

CHAPTER 4 — Access Collapse

No one reached for the keycard immediately.

That mattered.

Because the moment someone did—

the system would choose.

Ace didn't move.

Not yet.

She watched the figure.

Still.

Certain.

"You don't belong here," she said.

The figure didn't react.

"I do."

No hesitation.

No doubt.

That was the problem.

Mai stepped slightly to the side.

Not closer to the card—

out of alignment.

The space—

flickered.

Just a fraction.

“There are multiple ownership states,” she said.

Ace didn’t look away from the figure.

“Fix it.”

Mai didn’t answer.

Because “fix” wasn’t an option.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air—

tight—

then spreading.

“It’s not choosing,” she said.

A beat.

“It’s keeping all of them.”

That locked it.

V stayed near the entrance.

Watching—

not stepping further in.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...that’s worse than a breach.”

Mai moved.

Not toward the figure—

toward the keycard.

The moment she crossed a certain line—

the system reacted.

The lights didn't flicker.

The space didn't distort.

But the relationships—

shifted.

The distance between her—

and the card—

shortened.

Not physically.

Structurally.

Ace noticed immediately.

“It wants you there,” she said.

Mai didn’t deny it.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“It is assigning access.”

Shammy stepped closer.

The air—

resisted.

Light.

But real.

“It’s narrowing,” she said.

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“It’s concentrating.”

That was worse.

The figure moved again.

Closer now.

Still calm.

Still certain.

“You’re in my space,” they said.

Ace didn’t react.

“Wrong.”

The figure tilted their head slightly.

“You’re confused.”

No aggression.

Just—

validation.

Mai reached the keycard.

Didn't pick it up.

Not yet.

Her hand hovered above it.

The system—

paused.

For the first time.

Shammy felt it.

The air—

held.

Not moving.

“It’s waiting,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“For confirmation.”

That was the trap.

Ace stepped forward.

Not toward the card—

toward the figure.

The space—

accepted both.

No conflict.

Two owners.

Same validity.

That couldn't hold.

“Now,” Ace said.

Mai moved.

She took the keycard.

The reaction—

instant.

The system—

collapsed inward.

Not physically—

logically.

Ownership states—

multiplied.

Three.

Four.

More.

The figure—

didn't disappear.

It duplicated.

Not visually—

structurally.

Shammy inhaled sharply.

The air—

fractured.

"It's escalating!" she said.

Mai held the card—

but didn't define it.

Didn't assign it.

Just—

kept it unstable.

"That's the limit," she said.

Ace didn't slow.

"Then push it."

Mai didn't argue.

She stepped—

not forward—

not back—

sideways.

Out of alignment.

The card—

reacted.

Not choosing—

rejecting.

That was new.

The system—

stuttered.

Ownership states—

conflicted.

None dominant.

None stable.

Shammy pushed—

not against it—

through it.

The air—

refused structure.

Pressure—

uneven.

Alive.

The figure—

all versions—

hesitated.

For the first time.

Ace stepped between them.

Not attacking.

Interrupting.

The system—

failed to resolve.

Not collapse.

Fail.

That was enough.

The duplicates—

merged.

Not clean.

Not perfect.

Uncertain.

The space—

lost clarity.

Ownership—

undefined.

Mai lowered the card slightly.

It resisted.

Good.

Shammy exhaled.

The air—

uneven.

Breathing again.

V let out a breath.

“...Okay.”

A beat.

“...that’s officially worse than anything I’ve seen this week.”

Ace didn’t respond.

She looked at Mai.

“Status.”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“It cannot decide.”

A pause.

“Which means it cannot complete.”

That was the goal.

But not the end.

Because now—

the penthouse didn't belong—

to anyone.

And in Night City—

that wasn't safety.

That was an invitation

for something worse

to try

and take it.

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