

CHAPTER 3 — The Inserted Memory

The elevator didn't hesitate.

It accepted Ace.

That still felt wrong.

Higher floors.

Less noise.

More control.

CatCo Worldwide Media filtered access here—

not by force—

by clearance.

Ace walked in anyway.

The system let her.

Mai noticed.

“Your presence is now a valid state,” she said.

Flat.

No emphasis.

That mattered.

V muttered behind them:

“...Yeah, still not used to that.”

Neither was Ace.

She didn't say it.

Didn't need to.

The doors opened.

Executive floor.

Cleaner.

Quieter.

More dangerous.

Screens—

fewer—

but denser.

Data streams—

curated.

This was where stories became truth.

Mai moved immediately.

Not rushing—

prioritizing.

Access nodes.

Local terminals.

She didn't sit.

Didn't log in.

She watched.

Patterns.

Flow.

And then—

she stopped.

“There,” she said.

A desk.

Unoccupied.

Clean.

Too clean.

Ace stepped closer.

The surface—

minimal.

Terminal.

Personal shard dock.

One slot—

active.

That was it.

Mai reached—

paused.

Not hesitation.

Calibration.

“This will not present as data,” she said.

A beat.

“It will present as memory.”

Ace didn't respond.

“Do it,” she said.

Mai took the shard.

Standard form.

Nothing special.

No visual anomaly.

That made it worse.

She slotted it.

No warning.

No delay.

The system accepted it instantly.

And then—

Mai blinked.

Once.

Twice.

The room—

shifted.

Not physically.

Contextually.

She was sitting.

Different chair.

Different angle.

Voices around her—

familiar—

specific—

wrong.

“We need to run this tonight.”

A voice.

Firm.

Confident.

She turned.

Saw faces—

recognized them—

knew them—

had never met them.

A screen—

headline already written.

“Operator Identified — Internal Access Confirmed”

And there—

in the reflection—

Ace.

Standing behind her.

Present.

Real.

It felt—

complete.

Consistent.

True.

Mai spoke—

in the memory—

“I’ve verified the logs.”

That was wrong.

She hadn’t.

But she remembered saying it.

The memory held.

Clean.

Structured.

And then—

it broke.

The room snapped back.

Reality—

unaltered.

The shard—

still in place.

Mai stepped back—

immediately.

“Remove it,” she said.

Sharp.

Ace pulled it free.

No resistance.

No change.

Just—

gone.

Mai exhaled—

slower this time.

Processing—

not instant.

“That was not a simulation,” she said.

A beat.

“That was a completed memory.”

Shammy stepped closer.

The air—

tightened.

“You believed it,” she said.

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

Then—

“Yes.”

Flat.

Accurate.

V stared at the shard.

“...So that thing just—what—writes fake memories?”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“It writes valid ones.”

That was worse.

Ace looked at the shard.

Just once.

“Scope,” she said.

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“Local insertion point,” she said.

A beat.

“But propagation is systemic.”

She turned to the terminal.

Data still clean.

Logs still correct.

No sign of the memory.

“This does not alter data,” she said.

“It alters interpretation.”

The core.

Not the record—

the reader.

Shammy’s gaze shifted slightly.

The air—

unchanged.

“It doesn’t touch me,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“No.”

A beat.

“It requires structure.”

Human.

Cognitive.

Narrative.

Ace stepped back.

Looked at the floor—

the space—

the system.

“Purpose,” she said.

Mai answered.

“Control.”

Flat.

Direct.

“Not through force.”

A pause.

“Through story.”

V rubbed their face.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...that tracks way too well.”

Ace turned.

“We break it.”

No question.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“But not by removing the shard.”

Another.

“By breaking the narrative.”

That was harder.

Because somewhere—

inside CatCo's systems—

inside its people—

inside its memory—

the story had already been written.

And they were still—

trying to prove—

it hadn't.

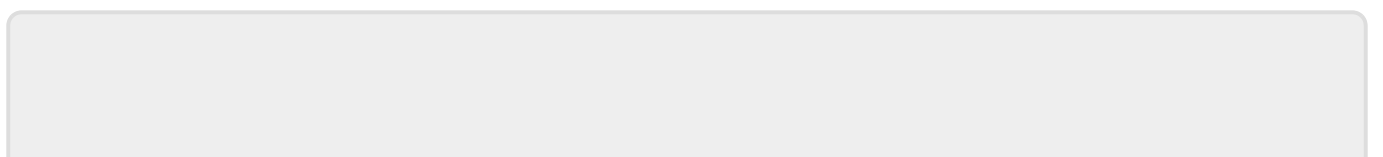
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