

CHAPTER 2 — Vertical Entry

The tower didn't hide.

It didn't need to.

Glass and steel rose straight out of the city like it had decided everything below it was optional.

Controlled.

Contained.

Owned.

Ace stopped half a step before the entrance.

Not hesitation.

Measurement.

"Too clean," she said.

Mai didn't look at the structure—

she looked at the system.

Entry points.

Flow lines.

Access control.

Everything—

aligned.

“That’s the design,” she said.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air—

tight.

Filtered.

“This place doesn’t breathe,” she said.

V shrugged slightly.

“Yeah,” they said.

“...corpos don’t like unpredictability.”

Ace moved.

No pause.

The doors opened before she reached them.

Not fast.

Not slow.

Correct.

That was wrong.

Mai noticed immediately.

“No scan,” she said.

V frowned.

“...There should’ve been.”

Ace didn’t react.

She walked through.

The system accepted her.

No alert.

No hesitation.

Just—

entry.

Mai followed.

This time—

she felt it.

Not resistance.

Recognition.

The system didn't check her.

It confirmed her.

“That’s not validation,” she said quietly.

“It’s assignment.”

Shammy stepped in last.

The air—

shifted.

Not violently.

Just—

wrong.

“It’s pulling us into place,” she said.

V stopped at the threshold.

Didn’t step in.

“...Okay, yeah,” they muttered.

“...that’s not normal.”

Ace glanced back.

“You coming.”

V hesitated—

just a fraction.

Then stepped inside.

The system paused.

For the first time—

it hesitated.

Then—

accepted.

“...Yeah,” V said quietly.

“...I hate that.”

The lobby didn't echo.

Sound moved—

but didn't bounce.

Everything was absorbed.

Controlled.

Mai's eyes moved—

tracking spacing.

Perfect symmetry.

Perfect alignment.

Perfect—

agreement.

“This is worse,” she said.

Ace didn’t ask why.

“Because it works,” Mai continued.

A beat.

“Completely.”

That was the danger.

A security unit turned its head as they passed.

Paused.

Processed.

Then—

returned to idle.

No challenge.

No alert.

That was wrong.

Ace stopped.

“Again,” she said.

Mai stepped slightly to the side.

Out of symmetry.

The system—

flickered.

Just a fraction.

Then—

corrected.

“It’s compensating,” she said.

Shammy tilted her head.

The air—

tightened.

“It wants us in place,” she said.

V looked between them.

“...You’re saying the building is arranging you.”

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Flat.

No exaggeration.

Ace turned toward the elevators.

“Then we go up.”

No delay.

The elevator doors opened before she reached them.

Of course they did.

Inside—

no panel interaction needed.

No selection.

No input.

The doors closed.

And the lift began moving.

Up.

“Top floor,” V said quietly.

“...I didn’t press anything.”

Mai didn’t look at the panel.

“It already knows where we belong,” she said.

That word again.

Belong.

Shammy leaned back slightly.

The air—

compressed.

Not painful.

Just—

too exact.

“It’s worse higher up,” she said.

Ace nodded once.

“Good.”

V groaned.

“...You need a different word.”

No one answered.

The elevator didn't slow.

Didn't adjust.

Didn't hesitate.

It moved—

with absolute certainty—

toward a floor—

that had already decided—

who was supposed to be there.

And this time—

it wasn't just letting them in.

It was bringing them
exactly where they were expected.

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