

CHAPTER 2 — Structure That Doesn't Hold

The building wasn't abandoned.

It simply wasn't used.

There was a difference.

The lights worked.

Doors responded.

Systems were online.

But nothing lived there.

Night City didn't forget places. It recycled them, broke them down, built something new on top.

This one hadn't been touched.

That was wrong.

Ace didn't slow. She didn't check the entrance.

The door opened anyway.

Recognized.

Accepted.

That didn't sit right.

Mai stepped in first, her eyes already moving—not scanning, not searching, but mapping. Lines, distances, relations. The shape of the space before it had time to pretend it was stable.

"The layout is inconsistent," she said.

Flat. Immediate.

Ace didn't answer.

She didn't need to.

She could feel it.

Distances sat just slightly off. Angles refused to settle cleanly. The corridor stretched a fraction too far, then corrected, then slipped again like it hadn't decided what it was supposed to be.

Shammy paused at the threshold.

The air lagged behind her.

Then caught up.

Wrong order.

“It doesn’t settle,” she said quietly. After a beat, more precise: “It keeps adjusting.”

Which meant the space wasn’t stable.

It was reacting.

Ace stepped forward.

The floor held.

The walls mostly did.

But the distance between them shifted—not in a way the eye could track, but in how the body read the space. Subtle. Wrong.

Mai moved ahead, slower now, each step measured.

“This is not expansion,” she said.

A pause, as she recalibrated what she was seeing.

“This is misalignment.”

That mattered.

Ace reached the first intersection and stopped just long enough to look.

Left.

The hallway stretched out long, empty, unchanged—or trying to be.

Right.

Shorter. Compressed. The proportions wrong in a way that made the eye hesitate.

She didn’t choose between them.

She moved forward.

The space adjusted.

Not abruptly.

Just enough to match the decision.

That was worse.

Shammy stepped in behind them, the air shifting with her. Pressure gathered, then slipped sideways like it didn't quite know where it was supposed to settle.

"It's following us," she said.

A beat.

"Or... responding."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Then:

"Yes."

Flat.

"It is adjusting to observation."

That locked it in place conceptually, even if the space itself refused to do the same.

Ace didn't slow. Didn't hesitate.

She kept moving, forcing the space to keep up with her instead of the other way around.

It worked.

For now.

Until it didn't.

The next corridor stretched longer than it should have been.

Then shorter.

Then both, in a way that made distance meaningless for a second too long.

Mai stopped.

“This is the source radius,” she said.

A brief pause, as if confirming it internally.

“Further in.”

Of course it was.

Ace stepped past her.

Deeper.

The building stopped pretending.

Walls drifted slightly off-angle, just enough to break the illusion of straight lines. The floor wasn't entirely flat anymore—not uneven, but unreliable. Distance lost its consistency, stretching and compressing without warning.

And then—

the air changed.

Sharper.

Denser.

Shammy inhaled slowly.

It didn't come out evenly.

“There,” she said.

Not a direction.

A state.

Mai turned just slightly, her eyes narrowing as the pattern finally began to converge into something usable.

“Yes,” she said.

Flat.

"It is close."

Ace didn't ask how.

She didn't need to.

She stepped forward—

and the space shifted.

Not to stop her.

To accommodate her.

That was the confirmation.

They weren't moving through the building.

The building was moving around them.

And somewhere just ahead—at the point where structure failed completely—

something that didn't belong

was holding everything together

simply by being

in the wrong place.

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