

Eldritch Fragment — Abholos: The Mist That Devours

Ace felt the world exhale.

The fog didn't browse in from the sea like weather; it **decided** to be here. It rolled over the harbor district with a mindless purposefulness, a tide with lungs—each inhalation swallowed edges, each exhalation set them back down a little smoother than before. Steel softened into pewter. The spine of a crane bent without creaking, as if the weight of sound itself had been erased from the world.

"Stack check," Mai said, voice pitched low, colorless. She had already started writing numbers in the air with her gloved index finger—a habit, a ritual, an anchor.

"One," Ace said, tasting metal. The syllable came out as if dragged through wool. The fog had already taken a slice of her consonants and kept it. She licked her lips and tasted her name. Copper. "I'm good."

Mai nodded. "I'll keep count." In her left hand, a palm-sized crystal etched with runes thrummed weakly, like a frightened animal. In her right, the disruptor pistol hung in an uncompromising pose that always looked too heavy for its frame. She wore the silk tether cross-body, coiling around her shoulder and down to Ace's harness, the line a dark umbilicus between them.

The drone feed on Mai's forearm went to black, then returned with a flicker of static and a silent view of the harbor bell swinging without noise.

"That's our map dying," Mai said.

Ace followed her gaze inland. The city's bones were becoming suggestions; corners rounded like sugar melting in tea, street lines blurred into a soft watercolor wash. Closer to the waterfront, the fog had found the old clocktower. It made a shallow bowl around the base, as if sampling it.

The job was ugly and simple: reach the Harbor Archive vault before the fog did, pull the ydinauha—an old magneto core with a full topological record of the city's underlaced lines—then get out. The core mattered; if the map lived, they could model how the fog moved when it **breathed**. If it lived, other places might live because of it.

"Window," Mai said.

Ace listened. The fog had a rhythm. Inhale: world tightens. Exhale: a slackening, a half-settle. The best crossings were in those thinning moments, when reality had edges.

They moved.

Their boots slapped wet stone with the reluctant hush of cloth pressed against glass. Down one block, then a right, where a diner's sign had sloughed into a soft flag of metal and paint. Ace glimpsed her reflection in the window and didn't trust it; the shape lagged a breath behind, and her eyes were paler than they should be, as if lacquered. The Verdant Flame hummed near her knuckles, impatient. Not yet. Flame burned a path, but it burned **her** too. They would need it later.

"Bridge," Mai said, pointing.

The footbridge across the drainage channel had devolved into a silver-gray smile. Just the surface remained: no guardrails, no understructure, the fog having licked away everything that wasn't that tenuous seam. The span was slick with a dew that wasn't water.

Ace clipped the tether to a pylon-stump that had somehow survived and leaned out, testing the smile's flex. The line tied them together; the city was a bowl; the ocean was erased.

"On me," Ace said.

The fog inhaled.

They went. For a moment there were no thoughts, just inches of friction and the slow-blooming ache in her thighs. The bridge tried to become a shape she couldn't hold in her head. Mai's breath scraped against Ace's neck, a reminder that there was still sound between them.

Halfway, the world twitched.

A low slosh ran along the length of the span, not a sound but a texture. Ace's foot slid. She dropped to a knee, palms flat. The smile bowed under their combined weight. Below them, the channel had thickened into something like skin. It stretched and didn't tear.

"Hold," Mai whispered. "Let it finish the breath."

Ace counted heartbeats. She knew Mai was counting too. They were two metronomes tied together, trying to stay in phase while the conductor meltingly lost interest.

When the fog exhaled, they stood and slipped the last yards to the far side. Ace didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until her chest burned. She exhaled into her scarf and watched it furl inward, eaten quietly.

"Stack check," Mai said.

"Two." The copper returned, a heavier flavor. Ace didn't like the math of it. Five and things got wrong. She rolled her shoulders, listening to her memory as if it were a radio station. The song on it remained Ace & Mai. The static had increased around the chorus.

A siren somewhere was pantomiming—lights revolved under the fog's milk while silence replaced the wail. The harbor bell kept swinging, a mute metronome.

"You hear it?" Ace asked.

"I can feel it in my teeth," Mai said. "That counts."

They cut left, into a corridor of leaning facades made kinder by the fog's smoothing tongue. At the end stood the clocktower, its face a featureless coin. Its old stone had taken on a wet sheen, as if carved out of dark butter. The tower had drifted—not collapsed, not been pushed—drifted a few feet out of its foundation, and left a soft lip.

