

## Chapter 10: Mouths That Borrow Names

They found the first voice at dusk.

Not in the air—too easy. Not as a scream—too crude.

It came from a place that should not have carried sound at all: a shallow rock hollow half-filled with rainwater. A little basin in stone. Still as glass. The kind of puddle you'd step over without thinking.

Mai saw it and stopped anyway, because she'd learned the valley's favorite trick:

Ordinary things, weaponized by attention.

Ace stopped with her, eyes already on the water.

The puddle reflected the sky. The sky reflected nothing back. It looked like the surface of a lens pointed at somewhere else.

Mai's hand hovered at her coat. Not the envelope. Not yet. Just the edge of her notebook, the impulse to record.

She didn't.

Ace crouched, slow, eyes half-lidded so she wouldn't give the puddle a clean stare.

A ripple formed.

No wind. No pebble.

Just a gentle, precise disturbance, as if something had dipped a finger into the reflection from the other side.

Then the voice spoke.

Not loud.

Too close.

It came out of the water with the soft intimacy of someone standing behind you.

“Ace.”

Mai went rigid.

Ace didn't move.

Her heart didn't visibly race. Her breathing didn't spike. But something behind her eyes sharpened, violet deepening into that prismatic undertone that meant the border inside her had noticed pressure.

The voice said her name again, exactly right, with the right weight, the right shape.

A perfect copy.

Mai's throat tightened. She didn't look at Ace—she watched the water like it might suddenly grow teeth.

Ace's voice came out low. "Not mine."

The puddle rippled again, as if amused.

"Ace," it repeated.

Mai stepped closer to Ace, close enough that her knee brushed Ace's shoulder. Anchor proximity. Not comfort—containment.

She whispered, "Don't answer with a full sentence."

Ace nodded once, barely.

The puddle voice shifted.

It tried a different tone.

"Mai."

Mai's stomach clenched. She didn't respond. She didn't even blink. She held her face still like a mask.

The puddle rippled again.

"Mai," it said, softer now, almost affectionate.

Ace's shadow surged, pressure rising, wanting to tear the reflection apart.

Mai touched Ace's wrist—harder this time. A command without words: stay.

Ace held.

The voice in the water hesitated, like it was trying to interpret the refusal.

Then it changed again.

It borrowed a new mouth.

A male voice this time, older, tired. The cadence shifted into something that felt like field-work. Institutional calm. Familiar bureaucracy.

"Agent," the voice said. "We need your report."

Mai's eyes flashed. "No," she whispered, too sharp.

Ace's gaze flicked to her. Mai corrected, swallowing the verb. "Refusal," she murmured, forcing her tone back into control.

The puddle voice continued, ignoring her correction.

"Tell us what you saw," it said, and the phrase was so close to the debrief room that Ace felt the air around them tighten like a noose.

It wasn't mimicking them randomly.

It was using the scripts that already lived inside their heads.

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's reading memory," she said quietly.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Or reading patterns."

The puddle rippled, and the voice sharpened into something more precise.

"Your designation," it said. "Silent Vessel."

Mai went absolutely still.

Ace's breath caught.

The valley felt like it leaned in.

That phrase—typed on the back of the photograph—had never been said aloud between them. Not like that. Not with certainty. Not with the weight of official labeling.

And now it came out of the water like a stamp.

Ace rose from her crouch so smoothly it looked like she'd been pulled upward on a wire. The air around her compressed, shadow-pressure tightening into a dense field. The emerald fracture-lines flared faintly at the edges like stress cracks.

Mai's hand snapped to her disruptor, not aiming at Ace, not aiming at the puddle—just ready, like a hand hovering near a knife drawer during an argument.

Ace's voice came out low and dangerous. "Stop."

The puddle went still.

Not because it obeyed.

Because it listened to the texture of that word.

Stop was a command.

A verb.

Mai's eyes widened slightly—careful—but it was too late. The valley had heard it. The system tasted it.

The puddle rippled again, slow, satisfied.

And then the voice changed into something worse.

It borrowed Mai's voice.

Perfectly.

Her intonation, her dry edge, the slight metallic calm she carried even under threat.

"Ace," the puddle said in Mai's voice, "you don't have to carry it alone."

Mai's face went pale. She swallowed hard.

