

CHAPTER 4 — Failed Stabilization

The structure did not resist them.

That was the first problem.

It should have.

Ritual geometries of this scale — layered, anchored, maintained under stress — did not simply allow new variables to enter without consequence. There should have been backlash. Collapse. At minimum, rejection.

Instead—

it adjusted.

Ace felt it immediately.

Not as force.

As absence.

Her movement didn't meet opposition.

It was... accepted.

That was wrong.

Mai saw it in the geometry.

Lines that should have fractured—

curved.

Not away from them.

Around them.

“They’re integrating us,” she said.

Ace didn’t stop.

“Then we break it from inside.”

“No.”

The word cut clean.

Mai stepped further into the structure, her gaze tracking intersections that no longer held fixed positions.

“If it integrates new variables, disruption scales with it.”

A beat.

“It won’t collapse.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed.

“It’ll get worse.”

“Exactly.”

Shammy stood between them.

Still.

Listening deeper than before.

The air around her didn't stabilize.

It stretched.

Pulled in directions that didn't agree with each other.

"It's not just holding pressure," she said.

Both of them looked at her.

"It's reallocating it."

Mai processed that instantly.

"Across layers?"

Shammy nodded once.

"And across reference."

That confirmed it.

Mai adjusted her stance.

Not physically.

Structurally.

“Then we don’t disrupt,” she said.

“We constrain.”

Ace glanced at her.

“Difference.”

“We reduce available space.”

Ace almost smiled.

“That I can work with.”

The next movement wasn’t fast.

It didn’t need to be.

Ace stepped forward—

and the space responded.

Not by blocking—

but by shifting.

Distance increased.

Slightly.

Then corrected.

Ace adjusted.

Not speed.

Not direction.

Intent.

The second step landed where the space didn't expect it to.

That mattered.

The structure reacted—

late.

A delay.

Mai saw it.

“There,” she said.

Ace didn't look back.

"I felt it."

Shammy moved with them.

The air tightened sharply around the point Ace had disrupted—
then flattened.

Not stabilizing.

Equalizing.

The ritual lines flickered.

Not breaking—
losing alignment.

Serpent's Hand operatives reacted.

Not uniformly.

One stepped back—
before the shift occurred.

Another moved too late.

Their coordination was failing.

But not enough.

“They’re still holding it,” Mai said.

“Then we push harder,” Ace replied.

“No.”

Again.

This time, sharper.

Mai stepped into the center alignment—
or what passed for it now.

Her hand lifted—
not touching anything—
but mapping.

“If we compress too fast, it will compensate.”

Ace stopped.

For her.

“How.”

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because the answer wasn't stable.

“It will displace.”

That was bad.

“How far,” Ace asked.

Mai's gaze moved across the structure.

There was no clean boundary anymore.

“No idea.”

That was worse.

Shammy's breathing changed.

Subtle.

But enough.

The air around them tightened again—
harder this time.

“It’s building,” she said.

Mai looked at her.

“Where.”

Shammy didn’t point.

She couldn’t.

“Not in one place.”

A beat.

“In the disagreement.”

That landed heavy.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“Then we’re out of time.”

Ace didn’t ask what that meant.

She already knew.

“We commit,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

No hesitation now.

“Full constraint.”

Shammy closed her eyes.

The air snapped tight around them—

not violently—

but completely.

For a moment—

everything aligned.

Not correctly.

But consistently.

That was enough.

Ace moved.

Fast.

Not faster than before—
but without adjustment.

She crossed the structure in three steps—
each one landing before the space could shift.

Mai followed—
locking intersections as she moved—
forcing geometry to commit where it didn't want to.

Shammy held the pressure—
keeping it from tearing itself apart—
just long enough.

The ritual responded.

This time—

it didn't adapt.

It resisted.

The lines snapped—
not breaking—
but tightening.

Hard.

Too hard.

Mai felt it first.

"This is wrong."

Ace didn't slow.

"Too late."

Shammy's eyes opened—
sharp—
focused—

"It's not redistributing anymore."

Mai’s head snapped toward her.

“Then what—”

“It’s collapsing reference.”

Everything stopped.

Not physically.

Structurally.

The space—

lost agreement.

Distances no longer corrected.

Positions didn’t snap back.

The room didn’t stretch—

it fragmented.

Ace reached the center—

or where it had been—

and the floor wasn't there.

It was.

It wasn't.

Both.

At once.

Mai's voice cut through it.

"Anchor's gone!"

Shammy shook her head.

"No."

A beat.

"It moved."

That was the moment.

The realization—

too late to act on.

The ritual had not failed.

It had completed—

just not where it was supposed to.

And now—

it was trying to exist somewhere else.

With them inside it.

Ace didn't hesitate.

“Hold it.”

Mai tried.

She really did.

She locked what she could—

forced intersections—

held lines that refused to stay—

but there was nothing left to anchor.

Shammy pushed back—

harder than before—

and for a fraction of a second—

the space held.

Then—

it folded.

Not inward.

Not outward.

Just—

away.

And everything that had been “here”—

stopped agreeing on what that meant.

The last thing Mai registered—

was the structure trying—

and failing—

to decide

where it was supposed to be.

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