

ACT II — “The Attempted Prevention”

The room was sealed in less than ninety seconds.

Not physically—that had already been done. Doors locked, access points controlled, personnel repositioned with quiet efficiency. What changed was informational. Channels narrowed. Noise reduced. The kind of silence that didn't come from absence, but from decisions.

Mai stood at the head of the conference table again, not touching it this time.

The twelve glasses had not stopped trembling.

That mattered.

If the overlap had been purely reactive, removing contact would have dampened the effect. Instead, the system continued to express instability on its own.

Autonomous.

Sustained.

She didn't like that word.

Across the room, the figure remained near the glass. Less distinct now, not because it was fading, but because the room was adjusting around it—failing to agree on where exactly it belonged.

Ace hadn't moved.

Still facing it. Still not drawing her blades.

Waiting.

That was the other thing that mattered.

If this had been a threat in the traditional sense, she would already have acted. The delay wasn't hesitation. It was classification.

Behind them, the containment lead returned, carrying a thin slate and a face that had already made too many small recalculations in too little time.

“We pulled what you asked for,” he said. “Or as much as exists without digging through three layers of people who don't want us digging.”

“Show me,” Mai said.

He stepped beside her and projected the data across the table surface. The water in the glasses refracted the light into fractured bands that didn't quite align with the projection.

Again—useful.

“Elias Voss,” the lead began. “Forty-six. Founder and primary architect of Voss Meridian Systems. Background in applied field harmonics, signal interference, and distributed energy networks. Over the

last five years, he's pivoted heavily into anti-ritual architectures."

Mai's eyes moved across the data faster than the projection could comfortably support.

"Define 'anti-ritual,'" she said.

"Field disruption," the lead replied. "He claims his system can introduce controlled noise into symbolic structures—breaks pattern coherence, collapses ritual chains before they complete."

Ace spoke without turning. "He makes rituals fail."

"Yes."

"On purpose."

"Yes."

Shammy exhaled slowly. The air shifted around her in a way that made the overhead lights flicker once, almost imperceptibly.

"That would hurt a lot of people," she said.

Mai didn't look up. "Yes."

The lead continued. "Tomorrow morning was supposed to be the full release. Private demonstration first—this room, most likely. Then distributed rollout to contracted partners. Governments already expressed interest. Some... less official groups as well."

Mai tapped one line of data with her finger.

The projection stuttered.

"Pre-release anomalies?" she asked.

The lead hesitated. "There are reports. Unverified. A handful of ritual failures over the last forty-eight hours that don't align with known interference patterns. Symbol collapse without counter-signal. Chains breaking early. Practitioners reporting... inconsistencies."

"Inconsistencies how?"

"They describe it as... interruption without interruption. Like something finished wrong."

Ace's voice cut in, quiet.

"Or didn't finish at all."

The lead nodded once. "Yes."

Mai straightened slightly. The pieces were no longer floating. They were locking.

"Timeline," she said.

"Anomalies begin approximately thirty hours ago. First structural event in the tower at 21:14 tonight. Voss scheduled to finalize release documentation at 22:30."

Mai glanced at the clock in the corner of the projection.

22:11.

Shammy felt it before anyone else spoke.

“The pressure is building,” she said.

Not louder.

Denser.

The air in the room had begun to resist subtle movement. Not enough to impede breathing. Enough to make each inhale feel slightly... negotiated.

Mai closed the projection with a flick of her fingers.

“Listen carefully,” she said.

Everyone did.

At first, nothing.

Then—

A faint, distant creak.

Not from above.

Not from below.

From *within* the structure of the moment itself.

Like weight deciding where it belonged.

The glasses on the table trembled harder.

One of them tipped.

Stopped halfway.

Hung there.

Impossible angle.

Surface tension stretched into something that wasn't physics anymore, just agreement temporarily refusing to resolve.

Ace moved.

Not fast.

Precise.

She stepped to the table and, without hesitation, pushed the glass the rest of the way over.

Water spilled.

Gravity asserted itself.

The glass hit the surface and rolled once before settling.

The tremor in the other glasses reduced by a measurable fraction.

Mai watched that, and something in her expression shifted from analysis to confirmation.

“Yes,” she said softly. “That’s correct.”

The figure by the window lifted its head.

“You made it move,” it said.

Ace didn’t look at it. “It was already moving.”

“You let it finish.”

“Part of it.”

The figure’s shoulders lowered a fraction. Relief again. Small. Fragile.

Mai turned toward it.

“You were not created by the collapse,” she said.

“No.”

“You were created by the interruption.”

“Yes.”

“You are maintaining the interruption.”

A pause.

Then: “I keep it from breaking too much.”

Mai nodded once.

“That is the problem.”

The figure didn’t argue.

It didn’t need to.

The room itself was already doing that.

Shammy stepped closer to the table, eyes half-lidded as she read something no instrument could chart.

