

CHAPTER 6 — Residual Ownership

The system didn't thank them.

It didn't acknowledge them.

It didn't adapt.

It continued.

Security alerts still ran—

but without direction.

Tracking systems still scanned—

but without certainty.

The penthouse—

functioned.

Imperfectly.

Exactly as intended.

Ace walked toward the exit.

No rush.

No hesitation.

Behind her—

the space didn't correct.

Didn't stabilize.

Didn't try to become whole.

It remained—

in failure.

Mai followed.

The keycard—

still in her hand—

resisted.

Not aligning.

Not settling.

Good.

Shammy stepped behind them.

The air—

uneven.

Alive.

But no longer pushing.

“That’s it,” she said quietly.

Ace didn’t respond.

She already knew.

V waited near the elevator.

Watching the room—

carefully—

like it might change its mind.

“...So we’re done?” they asked.

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

Because “done” wasn’t accurate.

“Yes,” she said.

Flat.

“For now.”

That was enough.

The elevator opened before they reached it.

Of course it did.

They stepped inside.

This time—

the system didn’t guide them.

Didn't select.

Didn't decide.

The panel lit.

Waiting.

Mai pressed the control.

Down.

The elevator moved.

Without certainty.

That was new.

V exhaled slowly.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...that’s not going to make anyone feel better.”

Ace didn’t respond.

She watched the reflection in the glass.

Not herself—

the system behind it.

Still running.

Still failing.

Good.

The penthouse owner was waiting.

Not inside.

Outside the system.

In a space that still made sense.

They didn't speak immediately.

They didn't need to.

The owner's gaze moved across them—

not searching—

confirming.

"...It functions," they said.

Not a question.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

A pause.

“It will not stabilize.”

The owner considered that.

Not surprised.

Not disappointed.

Just—

adjusting expectations.

“...Good,” they said.

That word again.

Ace didn't react.

"Payment."

Direct.

The owner transferred it without hesitation.

No negotiation.

No delay.

The numbers—

high.

Appropriate.

Mai confirmed.

“Received.”

The owner nodded once.

Then—

reached into their coat.

Paused.

Not uncertain.

Selecting.

“You deal with things that don’t belong here,” they said.

Not admiration.

Observation.

Mai didn't answer.

The owner continued.

"This didn't either."

They held something out.

Small.

Physical.

Wrong.

Mai took it.

Carefully.

Not examining it—

feeling it.

The texture—

aged.

Too aged.

She turned it slightly.

A photograph.

Faded.

Edges worn.

Not from this place.

Not from this time.

And in it—

something that didn't belong in this world—

something that shouldn't exist here at all—

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Shammy inhaled—

sharp.

The air—

tightened.

"That's not from here," she said.

Mai didn't respond.

Because she already knew.

Ace glanced at it—

once.

Then away.

“Later,” she said.

That was enough.

The owner stepped back.

Not interested in explanations.

Not expecting them.

“Figured you’d have more use for it than I ever did,” they said.

Flat.

Final.

Mai closed her hand around the photograph.

Not holding it—

containing it.

V looked between them.

“...Okay,” they said quietly.

“...that one I don’t like.”

No one disagreed.

They moved.

Out of the tower.

Back into the city.

Noise returned.

Movement.

Chaos.

Imperfect.

Alive.

Behind them—

the penthouse remained.

Usable.

Unstable.

Ownerless.

And somewhere—

beneath the surface of systems that thought they understood the world—

something older—

something misplaced—

had just surfaced—

quietly—

without explanation—

without permission—

waiting

for someone

to realize

what it meant.

—

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