



Chapter 7: Drop Shaft

For half a heartbeat, Ace’s body forgot what “down” meant.

The emerald circle didn’t crack like stone; it released like a latch. The floor under her boots simply...unagreed with being solid. Gravity rushed in to fill the argument, and Ace dropped through a perfect circular hole that wasn’t there a second ago.

Mai swore—sharp, visceral—and lunged.

Her fingers caught Ace’s sleeve right at the cuff.

Pain flared up Mai’s ribs like a hot wire, but she didn’t let go. She dug her heels into the stone, disruptor clattering off the edge, runes flashing like a warning siren.

“Ace!” Mai snarled.

Ace snapped her hands up, grabbing Mai’s wrist. Shadow-pressure surged automatically, a reflex, trying to brace them both against the fall.

The hole pulled harder.

Not just gravity. Something else—a tug, the same kind of inevitability the hook-field had used on Mai's disruptor. A tuned pull, hungry for frequency.

Ace's stomach dropped in a way that had nothing to do with height.

It wanted her.

Above them, the priest laughed, breathless with satisfaction.

"Good," he said, voice echoing strangely in the sudden vertical space. "Let the vessel descend. Let her—"

Mai whipped her head up. "Shut up."

Ace saw Mai's knuckles whitening, saw the tiny tremor in her arm as pain tried to negotiate surrender.

Ace knew Mai.

Mai would rather tear her own tendons than let go.

So Ace made the choice for both of them.

"Mai," Ace said, voice tight, "on three—"

"No," Mai snapped instantly. "We're not—"

Ace didn't argue.

"One," Ace said anyway.

The pull intensified. The air around the hole tasted like cold pennies and incense, like the breath of the warehouse chamber and the tunnel hub had combined into something older.

Mai's grip slipped a millimeter.

"Two," Ace said.

Mai's jaw clenched so hard a muscle jumped.

Ace looked up at her face—silver-blue eyes blazing, pain and fury and refusal all braided together.

Anchor.

"Three," Ace said.

Ace released Mai's wrist and shoved upward with shadow-pressure—not to push Mai in, but to push Mai back onto the stone with enough force to make her stable.

Mai slammed down on her stomach, breath punching out.

At the same moment, Ace twisted her body mid-fall and threw her right katana upward.

The emerald blade spun once, perfectly, and bit into the stone rim of the hole like a climbing spike.

The hilt caught on the edge, wedged.

The katana held—barely—humming and vibrating as the hole's pull fought to drag it in.

Ace's fall jerked to a stop.

She hung, suspended by the blade and her own shadow-pressure gripping it from below, body dangling in dark air.

Mai scrambled forward, half-crawling, fingers grabbing the katana hilt with both hands. Her ribs screamed; she ignored them.

Ace looked up and met Mai's eyes.

"Do not," Mai hissed, voice shaking, "ever do that again."

Ace's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Noted."

Behind Mai, the priest moved.

Ace felt it before she saw it—air shifting, intent sharpening.

The priest's hand lifted, fingers curling as if plucking strings.

The stone rim around the katana started to soften, ripple, forget itself—trying to make the blade slip free.

Mai swore and braced her boots.

Ace's shadow-pressure flared, trying to hold the rock in one shape by sheer refusal.

The priest's voice came, smooth again. "You're so close," he murmured. "Let go. Let the hymn carry you. Let Violet—"

Ace's eyes flashed violet.

And Violet, under her ribs, stirred at the mention of her name like a predator hearing its leash unclipped.

Ace felt the echo press gently, suggestively, almost affectionate.

If you fall, Violet whispered, I can catch you. I can make this easy.

Ace's teeth clenched. "No."

Mai's grip on the hilt tightened. "Ace—he's going to—"

Ace didn't wait.

She shifted her weight and drew her second katana while hanging. The motion was clean, practiced, even upside-down. Emerald light flared under the rim, casting jagged shadows up into Mai's face.

Ace swung the blade—not at the priest directly, too far, too obscured—but at the floor edge near the priest's feet.

A crescent of emerald pressure tore outward, low and fast, slicing through stone like it was wet paper.

The priest jumped back instinctively.

The ripple-forget effect on the rim faltered.

Mai used the heartbeat.

She yanked hard, muscles screaming, and hauled Ace up just enough for Ace to hook an elbow over the edge.

Ace rolled onto solid ground, chest heaving once.

Mai didn't give her time to breathe.

Mai grabbed the front of Ace's jacket and shoved her forehead to Ace's forehead—an angry, grounding contact.

"You absolute idiot," Mai breathed.

Ace's eyes were bright, alive. "You didn't let go."

Mai's laugh was half a snarl. "Of course I didn't."

A sound behind them—stone shifting.

The hole was still open.

Worse: it was widening again, slowly, like a mouth learning how far it could open.

The priest stood at the edge of the emerald-lit circle, collar crooked now, calm face slightly cracked with irritation. His ruined brace socket smoked faintly, but he didn't look defeated.

He looked...interested.

Like the failure had taught him something he'd wanted to know.

"You see?" he said softly. "You can't leave this behind. Even when you climb out, the path remains. The room remembers."

Mai lifted the disruptor, aim steady now. "One more word and I'm deleting your teeth."

The priest smiled faintly. "You won't."

Mai's finger tightened.

Ace's hand lifted slightly—stopping her again.

Mai's eyes snapped sideways, furious. "Ace—"

Ace's gaze didn't leave the priest. "He wants a clean death," Ace said quietly. "Or a dramatic one. Either way, it feeds the story."

The priest's smile widened. "Smart."

Ace stepped forward, blades low, posture relaxed in that predatory way that meant the opposite.

