

## Chapter 7 — The Breathless Space

They didn't speak for a while.

---

Not because there was nothing to say.

Because saying anything would have implied progression.

And this place—

Did not allow that.

---

Ace leaned lightly against the wall.

Not resting.

Testing.

---

Still no response.

---

Mai stood in the center of the corridor.

Perfectly still.

Not thinking faster.

Thinking more precisely.

---

Shammy—

Moved.

---

Not forward.

Not back.

---

Just—

---

Shifted.

---

One step to the side.

---

The air followed her.

---

That was new.

---

Not fully.

Not freely.

But—

Enough.

---

She stopped.

---

Closed her eyes.

---

Didn't speak.

---

Didn't explain.

---

Just—

Listened.

---

The corridor remained unchanged.

---

Ace watched her.

---

“What are you doing?” she asked quietly.

---

Shammy didn't answer.

---

Not immediately.

---

Then:

“Trying not to move it,” she said.

---

Ace frowned.

---

“You just said it doesn't respond.”

---

Shammy shook her head slightly.

---

“It doesn't respond to us,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“It responds to itself.”

---

Mai's gaze shifted.

---

That—

---

That mattered.

---

“Explain,” she said.

---

Shammy exhaled slowly.

---

The air tightened again.

---

Slightly more than before.

---

Then—

Held.

---

“It’s not still,” she said.

---

Ace looked around.

---

“Yes it is.”

---

Shammy opened her eyes.

---

“No,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“It’s holding still.”

---

That was different.

---

Mai stepped closer.

---

“How?”

---

Shammy didn't look at her.

---

“Like this,” she said.

---

She inhaled.

---

Stopped.

---

Did not exhale.

---

The air around them—

Shifted.

---

Just slightly.

---

Not enough to be wind.

Not enough to be pressure.

---

But enough—

---

To be noticed.

---

Ace's expression sharpened.

---

"There," she said.

---

Mai nodded once.

---

"Again."

---

Shammy didn't move.

---

Didn't breathe.

---

Didn't—

Release.

---

The corridor—

Tightened.

---

Subtly.

---

The space between them compressed—

Not physically.

Not measurably.

---

But—

Perceptibly.

---

Ace took a step forward.

---

The distance changed.

---

Barely.

---

But it did.

---

Ace stopped.

---

Looked at Mai.

---

“Did you see that?”

---

“Yes.”

---

That was enough.

---

Shammy exhaled.

---

The effect vanished instantly.

---

The corridor snapped back to its previous state.

---

Perfect.

---

Unchanged.

---

As if nothing had happened.

---

Shammy frowned.

---

“That’s not good,” she said.

---

Mai didn’t ask why.

---

She already knew.

---

“It corrected,” she said.

---

Shammy nodded.

---

“Yes.”

---

Ace crossed her arms.

---

“So it noticed.”

---

“No,” Shammy said.

---

A beat.

---

“It adjusted.”

---

That was worse.

---

Mai paced once.

---

Measured.

---

Thinking.

---

“It’s maintaining a state,” she said.

---

Ace looked at her.

---

“Yeah. We got that.”

---

Mai shook her head.

---

“No,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“It’s actively maintaining it.”

---

Silence.

---

That changed the equation.

---

Ace's posture shifted slightly.

---

"So if we push—"

---

"It compensates," Mai finished.

---

Ace exhaled slowly.

---

"Then we push harder."

---

Shammy shook her head immediately.

---

"No."

---

That came sharper than anything she had said so far.

---

Ace looked at her.

---

"Why not?"

---

Shammy met her gaze.

---

“Because it’s already at maximum,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“If we force it, it won’t break.”

---

Ace’s eyes narrowed.

---

“What will it do?”

---

Shammy didn’t answer immediately.

---

Then:

“It will remove the change.”

---

Silence.

---

That word—

Remove—

Did not sit well.

---

Mai’s expression tightened slightly.

---

“Define ‘remove,’” she said.

---

Shammy hesitated.

---

Not out of uncertainty.

---

Out of precision.

---

Then:

“Not destroy,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“Prevent.”

---

Ace exhaled slowly.

---

“So if we push too far...”

---

Mai finished it.

---

“...we stop existing in a way that matters.”

---

That was not reassuring.

---

Shammy looked down the corridor again.

Listening.

---

This time—

Longer.

---

More focused.

---

Then—

Quietly:

“It’s tired.”

---

Ace blinked.

---

“That’s not possible.”

---

“No,” Shammy agreed.

---

A beat.

---

“But it’s holding something it can’t complete.”

---

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

---

“What?”

---

Shammy didn't answer.

---

Because—

She still couldn't hear it clearly.

---

But she could feel it.

---

A pressure.

---

Not from them.

---

From the space itself.

---

Something—

Unresolved.

---

Ace pushed off the wall.

---

"Then we find it," she said.

---

Mai nodded once.

---

"Yes."

---

This time—

---

There was direction.

---

Not a path.

---

But—

A vector.

---

Shammy took a slow breath.

---

The air responded.

---

Slightly more than before.

---

Not free.

Not stable.

---

But—

There.

---

For the first time—

The space did not immediately correct it.

---

That was new.

---

That mattered.

---

And somewhere—

Not ahead.

Not behind.

---

Within—

---

Something shifted.

---

Not visibly.

Not audibly.

---

But—

Present.

---

The corridor remained the same.

---

And yet—

It no longer felt entirely empty.

---

Not empty.

---

Never empty.

---

Just—

Holding.

—

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