

# 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.

---

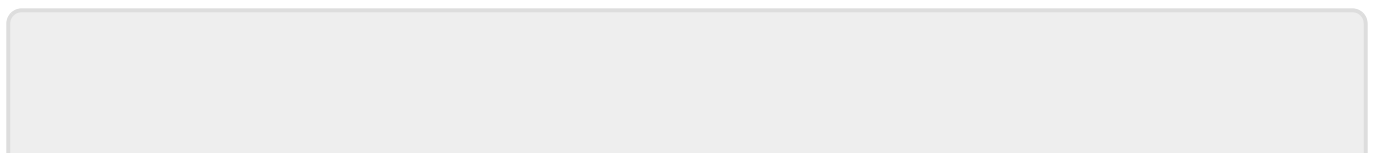
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