

# 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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