"Entrance is there," Mai said, indicating the bulged doorway, which looked like a mouth trying to inhale its own teeth. "We'll need a window."

"Anemotorch first," Ace said. "Then we see if I need to burn."

Mai's mouth tightened. "You *will* need to burn."

Ace grinned, because the shape of Mai's worry was a familiar room to sit in. "Then we make it count."

They unlatched an anemotorch from Mai's thigh rig. The device looked like a baton mated with a turbine fan: a short cylinder with a hair-thin mouth that could spit a controlled vortex. It wasn't a weapon. It was a concept: in a world of drift, you make a sharp edge of moving air.

"Three torches," Mai said. "Don't count on more."

"I'd never," Ace said. She took a half-step forward, feeling the tether tug, and set the torch at the doorway's bulge, angling its mouth to rake the fog back. "Ready?"

Mai's crystal was already purring itself awake, runes from old cities chasing each other along its facets.

"Ready," she said.

Ace thumbed the torch. It coughed a line of motion. The fog recoiled as if a nail had been scraped across its surface. The bulged stone withdrew a hair, firming as it pulled away from embrace. The world exhaled; the gap held.

"Ten seconds," Mai said.

Ace felt the Flame in her bones and kept it banked like a coal. She would need to pull it through her skin to mark herself, and she didn't want to spend more than her name required.

"Go," she said.

They slipped through.

Inside, the air was thicker, the fog's mass denser, the silence louder. The clock's mechanism hung like a sculpture of blackened sugar, gears half-dissolved into implied circles. The stairs had become ribboned, their edges blurred into suggestion. Ace stepped carefully, boots keeping to the center where the idea of "step" was strongest.

Halfway up, they found the first of the port authority's lost team, curled against a wall that bulged to fit the shape of his back. His eyes followed them, bright and misfiled.

"Don't look at me like that," he whispered. It wasn't to them.

"Stack?" Mai asked him.

He blinked. "What's a stack?" Then: "You said you wouldn't bring her here." He glanced at Mai and flinched as if meeting a ghost in a hallway he thought he'd locked.

"Four," Mai breathed. She knelt. "Can you walk?"

He considered this as if tasting it, then nodded. His legs worked, but as he stood, one shoe left a sliver of itself on the stone, a peel of rubber that had changed its mind. "She's not supposed to be here," he told Ace, breath rank with fear. "You ruin everything when you are here."

Ace didn't take the punch personally. *Four* meant he had more wrong memories than right. He was stacking dissolutions like a gambler in a bad run. He would remember whole afternoons that never happened and misremember names of people he loved. He would think Ace had done harms she hadn't. This was how the fog stole soldiers—by making them swing at allies until the line broke.

"Stay between us," Mai said crisply, reclaiming his wrist to tie him into the tether with a secondary

line. "If you try to cut yourself free, I will break your fingers and apologize later."

He laughed at that, and in the laugh there was a glimmer of his own—sharp, gallows-honest. Good. *Not gone yet.*

They found two more at the mezzanine—one sitting with a hand pressed flat to the wet wall as if listening, the other rocking. The sitter's smile was a child's at a puppet show. "It breathes," he told Ace. "It breathes and it never, ever, *ever* stops."

"How many of you?" Mai asked.

"Five," he said, and his eyes stuttered, unsure whether to be here.

"We have three," Mai said.

"Four," he corrected, pointing at a dark bundle farther along the curve. Mai didn't look. She didn't need to. Ace glanced and saw a shape that had been a body. The fog did not leave corpses. It left softened suggestions that would not grow flowers.

"We don't have the time," Ace said. The vault room was above. Each breath the fog took would smooth more, erase more clues, collapse the tower into a concept. "We take who can walk and we get the core. Then bug out."

"Then we run," one of the survivors said blissfully, as if the word had arrived from a life he remembered fondly. "God, I loved running."

"Stack check," Mai said, not to him.

"Two," Ace answered. She let her tongue test the consonants again. They were better now that she'd stopped talking for a minute. The fog punished speech: sound was friction against its skin; it wore you down.

They climbed.

At the landing before the vault, the tether jerked. The man behind Ace—the one who had called her ruination—had dropped to a knee, eyes clenched. He was whispering something to a person not here. Ace turned, an apology wired and ready in her shrug. His hand flicked. The little knife came out of nowhere, edge slick with fog-wet. He slashed the silk line.

