

CHAPTER 4 — Narrative Infection

The floor above didn't exist on any public directory.

Of course it didn't.

Editorial core.

Where stories stopped being drafts—

and became direction.

CatCo Worldwide Media didn't guard it with guns.

It guarded it with certainty.

Ace walked in anyway.

No alarm.

No delay.

The system already knew her.

That still sat wrong.

Mai noticed the difference immediately.

“Access chain is extending,” she said.

Flat.

“You are being recognized at higher levels.”

V muttered:

“...Yeah, that’s not creepy at all.”

Shammy stepped through last.

The air—

unchanged.

That was worse.

The room was smaller.

Quieter.

Fewer people.

More control.

Screens displayed active drafts—

live feeds—

story frameworks.

Not news.

Narratives.

“They’re not reporting,” Mai said.

“They’re aligning.”

That was the core.

Ace moved closer to one of the main displays.

Didn’t touch it.

Didn’t need to.

The headline updated—

live.

“Unidentified Operator Confirmed in Internal Systems”

A subline appeared beneath it—

typed—

then locked.

“Access logs support prior presence.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

“They are reinforcing the memory,” she said.

A beat.

“Not creating new ones.”

That meant—

it had already spread.

A voice behind them:

“We have confirmation.”

They turned.

Senior editor.

Calm.

Composed.

Certain.

“It’s consistent across departments,” she said.

“We’ve verified the timeline.”

Mai stepped forward.

“You have not,” she said.

Flat.

The editor blinked.

Just once.

Then recovered.

“Yes,” she said.

Firm.

“We have.”

A pause.

“The operator entered at 19:20.”

Her gaze moved—

to Ace.

Recognition.

Again.

“You,” she said.

Not surprised.

Validated.

Ace didn't respond.

Didn't deny it.

Didn't confirm.

She just—

stood there.

That was already breaking it.

Mai moved to the terminal.

Didn't input.

Didn't override.

She observed.

The system wasn't lying.

It was—

consistent.

The data—

clean.

The logs—

correct.

But the interpretation—

locked.

“They are building a closed loop,” she said.

A beat.

“Memory confirms narrative.”

“ Narrative confirms memory.”

No exit.

V exhaled.

“...So we’re stuck inside their story.”

Mai didn’t answer.

Because that was accurate.

Shammy stepped forward.

The air—

shifted.

Subtle.

Unnoticed.

“They feel right,” she said.

A pause.

“That’s why it holds.”

The editor nodded—

as if agreeing—

without understanding.

“Exactly,” she said.

“This is verified.”

The word hung—

heavy.

Verified.

Ace stepped closer.

Into her space.

Too close.

Not aggressive.

Just—

wrong.

“You didn’t see it,” Ace said.

Flat.

The editor frowned.

“I remember it,” she said.

That was her anchor.

Mai spoke—

cutting through it.

“You remember confirming it,” she said.

A beat.

“Not observing it.”

The editor hesitated.

Just a fraction.

That was enough.

Shammy shifted—

the air—

unbalanced.

Pressure—

slightly off.

“You’re filling the gap,” she said.

Quiet.

The editor’s expression changed.

Not confusion.

Discomfort.

“No,” she said.

Less certain.

“It’s consistent.”

But consistency wasn’t truth.

That was the flaw.

Mai turned—

to the system—

to the network—

to the structure holding it together.

“This is not a shard,” she said.

A beat.

“This is distribution.”

That escalated everything.

V stared at the screens.

“...So it’s everywhere.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Flat.

“Everywhere that matters.”

The narrative wasn’t contained.

It was active.

Self-reinforcing.

Self-correcting.

Self-believing.

Ace stepped back.

Looked at the room—

the people—

the system.

“They’re not wrong,” she said.

A pause.

“They’re aligned.”

That was worse.

Mai turned back to her.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“And alignment is the problem.”

Silence.

Short.

Sharp.

Because there was only one way to break it.

Not by correcting it.

Not by removing it.

But by making it—

unreliable.

And somewhere—

inside a system built to decide what was real—

the next version of the story—

was already forming—

before they had a chance

to stop it.

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