.

Real space.

Open.

Layered.

Alive.

Light spilled in—

not artificial white—

color.

Movement.

Noise.

Ace stopped.

Not because she hesitated.

Because the environment required it.

Mai stepped up beside her.

For a moment—

neither of them moved.

Below them—

the city stretched.

Vertical.

Dense.

Uncontained.

Neon cut through shadow.

Vehicles moved in layered paths.

Sound carried—

not clean—

but constant.

This was not a controlled system.

This was—

something else.

Mai spoke first.

“Population density is extreme.”

Ace’s gaze tracked movement patterns.

“No perimeter.”

That was worse.

Shammy stepped forward.

The air shifted again.

Not wrong—

just—

full.

“Too much pressure,” she said.

Not unstable.

Just—

constant.

She closed her eyes for a second.

Adjusted.

When she opened them—

she had it.

“It holds,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“That’s enough.”

Ace turned away from the view.

“Then we move.”

No hesitation.

No discussion.

Standing still didn't solve anything.

They descended.

Stairs.

Not uniform.

Not measured to perfection.

Real.

Each step grounded them further.

The deeper they moved—

the louder the city became.

Voices.

Engines.

Music—

bleeding from somewhere unseen.

Everything overlapping—

but agreeing.

That was the difference.

Chaos—

that still followed rules.

Mai adjusted her pace.

“We need information.”

Ace didn't disagree.

“Contacts.”

Shammy tilted her head.

Listening again.

“Someone’s coming.”

Ace stopped.

Not tense.

Ready.

Footsteps approached.

Not cautious.

Not aggressive.

Confident.

A figure stepped into view.

Casual posture.

Measured gaze.

No immediate hostility.

But no confusion either.

That was the first real anomaly since arrival.

The figure looked at them—

once—

and understood something.

Not everything.

But enough.

A small breath.

Almost a laugh.

“...Huh.”

Ace didn't move.

Mai watched.

Shammy felt the air shift—

just slightly—

around the newcomer.

Recognition.

Not emotional.

Structural.

The figure tilted their head.

Studying them.

“Yeah...”

A pause.

“...you’re not supposed to be real.”

Silence held for a moment.

Not empty.

Measured.

Ace broke it.

“Where are we.”

The figure didn't look away.

"Night City."

A beat.

"...more or less."

Mai processed that instantly.

Not enough data.

But usable.

Shammy exhaled softly.

The air held.

Stable.

For now.

Ace's grip tightened slightly—

not on a weapon—

on presence.

“Then you talk,” she said.

The figure smiled.

Not friendly.

Not hostile.

Practical.

“Yeah,” they said.

“...looks like I do.”

And just like that—

the first connection formed.

Not planned.

Not controlled.

But—

functional.

And in this place—

that was enough
to start moving forward.

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