The tether's snap sounded like a glove clapped over a mouth. The disconnected end slithered toward the fog as if grateful to be free.

"No," Mai said, a flat note. She moved with the speed of old drills, palm finding the knife wrist, twist, snap, drop. The man yowled—real, present pain cutting through his delusions like a rescue flare. He met Mai's eyes for the first time as if waking up in a room he recognized. "I—" he said.

"I warned you," Mai said.

Ace threaded the line through his harness with hands that wanted to be angry and found themselves sad instead. She knew the math. If they cut him loose, he would walk back into the breath and become part of the fog's new shape. If they didn't cut him loose, he might still do it himself, later, when the wrong memory felt more right than the right one.

"We're almost done," she told him. "Stay with the breath, not in it. Watch my boots. Not the walls."

He nodded once, like a student catching the trick behind a problem. "Watch your boots," he repeated. "Okay."

They reached the vault room.

The core sat in a cradle that had sweated into its own shape, curves pooled and then decided they liked being that way. The casing was beaded with dew that wasn't dew. The hiss of the fog was intimate here, a pressure in the joints, the quiet snap of cauliflower when you break it apart.

"Window," Mai said. "I can give us twenty seconds if I burn two charges. Maybe thirty if you mark."

Ace took off her glove. The skin of her right forearm was a map of old work—thin pale scars where the Verdant Flame had kissed and then healed. She flexed her hand. The flame answered, eager. "How many torches?"

"One left," Mai said. "This room eats edges fast."

Ace nodded. The cost would carry. The mark would be an anchor. Anchors kept you in one place but they dragged you when the tide shifted. She had done worse.

"Do it," she said.

Mai set the crystal on the floor and it came alive, runes flaring in a soft geometry that Ace could feel more than see. The air within eight meters stabilized, like frost on glass. Outside that cup, the fog squeezed down, annoyed but not smart enough to be anything but consistent: it slid off the geometry, pooling darkly at the edges and waiting for the math to erode.

"Anemotorch," Mai said.

Ace thumbed it. The jet ripped a line across the fog at the doorway, worrying it open, making it think of being elsewhere. The tower itself seemed to take a breath.

"Now," Mai said. Her voice trembled and Ace knew why—the runes took from you, not blood this time but clarity, borrowed from the future and spent in the present. Mai would be dimmer later, the pistol's chamber scorched. They would pay for this window when they needed a door.

Ace opened her hand. She didn't pull the flame from outside; she pulled from within, drawing the Verdant stuff through her skin until a thin, bright filament traced along her radius bone and carved itself into her forearm. It hurt in a clean way—no interference, no interference varnish, no blur. Pain made decisions easier.

The mark sizzled and the flame fixed itself there, an anchor point that made the world around her stop **smearing**. It was like stapling the page of reality to a clipboard. Ace felt the room sharpen. The fog didn't like it. It skittered at the edges of her perception, a cat forced to watch someone draw a circle it couldn't enter.

"Twenty-two seconds," Mai said, voice now a thread. "Go."

Ace moved to the core, hands sure, motions cut from old muscle memory. She lifted the ydinauha's weight with a respect that felt like prayer. The cradle tried to hold it, but she made her edges sharp and it had to let go. The core came free with a wet composure that made her stomach lurch.

Behind her, one of the survivors laughed too loud. The sound hit the fog like a stick on a hive. The cup buckled an inch. The geometry flickered.

“Shut up,” Mai hissed, but the damage was done. The fog found a tongue it could pull and tugged.

Ace slung the core into the satchel on her chest, clipped it tight. The weight changed the way her knees talked to each other. “We’re leaving.”

“Window collapsing,” Mai said. “I can—”

The tether went tight. The man at the back—the one who loved running—had turned away. Not a mistake. A choice. He had seen something in the fog that looked like a finish line. His hands fumbled at the line, then found nothing; the silk had slipped out and was already being eaten quietly along its length by the fog’s wet mouth.

“Don’t,” Ace said, reaching for him even knowing the reach would take too long.

He smiled at her and it was a good smile, the kind you give to someone you know is going to forgive you. Then he stepped. The fog accepted him without flourish. He didn’t sink. He didn’t dissolve. He just *stopped being here*.

