

CHAPTER 2 — Newsroom Without Truth

The building didn't feel wrong.

That was the first problem.

CatCo Worldwide Media ran like it always did—

lights steady—

screens alive—

voices layered into a constant, controlled noise.

Efficient.

Functional.

Trusted.

Ace walked in without slowing.

No alert.

No resistance.

The system recognized her.

That was new.

And wrong—

in a different way.

Mai noticed it too.

“Access accepted,” she said.

Flat.

“Clean.”

No friction.

No pushback.

The doors opened—

exactly when they should.

Timing—

perfect.

Inside—

nothing was.

Desks filled.

People working.

Screens updating.

Everything—

normal.

Until you listened.

“We ran that piece yesterday,” someone said.

Another voice—

“No, that’s today’s slot.”

A third—

“...I already edited it.”

Mai’s gaze moved—

fast—

connecting.

Discrepancies stacked.

Not random.

Patterned.

“They are building consistency from false inputs,” she said.

Shammy stepped further in.

The air—

unchanged.

That was worse.

“It feels stable,” she said.

A beat.

“Too stable.”

V frowned.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...like nobody thinks anything’s wrong.”

Because they didn’t.

That was the point.

Ace stopped near a workstation.

Didn’t touch it.

Didn’t need to.

The screen displayed an article—

half written.

Headline:

“Unidentified Operator Seen in Lower Floors”

Ace read it once.

No reaction.

“That’s you,” V said quietly.

Ace didn’t answer.

Because it wasn’t.

Mai stepped closer—

scanned the data—

timestamps—

edit logs—

user activity.

Everything—

consistent.

Everything—

wrong.

“This was not written,” she said.

A beat.

“It is remembered.”

The cursor blinked.

Waiting.

Like the article had always been there.

A voice behind them:

“I told you that was real.”

They turned.

A journalist—

mid-thirties—

tired eyes—

certain expression.

“I saw it,” she said.

Pointing—

not at Ace—

at the screen.

“He was here.”

Her gaze shifted—

landed on Ace.

Recognition.

Immediate.

“You,” she said.

Not surprised.

Confirmed.

“You came through here yesterday.”

Ace didn’t respond.

Didn’t deny it.

Didn’t engage.

“Incorrect,” Mai said.

Flat.

The journalist frowned—

just slightly.

“No,” she said.

Firm.

“I remember it.”

A beat.

“You spoke to someone.”

Another.

“Security didn’t stop you.”

Everything about it—

specific.

Detailed.

Impossible.

V shifted uncomfortably.

“...Yeah, that didn’t happen.”

The journalist blinked.

Once.

Then—

recovered.

“It did,” she said.

Softer now.

Less certain.

But still—

believed.

Shammy stepped closer.

The air—

moved around her—

subtle—

unnoticed.

“You’re holding two versions,” she said.

The journalist looked at her—

confused.

“What?”

Shammy tilted her head.

“You know it didn’t happen,” she said.

A beat.

“But you remember that it did.”

Silence.

The journalist hesitated.

Just a fraction.

That was enough.

Mai watched—

closely.

“The memory is anchored,” she said.

“To narrative.”

Not data.

Not fact.

Story.

Ace stepped back from the screen.

Looked at the room—

again.

Now—

it wasn't normal.

Now—

it was structured.

People weren't working.

They were aligning.

Matching memory—

to output.

Building something—

that felt true.

Even when it wasn't.

V exhaled slowly.

"...Okay," they said.

"...this is worse than the last one."

No one argued.

Mai turned slightly.

Scanning—

not the people—

the system.

“There is no single shard,” she said.

A beat.

“This is already distributed.”

That escalated it.

Ace’s gaze shifted—

toward the upper floors.

“Source,” she said.

Not a question.

Direction.

Mai nodded.

“Higher access level,” she said.

“Editorial or core systems.”

Of course it was.

The room behind them—

continued.

Uninterrupted.

Unaware.

Because as long as the story made sense—

no one questioned where it came from.

And somewhere—

above them—

inside a system designed to define truth—

something had already written

what happened next.

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