

Chapter 9 — Incomplete Purpose

They didn't rush it.

That mattered.

Anything forced—

The space erased.

Anything aligned—

It tolerated.

Mai stood at the desk.

Still.

Measuring.

Not the objects.

Not the room.

The *failure*.

Ace remained by the door.

Watching both directions.

Not because something might come.

Because something might—

Stop.

Shammy stood closest to the desk now.

Not touching.

Not interfering.

Just—

Present.

The air around her had changed.

Not freely.

Not naturally.

But it was no longer completely flat.

There was tension now.

Held.

Waiting.

Mai spoke quietly.

“We don’t add anything,” she said.

Ace glanced over.

“Then what are we doing?”

Mai didn’t look at her.

“We remove the expectation of completion.”

Ace frowned.

“That’s not clearer.”

“No,” Mai said.

“It isn’t supposed to be.”

Shammy’s gaze remained on the desk.

“It’s trying to finish something,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“And failing.”

Ace tilted her head slightly.

“So we make it fail harder.”

Mai exhaled once.

“Precisely.”

That was enough.

She reached forward.

Not to the cup.

To the space around it.

Her hand moved—

Stopped—

Then shifted slightly off-axis.

Deliberately misaligned.

She wasn't touching the object.

She was—

Interrupting its structure.

For a moment—

Nothing happened.

Then—

The air tightened.

Not from Shammy.

From the space itself.

Ace straightened slightly.

“There,” she said.

Shammy didn’t move.

But her presence—

Focused.

Mai adjusted her hand again.

Further from alignment.

Further from resolution.

The cup flickered.

Stronger this time.

Not visually.

Ontologically.

Like it was trying—

And failing—

To exist.

The desk shifted.

Not position.

State.

Edges lost definition.

Returned.

Lost again.

Ace stepped forward.

“Keep going,” she said.

Mai didn't respond.

She already was.

The room—

Tightened.

The walls felt closer.

Not physically.

Structurally.

Shammy inhaled slowly.

The air responded—

And this time—

The space did not fully suppress it.

That was new.

That was important.

“It’s losing control,” Shammy said.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Ace’s expression sharpened.

“Then push it.”

“No,” Mai said immediately.

That stopped her.

“We don’t overpower it,” Mai continued.

A beat.

“We destabilize it.”

Ace didn’t argue.

She stepped closer anyway.

Not to strike.

To stand.

To be present.

Her presence carried weight.

Not physical.

Intent.

Finality.

The space—

Reacted.

The cup snapped into clarity—

For a full second.

Solid.

Real.

Complete.

Then—

Shattered.

Not physically.

Conceptually.

It lost cohesion.

Flickered violently—

Then—

Collapsed back into undefined existence.

Shammy flinched.

Just slightly.

“That hurt,” she said.

Mai didn’t look away.

“Yes.”

Ace narrowed her eyes.

“Good.”

The room pulsed.

Once.

A distortion—

Not visible—

But undeniable.

The walls compressed—

Then released.

The floor shifted—

Then stabilized.

The air—

Finally—

Moved.

Just a fraction.

But real.

Mai pulled her hand back.

Not out of fear.

Out of calculation.

“That’s enough,” she said.

Ace looked at her.

“It’s breaking.”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“It’s reacting.”

That distinction mattered.

A lot.

Shammy stepped back slightly.

The air followed.

Still imperfect.

Still unstable.

But no longer completely suppressed.

“It’s trying to correct,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Ace glanced around.

“So what happens if it does?”

Mai met her gaze.

“It stabilizes again.”

Ace’s jaw tightened slightly.

“Then we don’t let it.”

Silence.

That—

Was the line.

Shammy looked between them.

“It won’t fight us,” she said.

A beat.

“It will just remove the change.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Ace didn’t look away.

“Then we become the change,” she said.

That—

Shifted something.

Not in the room.

In the structure of the situation.

Mai's expression stilled.

Then—

Aligned.

“Yes,” she said.

That was it.

No escalation.

No force.

Just—

Presence.

Triad.

Together.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air responded—

Stronger than before.

The room—

Could not fully suppress it.

The desk flickered.

The walls—

Lost coherence for a fraction of a second.

Then returned.

But not perfectly.

Not completely.

Something had slipped.

Something had—

Changed.

And this time—

The space could not fully erase it.

It held.

Barely.

But enough.

For the first time—

The room was not stable.

And whatever this place had been trying to do—

It was now failing.

On purpose.

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