Mai didn’t swear. She didn’t waste sound. She punched another pattern into the crystal and the cup flared again, stealing a few more seconds. She tossed the anemotorch and it carved a second line at the door, then burned out with a small death rattle.

“Go,” she said.

They went.

The descent was a fight with a soft enemy. Stairs shifted underfoot as if embarrassed to be stairs at all. The tether hummed like a live thing between them. Ace felt the anchor mark twisting under her skin, the filament of Verdant fire biting in deeper to keep her outline sharp. It was too bright; she was spending too much; she would pay later in shaking hands and lost words.

At the mezzanine, the fog inhaled hard, and the tower obeyed a pressure that did not consider architecture a law worth respecting. The whole structure flexed, an inside muscle clenching. A wall bulged toward them, reaching with a new taste for edges. The survivor with the broken fingers sobbed that raw, animal sob of men who have outlived their better friends.

“Hold your breath,” Mai said.

It was a stupid instruction and exactly the right one. The human body wanted to sync with bigger lungs around it. If they breathed when the fog did, they would be taken into its rhythm. Ace clamped her teeth and felt her ribs protest. Her head filled with heavy heat. Her vision sparkled. She watched Mai’s mouth go bloodless. The wall bulge paused, quivered—then drew back fractionally as the fog exhaled. They breathed with their own timing.

Outside the tower, the city inhaled again. Ace felt it through her boots—a long, slow lift of everything, a slosh of the ground being *more* than ground. The harbor bell’s silent swing had become violent now, whipping itself in a circle, ringing a sound that had nowhere to go.

On the entry level, the doorway had a different shape. It had turned sideways, a vertical grin. The anemotorch’s cut had been smoothed. The geometry cup around Mai’s crystal flickered and died like

a hit lightbulb.

Ace didn't think. She pressed her forearm—a brand-new anchor—against the fog's lip and let the flame burn hard. The fog shrank away from the mark with an unhappy thrum. The doorway firmed. Her knees almost let go under the pain. She tasted static and felt her name flinch again, but the edges held.

"Out!" Mai snapped.

They staggered through, the tether dragging the last survivor like a fish sliding through weeds. The fog snapped closed behind them with a soft pop. A handprint of the stuff clung to Ace's sleeve, and she brushed it off lightly; it stretched and then tore like gum, leaving a stain that faded as the fog exhaled.

Outside, the air had a little more noise. Not much. Enough to hear their own footfalls. The fog had come further inland while they were inside, tasting new shapes. The diner was now a smooth blister. The streetlights had been gently tucked into themselves like taffy.

"Beach," Mai said.

They ran not because the plan said run, but because any other verb would have made less sense. The path back to the drainage channel showed that the fog's exhalation was lazy here, and the little windows of sharpness were longer. The bridge's smile had turned into a straight line of slick, and the channel below it had the look of a sleeping stomach.

At the center of the span, the tether snagged again. Ace spun, expecting to see claws. She saw instead the blunt, bleak face of the man with the broken fingers, the line looped around his elbow, one end hanging and **fading**—not pulled off, not snapped, just **becoming a different material** that did not include the idea of being a rope.

He was hysterical now. "She said she would meet me," he cried. "She said if I ran, she would be there."

"No one meets you in there," Ace said. She didn't know if that was true but her voice made it sound like truth. "You've got one finish line. It's on my side of the rope."

His laugh was a bark, grief-shaped. "What if I don't want that one?"

"Then stand still and you can have none," Mai said, and hauled his elbow, wrapping the line higher, replacing dissolving silk with fresh around muscle that still listened. "Come with **us**."

He came because choice required a stable sense of who you were, and the only stable thing in the fog was other people who refused to leave you. He came because he was still human, and because Ace's face didn't look like his enemy anymore. He came because there were hands on him and those hands felt like facts.

They got him over. They got themselves over.

On the far side, they found air with edges. The wind from the inland made a tired little argument with the fog, nudging it back half a meter at a time. It wasn't a victory. It was a pause.

"Stack check," Mai said.

“Three,” Ace said honestly. She could **feel** it now, that tug at the corners of her memory, the way past and present ran together like ink. If she reached back too fast, she would rip the paper. “You?”

Mai’s mouth tilted. “Two for me. The crystal is... spent.” She lifted the disruptor pistol, checked the chamber. The rune etched inside had gone the color of old ash. “Pistol’s dead until I can re-cut the Mark. That’s... not tonight.”