“What do you actually want?” Ace asked. “Not ‘worship.’ Not ‘Order.’ Not your slogans.”

The priest’s eyes went soft—almost sincere, which was somehow worse. “I want you to remember,” he said. “I want the hymn to finish inside you. I want the vessel to become what she was made to be.”

Mai’s voice went ice-cold. “She wasn’t made.”

The priest looked at Mai as if she was a stain on glass. “Everything is made,” he said softly. “Some people just pretend they weren’t.”

Ace felt the river under ice move.

A flicker of red light behind her eyes.

A child’s palms.

A hymn that wouldn’t stop.

Ace inhaled slowly and locked the memory down with brute calm.

Then she spoke, voice very even.

“If you’re trying to wake something,” Ace said, “you’re doing it clumsily.”

The priest’s brow lifted. “Oh?”

Ace nodded toward the widening hole. “You’re still using doors,” she said. “You still think you need thresholds. You still think you can guide me by moving the floor.”

The priest’s smile thinned. “And?”

Ace’s eyes flashed violet. “And I already have a door inside me. You’re just knocking on the wrong side.”

For the first time, the priest’s expression shifted—not fear, not panic.

Respect.

Mai’s hand slid to Ace’s elbow, a silent check.

Ace didn’t look at her, but her shoulder pressed back into Mai’s touch for half a second.

Anchor acknowledged.

The priest’s voice softened again, coaxing. “Then open it. Let her out. Let Violet—”

“No,” Ace said.

Not shouted.

Not dramatic.

A simple refusal that landed like a gunshot in a silent room.

The priest's jaw tightened. "Then you'll keep falling."

He snapped his fingers again.

The hole surged wider—fast now.

Stone at their feet liquefied into absence.

Mai reacted instantly, grabbing Ace's sleeve again—ready to fight the drop a second time.

Ace didn't repeat the earlier move.

Instead, Ace drove both katanas into the stone on either side of the hole, blades embedded up to the guard like pitons. Emerald light flared, vibrating through the room's geometry.

Then Ace threw her shadow-pressure outward—not as a blast, but as a brace.

She forced the stone to remember itself.

The widening slowed.

It didn't stop.

But it fought.

Mai understood immediately and switched tactics. She planted her disruptor's barrel against the stone line where the emerald circle met normal floor and fired a sustained interference burst—less like a pulse, more like a grinding note.

The stone hissed.

The emerald circle flickered.

The hole shuddered.

The priest's eyes narrowed, annoyed. "You think you can out-muscle architecture?"

Mai bared her teeth. "I can outsmart it."

Ace's aura pushed harder.

The emerald circle dimmed another fraction.

The hole trembled like a throat trying to swallow and failing.

Then the room did something spiteful.

The shadows at the edge—the choir remnants—moved again. Not humming this time. Not singing.

They stepped forward.

Slowly.

Hands out.

Not to attack.

To touch the circle.

To become living capacitors, feeding the geometry with their bodies.

Mai's interference note faltered as the circle's glow stabilized.

"Shit," Mai hissed through clenched teeth. "They're powering it manually."

Ace's gaze snapped to the choir remnants. "Then we cut the hands."

Mai's disruptor shifted from sustained interference to sharp pulses.

Ace yanked one katana free and moved—fast, brutal, efficient.

She didn't kill them all.

She didn't have time for moral purity.

She cut wrists. She severed fingers. She slammed shadow-pressure into knees, dropping bodies out of alignment. Each fallen cultist broke the circle's reinforcement line.

The hole trembled again, destabilizing.

Mai's pulses became cleaner, more effective.

The priest backed away, eyes bright with anger now. "You're ruining the hymn."

Ace didn't look at him. "Good."

Mai fired one last triangulation shot into the space between three choir remnants.

Reality stepped backward.

The remnants collapsed like marionettes with cut strings.

The circle flickered hard.

The hole contracted—a sudden, violent gasp inward.

For a heartbeat, it looked like it would seal.

Then the priest smiled again, too calm.

"You think I need them?" he whispered.

And he stepped toward the hole himself.

Mai's disruptor snapped to his chest. "Don't."

The priest didn't stop.

He walked to the edge of the hole, looked down into the dark like he was looking into a familiar altar, and spread his arms slightly—collar open, posture like a man about to embrace baptism.

Then he let himself fall.

No scream.

No flail.

Just surrender to the void.

Mai's finger twitched on the trigger, too late.

Ace reached out instinctively with shadow-pressure to catch him—

—and felt something bite back from below.

Not the priest.

The shaft.

A cold hook of resonance that tried to latch onto Ace's aura through her reach.

Ace snapped her shadow-pressure back like yanking her hand away from a hot stove.

Her breath hitched.

Mai stared at the hole, horrified and furious. "He wanted that."

Ace's voice was tight. "He wanted the shaft to taste me."

The hole—now smaller—pulsed faintly.

Not closing fully.

Holding a slit open, like an eye refusing to blink.

Mai's disruptor runes flashed warnings again, rapid.

Ace's katanas hummed low.

And in Ace's chest, Violet went very, very quiet—quiet like someone listening to a familiar song from far away.

Mai's hand found Ace's sleeve again, gentler this time, not a grip—an anchor.

"We leave," Mai said, voice low. "Now. Before that thing finishes mapping you."

Ace nodded once.

They turned—fast—toward where the arch should have been.

And found only stone.

No doorway.

No seam.

No exit.

The room had decided the descent was optional.

But the escape was not.

Mai's voice went flat. "Okay."

Ace's eyes narrowed, violet and steady.

"We make our own door," Ace said.

Behind them, the slit-hole pulsed again.

Three beats.

Pause.

Three beats.

And somewhere deep below, something answered—not with a hymn this time...

...but with a breath.

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