

# CHAPTER 13 — Padre's Request

The church wasn't hidden.

---

It didn't need to be.

---

It stood where it had always stood—

---

surrounded by a city that had grown around it, past it, through it, without ever quite absorbing it. Concrete pressed close on all sides, neon bled across its outer walls in colors that didn't belong to it, and still—

---

it remained.

---

Unchanged.

---

That alone made it noticeable.

---

---

Ace slowed first.

---

Not hesitation.

---

Measurement.

---

"This one matters," she said.

---

---

Mai didn't answer.

---

---

She was watching the structure.

---

---

Not the surface—

---

---

the alignment.

---

---

"It shouldn't," she said quietly.

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---

That was worse.

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---

Shammy stood still for a moment.

---

---

Listening.

---

---

The air around the church—

---

---

held.

---

---

Too clean.

---

---

Too consistent.

---

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“It’s not pushing,” she said.

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Ace glanced at her.

---

“Meaning.”

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---

Shammy didn’t look away from the building.

---

---

“It’s already settled.”

---

---

That tracked.

---

---

V exhaled quietly.

---

---

“Yeah,” they said.

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“...Padre wasn’t exaggerating.”

---

---

The door stood open.

---

Not forced.

---

---

Not damaged.

---

---

Just—

---

---

open.

---

---

Mai noticed immediately.

---

---

“No access control,” she said.

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---

Ace moved forward.

---

---

“Then we don’t wait.”

---

---

V didn’t follow.

---

---

“Padre’s inside,” they said.

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---

That was all.

---

---

They stepped in.

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---

The shift was immediate.

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---

Not dramatic.

---

---

Not violent.

---

---

Precise.

---

---

The air didn't change.

---

---

The light didn't flicker.

---

---

The space—

---

---

remained exactly what it appeared to be.

---

---

And that was wrong.

---

---

Ace stopped.

---

---

One step in.

---

---

Not because she had to.

---

Because something didn't agree.

---

---

Mai stepped beside her.

---

---

Her eyes moved—

---

fast—

---

not across objects—

---

across relationships.

---

---

The pews—

aligned.

---

The aisle—

---

straight.

---

The walls—

---

parallel.

---

---

And still—

---

---

"It's off," she said.

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---

Ace didn't ask where.

---

---

She already felt it.

---

---

The distance between her and the far wall—

---

was correct.

---

Until she thought about it.

---

---

Then it wasn't.

---

---

Shammy exhaled.

---

---

The air didn't respond.

---

---

Not because it couldn't.

---

---

Because it didn't need to.

---

---

"It's not shifting," she said.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

"It's set."

---

---

That word landed heavy.

---

---

Set meant—

---

no correction.

---

---

No movement.

---

---

No escape through change.

---

---

The space had chosen its wrongness—

---

and committed to it.

---

---

A figure stood near the front.

---

---

Still.

---

Waiting.

---

---

Padre didn't turn immediately.

---

---

Of course he didn't.

---

---

He let them enter.

---

---

Fully.

---

---

Only then—

---

---

did he look back.

---

---

His expression didn't change.

---

---

But something in his posture—

---

---

tightened.

---

---

"You see it," he said.

---

---

Not a question.

---

---

Mai nodded once.

---

---

“Yes.”

---

---

Padre exhaled slowly.

---

---

“Good.”

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“Because I’m done pretending I don’t.”

---

---

Ace stepped forward.

---

---

Not toward him.

---

---

Toward the center.

---

---

“Explain.”

---

---

Padre shook his head slightly.

---

---

“I’ve seen strange things in this city,” he said.

---

---

A pause.

---

---

“This is not one of them.”

---

---

That was enough.

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---

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

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---

“Duration.”

---

---

“Three days.”

---

---

Too long.

---

---

“Growth.”

---

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---

---

Padre hesitated.

---

---

Not uncertainty.

---

---

Selection.

---

---

"It hasn't spread," he said.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

"But it hasn't stayed the same either."

---

---

That was worse.

---

---

Ace stopped at the edge of the central aisle.

---

---

Not because she had to.

---

---

Because—

---

something marked it.

---

---

Not visually.

---

---

Structurally.

---

---

She stepped forward.

---

---

The distance didn't change.

---

---

Her foot landed exactly where it should—

---

---

and still—

---

---

“No.”

---

---

Shammy's voice cut through it.

---

---

Short.

---

---

Immediate.

---

---

Ace didn’t move further.

---

---

Mai turned slightly.

---

---

“Why.”

---

---

Shammy didn’t look at her.

---

---

She was listening—

---

---

to something that didn’t make sound.

---

---

“It agrees with itself,” she said.

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“But not with us.”

---

---

That locked it.

---

---

Mai exhaled slowly.

---

---

“Then we don’t force entry.”

---

---

Ace glanced at her.

---

---

“Then what.”

---

---

Mai stepped forward—

---

---

but not into the aisle.

---

---

Parallel.

---

---

“We observe the boundary.”

---

---

Padre watched them.

---

---

Carefully.

“You’re not the first people I called,” he said.

That mattered.

Mai didn’t look at him.

“Outcome.”

Padre’s expression didn’t change.

“They walked in.”

A pause.

“They didn’t walk out.”

Silence settled.

---

---

Heavy.

---

---

Ace didn't react.

---

---

She already had her answer.

---

---

Shammy took a slow breath.

---

---

The air held.

---

---

Consistent.

---

---

Except—

---

---

at the edge.

---

---

There—

---

---

it didn't belong to the room.

“It’s anchored,” she said quietly.

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Ace looked toward the center.

“Then we break it.”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

Flat.

That got Ace’s attention.

“Explain.”

---

---

Mai’s voice didn’t change.

---

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“If we disrupt a fixed disagreement,” she said,

---

“...it doesn’t collapse.”

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“It propagates.”

---

---

That was worse.

---

---

Padre closed his eyes briefly.

---

---

“...That’s what I was afraid of.”

---

---

Shammy stepped closer to the boundary.

---

---

Not crossing.

The air tightened slightly—

then held.

“It’s not growing,” she said.

A pause.

“It’s waiting.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

“For what.”

Shammy didn’t answer immediately.

Then—

quietly:

“For agreement.”

---

---

That changed everything.

---

---

Ace straightened.

---

---

“Then we don’t give it one.”

---

---

Mai didn’t answer.

---

---

Because the object—

---

still in her hand—

---

had already begun

to disagree

just a little more

with the space around it.

—

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