“It’s not just the tower,” she said. “It’s the decision.”

Mai looked at her. “Explain.”

Shammy searched for the right shape of words.

“He was going to change something fundamental,” she said finally, nodding toward the ceiling—toward Voss, somewhere above them. “Not just here. Everywhere. The way things *work*.”

“Ritual systems,” Mai said.

“Yes. The way they connect. The way they... breathe.” Shammy frowned slightly. “If that changes, everything built on them changes too.”

Ace’s voice was flat. “So someone tried to stop him.”

“Yes,” Mai said. “And they did it correctly.”

The lead blinked. “Correctly?”

“They targeted the event chain that leads to the release,” Mai said. “Not the man. Not the building. The outcome.”

“And that’s a problem because—”

“Because they failed to complete the operation.”

Silence.

The kind that followed statements people didn’t want to understand.

The lead swallowed. “Walk me through that.”

Mai didn’t hesitate.

“They identified a future state they wanted to prevent: the release of Voss’s anti-ritual technology.”

She gestured lightly toward the room.

“They located a critical convergence point: this building, this tower, this sequence of events leading to that release.”

Her hand lowered.

“They initiated a termination ritual.”

The word hung in the air like a verdict.

“Designed not to summon or alter,” she continued, “but to *remove* the event from causal progression.”

The lead frowned. “Remove it.”

“Yes.”

“Erase it.”

“Yes.”

“And instead...”

Mai looked at the glass Ace had pushed over. The water still spread slowly across the polished surface, reflecting light that didn't quite match the room.

“...they prevented it from finishing.”

The creak came again.

Closer this time.

The walls did not move.

But something inside the room shifted.

Alignment.

Expectation.

The sense that a weight, somewhere above them, had just leaned further than it should have.

Shammy's eyes snapped upward.

“It's accelerating.”

“How long?” Ace asked.

Shammy didn't answer immediately.

Then, quietly:

“Minutes.”

The lead swore.

“Evacuate the upper levels,” he said into his comms. “Now. No arguments. If they resist, sedate and remove—”

Mai cut him off.

“That will not help.”

He stared at her. “Excuse me?”

“Evacuation addresses physical risk,” she said. “This is not a physical collapse.”

“Then what is it?”

Mai met his eyes.

“It is a collapse that has not been allowed to complete.”

Above them, somewhere in the upper structure of the tower, something gave way.

No sound reached them.

No vibration traveled through the floor.

But every glass on the table jumped.

Simultaneously.

The figure by the window flinched.

Not in fear.

In recognition.

“It’s starting again,” it said.

Ace turned toward the door.

“Then we go up.”

Mai didn’t move.

Not yet.

Because one final piece had just settled into place.

She looked at the figure.

At the worn face. The impossible stillness. The exhaustion of something that had been holding a moment open far longer than any system should allow.

“You’re not the cause,” she said.

“No.”

“You’re not the solution.”

“No.”

“You’re the delay.”

The figure closed its eyes.

“Yes.”

Mai nodded.

Decision made.

She turned to Ace.

“We don’t stop it.”

Ace didn’t ask.

“What do we do?”

Mai’s answer was quiet.

Precise.

Absolute.

“We let it finish.”

The elevator ride to the upper levels did not obey the same rules as the one that had brought them here.

It moved.

But not continuously.

Between floors forty-eight and fifty-two, the display froze for three seconds while the sensation of ascent continued. Then the numbers jumped. Fifty-three. Fifty-seven. Fifty-four. The doors did not open.

No one commented.

By the time they reached sixty-one, the pressure in the cabin had changed enough that breathing required conscious adjustment.

The doors slid open.

The hallway beyond was wrong in a way the lower levels had only suggested.

Walls leaned without leaning.

Lighting flickered in patterns that did not repeat.

At the far end, a set of reinforced glass doors marked the entrance to Voss’s private suite.

They were open.

Inside, Elias Voss stood alone in a room built for control.

Floor-to-ceiling displays surrounded him, each filled with cascading data, system models, lattice projections—an entire architecture of interference designed to dismantle ritual coherence at scale.

He looked up as they entered.

Annoyed.

Not afraid.

“Unless you’re here to sign a contract,” he said, “you’re interrupting something important.”

Behind him, the room... shifted.

For one impossible instant, the far wall buckled inward.

The ceiling dipped.

The entire space tilted toward collapse—

—and snapped back into place.

Voss didn't react.

Because for him—

it hadn't happened.

Ace stopped ten meters from him.

Mai stepped beside her.

Shammy remained near the door, eyes fixed not on the man, but on the invisible weight pressing down through the structure of the moment.

Mai spoke first.

“Mr. Voss,” she said calmly.

“You are about to make a decision.”

He frowned. “I've already made it.”

“Yes,” Mai said.

“That's the problem.”

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