Ace's eyes narrowed to slits, violet shimmering like a blade edge.

The puddle continued, still in Mai's voice, still tender.

"Let me in," it said. "Let me anchor you."

Mai's hands trembled once—barely—but Ace saw it. Ace saw everything.

Mai whispered through clenched teeth, "That's not me."

Ace didn't look away from the water. "I know."

The puddle's surface bulged upward, just slightly, as if something beneath it was trying to push through the membrane.

A face didn't appear.

A mouth did.

Just the suggestion of lips in the reflection, forming words without needing lungs.

"Ace," it said again, and now it was a chorus—Ace's name spoken by borrowed mouths layered on top of each other: the debrief man, the old truck driver, Mai, someone else Ace didn't recognize but her bones did.

The sound wasn't loud.

It was dense.

It pressed into the skull like pressure in deep water.

Ace felt Violet stir. Not fully. Not unleashed. But the resonance inside her flexed like a predator smelling familiar blood.

Mai's fingers tightened around Ace's wrist, anchoring harder. "Stay," she whispered, voice raw for the first time in a long time.

Ace's jaw trembled once. She forced her breath slow.

She didn't answer the chorus.

She didn't give it the satisfaction of reaction language.

Instead, she did something simpler.

She took one step backward.

Then another.

Mai moved with her, never breaking contact.

The puddle voice followed them, not physically, but in tone—raising urgency, layering pity, offering bargains shaped like compassion.

"You're tired," it said.

"You can rest," it said.

"You can stop fighting," it said.

Each sentence a hook, each hook disguised as kindness.

Mai hissed under her breath, "It's offering comfort because it can't force access."

Ace nodded, tiny.

The chorus sharpened. Impatience again.

And then it tried the worst one—because it had learned their world's rules.

It tried to ask a direct question.

"Ace," the chorus said, and for a heartbeat the valley's silence aligned so perfectly that even the wind stopped.

"Who are you?"

The question hit like a hand around the throat.

Not because the question itself was frightening.

Because answering it would be surrender.

A full name, a full identity, a finished circle.

Ace's eyes flared violet.

Her shadow surged.

Mai tightened her grip and, for the first time, used a full sentence—because sometimes you break your own rules to save someone from theirs.

"Don't," Mai said, voice fierce, absolute, human. "You don't owe it a definition."

Ace's breath shook once.

The chorus waited.

Ace stared at the puddle.

Then she did what they'd practiced in fragments and half-rules since the alley.

She answered without giving a verb.

Without giving a name.

Without finishing the circle.

"I am," Ace said quietly.

And stopped.

The valley's silence convulsed like it had been slapped.

The puddle rippled violently, water splashing over the stone lip.

The borrowed mouths stuttered, trying to continue the sentence, trying to complete it for her.

"I am—" it echoed, multiple voices, attempting to finish her circle.

Ace didn't let it.

She turned away.

Mai pulled her with a firm, anchored motion, and they walked—fast but not running, moving like they were leaving a room that wanted a signature.

Behind them, the puddle's surface boiled with frustration.

The chorus continued for a few seconds, but it was no longer persuasive. It was angry. It was trying to force completion.

Ace didn't look back.

Mai didn't either.

They moved into the growing dark, leaving the reflective hollow behind.

For a while, neither spoke.

Then Mai finally exhaled, shaky but controlled.

"That was close," she murmured.

Ace's voice came out flat, but there was something under it—heat, grit, a flicker of pride that she hadn't broken.

"It wanted my shape," Ace said.

Mai nodded. "And you gave it only the first brick."

Ace's mouth twitched once, a grim almost-smile. "Let it choke on that."

Mai's eyes softened, just slightly. "You're learning."

Ace glanced at her. "So are you."

Mai snorted softly. "Yes, well, I'd prefer to learn without hearing myself used as bait."

Ace's gaze sharpened, protective. "It won't get you."

Mai's smile was small, dry. "You say that like you can stab grammar."

Ace didn't deny it.

They walked on.

And behind them, in the puddle's ruined reflection, the trisected circle formed again—three arcs intersecting without touching.

A mouth without lungs.

A question without mercy.

And the valley, now with fresh data about what “I am” could do, adjusted its strategy.

Not to kill them.

To complete them.—

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