Ace nodded, not trusting words. She flexed her right hand. It shook. The anchor mark on her forearm shone faintly under her skin, a green worm of light. It would keep shining until it decided it didn’t want to. They would have words about that, the mark and she, sometime when she wasn’t busy surviving.

They made shore as the fog exhaled one last time, a tired lung emptying. It reached for them and then lost interest; new architecture on the next street over had caught its attention. The harbor bell finally made a sound—one dull, degraded **donk**—as if trying to apologize for its absence.

They collapsed onto the wet sand at a slant where the sea should have been if the sea had remembered how to do **waves**. It lay instead like a thought not yet formed.

The surviving two men stared with blown pupils at nothing and then, because living insists on the next thing, began to cry in pulses. The tears looked wrong on their faces. They wiped them away angrily, as if someone else had put them there.

Mai sat cross-legged, the core in her lap, and began to unwrap its wet casing with deliberate fingers. Her jaw worked as if chewing back a migraine.

“Show me something good,” she murmured to the ydinauha, as if bribing a guildmaster.

Ace lay back, palms up, letting the foamed sky press down. The world’s edges were returning, but she kept quiet. Words spent edges. Different jobs took different kinds of bravery; this one wanted silence and a tight grip on the rope, not speeches.

She must have drifted—a catnap with the part of her brain that kept watch still upright—because Mai’s soft “Ah,” snapped her back.

“You have something,” Ace said.

Mai didn’t look up. Her eyes had the look they got when a crossword finally gave up its last word. “Yes,” she said. “Better than something.” She turned the core so Ace could see the pattern blooming on the small reader’s membrane display, a brittle ghost of old machinery still eager to be useful. Lines, arcs, little swarms of dots that weren’t dots because they moved when she wasn’t looking directly at them.

“It **does** breathe,” Mai said. “And it breathes on a route.”

“Not random,” Ace said. The shape of the model tugged at something in her chest—a familiarity she didn’t enjoy. The arcs curved like old sigils pretending not to be sigils.

Mai nodded. “No. This is a chosen path. The inhalations focus on a chain of... I don’t know what to call them. Weaknesses, maybe. Keyholes. It’s moving toward a set of those, and when it exhaled after hitting the harbor, the path adjusted for...” She squinted. “For us. For **the core** leaving.”

“Which means something watched the **absence**,” Ace said slowly. “Or at least, recorded it into the breath.”

"Or the breath is the record," Mai said. She rubbed her temple. "I need sleep."

Ace looked back at the fog. It had found the diner again, seemed set on making the whole place into a single, unified surface that reflected nothing. The thought slid coldly under her skin: if Abholos was a person, it could be bargained with. But it wasn't. It was a means without an end, a process capable of being pointed.

Someone had pointed it.

"Do you think it knows us now?" Ace asked, not loving the need in the question.

Mai's smile was tired. "I think it knows *texture*. We are a new texture." She set the core back into its cocoon, hands gentle. "And whoever set the path will feel when their fog hits a knot it didn't expect."

Ace flexed her hand again. It trembled. She closed it around Mai's knee briefly. Skin on skin, a fact bigger than the fog.

"You did good," Ace said.

Mai's eyes softened. "You're very brave when you're dissolving." Then: "Don't do that again."

Ace's laugh came out torn but honest. "Which part? The burning, the anchoring, or the heroic rope wrangling?"

"Yes," Mai said.

They sat like that for a minute that might have been five. The men's sobs tapered off to ragged breathing. Out in the city, something delicate gave up and became a curve.

When the wind finally found its old direction and started shooing the fog back from the beach, Ace stood. Her legs resented the recall. She made a note of each resentment; they were offers to quit she declined politely.

"Let's move," she said. "Before it remembers to inhale out here."

They took the survivors inland, past the line where the air had a new appetite for sound. Trucks waited, and people with hands that knew how to lift soft things without breaking them. The little emergency post was a bright wound in the gray, generators muttering, a dog barking happily because it knew its own name and found the world thrilling. Someone handed them blankets that smelled like storage. Someone else offered coffee. Ace said yes and burned her tongue and felt fiercely alive again for a second.

Mai took the core into a tent where models lived: whiteboards with jags of math, maps pinned under transparent overlays, strings that once would have looked like conspiracy and now looked like rescue. She laid the core down like a heart and everyone stepped back a little as if in church.

