

CHAPTER 3 — Ritual Instability

The corridor did not lead down.

It suggested it.

Ace noticed first.

Not as a thought — as resistance. The way her step met the floor a fraction earlier than expected. The way her center shifted forward, but the space didn't quite agree to receive it.

"This isn't a descent," she said.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She was watching the walls.

Not their surface — their relationship to each other.

"Angle drift," she said finally.

"Minimal. Increasing."

The lighting overhead remained consistent.

Distance between fixtures did not.

Shammy stopped.

Just long enough that the air around her tightened, then flattened again.

"It's already layered," she said.

Ace turned slightly.

“Explain.”

Shammy shook her head once.

“Not separate.”

A pause.

“Overlapping.”

That tracked.

Too well.

Mai adjusted her pace.

Not faster.

Not slower.

Measured.

“If it’s overlapping,” she said, “then the anchor isn’t below us.”

Ace didn’t look back.

“Then where.”

Mai didn’t answer.

Because the answer was already forming—

Everywhere.

The corridor shifted.

Not visibly.

Not in a way anyone else in the facility would register.

But the door behind them—

It was further away.

Ace noticed.

Didn't turn.

"Don't look back," she said.

Mai didn't need the instruction.

Shammy had already closed her eyes.

"Forward isn't stable," she said quietly.

"That's fine," Ace replied.

"We're not staying."

A sound reached them.

Not from ahead.

Not from behind.

Through.

Voices.

Muted.

Layered.

Not echoing—

misaligned.

Mai slowed.

Raised a hand slightly.

“Primary teams.”

Ace listened.

Gunfire.

Contained bursts.

Controlled.

But the spacing between them—

wrong.

Too close.

Then too far.

As if time itself had lost interest in keeping rhythm.

Shammy exhaled.

The air around her tightened sharply—

then released.

“They’re inside it,” she said.

Ace’s expression didn’t change.

“So are we.”

The corridor opened.

Or tried to.

The space ahead widened—

but not evenly.

The right wall extended further than it should.

The left remained fixed.

The floor compensated.

Or tried to.

Mai stepped through first this time.

Testing.

Her foot landed—
correctly.

But the distance between that step and the next—

shifted.

“Non-uniform expansion,” she said.

Ace followed.

Didn't adjust.

If the space didn't agree, she would.

It held.

For now.

Shammy entered last.

The moment she crossed the threshold, the air compressed—

not physically, but structurally.

Like something had noticed.

She opened her eyes.

“It’s aware of pressure changes,” she said.

Mai didn’t look at her.

“Of course it is.”

The room ahead was not a room.

It had walls.

A floor.

A ceiling.

But they didn’t commit.

At the far end—

the ritual.

Not a circle.

Not exactly.

Layers of geometry intersecting without aligning. Lines drawn across planes that didn't share orientation. Symbols that repeated—but not in the same place twice.

And people.

Serpent's Hand.

Serpent's Hand operatives stood within the structure, maintaining it.

Not building.

Not initiating.

Holding.

That confirmed it.

"We're late," Mai said.

One of the operatives turned.

Not toward them.

Toward something slightly to their left—

that wasn't there.

Then corrected.

Eyes locking onto Ace.

Recognition.

Not of identity.

Of interference.

“They see us,” Ace said.

“Not clearly,” Mai replied.

Good.

Gunfire cut through the space.

From above.

Or below.

Impossible to tell.

One of the Serpent’s Hand operatives dropped—
but not where he stood.

His body landed a meter to the right.

Then corrected—
snapping back into place.

Shammy flinched.
Not at the violence.

At the inconsistency.

“It’s splitting the event,” she said.

Mai’s focus sharpened.

“Not splitting.”

A beat.

“Duplicating reference.”

That was worse.

Ace moved.

Straight line.

Toward the center.

No hesitation.

Two operatives reacted.

Their movements didn't sync.

One moved early.

One moved late.

Both missed.

Ace didn't adjust.

She didn't need to.

The space failed before she did.

Mai followed, but not directly behind.

Offset.

Tracking the geometry, not the path.

Shammy stepped forward—
and the air tightened again.

The ritual responded.

Lines shifted.

Not breaking—
reconfiguring.

“They’re reinforcing it,” Mai said.

“Then break it,” Ace replied.

“Not yet.”

Mai’s voice cut sharper this time.

“If we disrupt it without stabilization—”

“It collapses,” Ace finished.

“Wrong,” Mai said.

“It redirects.”

That landed.

Ace stopped.

Half a meter from the edge of the structure.

The air there felt—
wrong.

Not dense.

Not thin.

Just—
misplaced.

Shammy stepped beside her.

Didn't enter.

Listened.

"It's anchored," she said.

"Where," Ace asked.

Shammy tilted her head.

Then:

“Not here.”

Mai exhaled slowly.

“Of course not.”

The geometry shifted again.

Faster now.

Gunfire intensified—
then stuttered.

Time wasn't holding.

“We don't have a clean break window,” Mai said.

Ace glanced at her.

“Then we don't wait for one.”

“No,” Mai said.

This time, she stepped forward.

Into the edge of the structure.

The space resisted—
then accepted.

Barely.

“We stabilize first,” she said.

Shammy moved with her.

The air snapped tight—
then stretched.

Ace followed.

All three inside.

That was the moment.

The ritual reacted.

Not violently.

Precisely.

The lines didn't break.

They adjusted.

Around them.

As if incorporating—
not rejecting.

Mai felt it immediately.

"This is wrong."

Ace didn't slow.

"Fix it."

Shammy's voice came quieter now.

"It's not failing."

A beat.

"It's adapting."

And that—

was worse than anything else so far.

Because adaptation meant one thing.

It was still holding.

Just not the way it was supposed to.

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