Ace loitered in the doorway. She liked watching Mai do the thing that made other smart people stand politely aside. She liked the way Mai's hands moved when the work grabbed them, as if time had gotten a crush on her and wanted to show off.

On the display, the route sharpened. The harbor was a petal. The exhale mapped a little eddy where they'd been. The inhale's arc led—Ace stepped closer, the hairs under her sleeve prickling—to a new node inland.

"Where does it go?" she asked.

Mai swallowed, pupils tightening. She turned the membrane's contrast up. The little motes connected, not with lines you could draw but with lines the model insisted were there anyway.

"It goes to a reservoir," she said. "And under the reservoir is a culvert built two years ago, when a contractor cut corners and a priest wrote a blessing he didn't mean." She exhaled, and Ace heard the fatigue hitch in it. "It goes to a thing we don't want it to meet."

Ace nodded once. "So we go first."

Mai didn't argue. She didn't offer a plan in twelve steps. She just looked at Ace's forearm, where the anchor mark burned faintly, a green beadline that would, at some inconvenient moment, ask to be paid for in shakes and lost edges.

"That's going to hurt tomorrow," Mai said softly.

"Hurts now," Ace said, and rolled her shoulder. "Tomorrow will be a new and exciting frontier."

Mai huffed a sound that was almost a laugh. Then she lowered her voice, threading a small private space between them. "Ace."

"Yeah."

Mai lifted a finger and traced the air a centimeter above the burning line, not touching, because to touch would be to invite the flame to nip. "We don't bargain with it," she said. "We don't try to make it see us. We go, we steal the future out from under its breath, and we leave. If anything looks like a door that wants to talk, we shoot it or we run."

Ace's mouth curled. "You're very romantic."

"I am," Mai said blandly. "I like you alive."

Ace leaned down, bumped her forehead gently against Mai's. "Deal."

Outside, a gull screamed, delighted to have a voice. The fog along the harbor receded another arm's length. The day shifted its weight.

The two survivors sat together, fingers hooked into each other's sleeves like boys on a field trip who'd gotten separated and found the line again. One of them glanced up at Ace and flinched, then smiled an apology as the wrong memory folded itself smaller, put away for later. He raised his unbroken hand in a half-wave. She returned it with the same small economy.

"Rest ten," Mai said, checking the time she didn't trust. "Then we roll. I want to meet that reservoir while it still thinks it's safe to be a bowl."

"Copy," Ace said, already prowling for more coffee. She wanted caffeine and a quiet room where she could be a tremor and not perform steadiness for anyone.

She found neither. The world had decided the next thing. She would be ready or she would not, and both had happened before.

On the way to the truck, she stopped at the shoreline and looked once more at the city. The fog had

not *gone*. It had made a bargain with the wind in which the wind thought it had won. The cranes whose necks had softened stood now like bent reeds. The diner was a blister polished by a tongue that never tired. In the soft geometry of the clocktower's wound, she could see, if she squinted and lied, the imprint of her own hand in the place where she had pressed her anchor. She rejected the romance of that—no marks on it were personal. Only work.

She turned away.

The truck smelled like oil and oranges and the old leather of seats that had been in other emergencies. Mai slid in beside her, the ydinauha strapped like an infant in a seat belt. The survivors huddled behind, those without hands to hold their hands holding each other's sleeves like men who would live out of sheer spite.

"Ready?" Mai asked.

Ace cracked her knuckles. The mark on her arm flashed sourly and then settled, a sullen roommate. "I was born ready," she said, because the joke had saved them both too many times to abandon now.

Mai rolled her eyes, affectionate and exhausted. "You were born short and furious."

"Those are subcategories of ready," Ace said.

The truck growled awake. The wind over the harbor stiffened, finding itself again. The bell, after a day of movies with no sound, rang a single, imperfect note that still made the hair at Ace's nape stir.

They drove.

As they cleared the last row of softened houses, Ace glanced in the mirror. The fog did not wave. It did not watch in any way she could pinpoint. But somewhere along its edges, the breath hit a new pocket of air, and the exhale that followed curved in a way the model on Mai's display had predicted.

Someone had written a route in the lungs of a god without a face.

Fine.

She and Mai would write over it, in a hand the fog couldn't dissolve.

They had done as much with worse pens.

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