

Chapter 11: Keep the Verbs

They didn't camp.

Not properly.

Camping implied settling. Settling implied permission. Permission implied the valley got to count them as present.

Instead they found a narrow cut in the rock—a shallow notch where the wind couldn't quite reach, where the ground was hard stone and not listening sand. A place that felt less like shelter and more like a pause between pages.

Mai laid out a tarp anyway, not for comfort but for control. A clean surface. A boundary they defined.

Ace sat with her back against the rock, knees up, arms loose around them. Her katanas stayed sheathed. The sisters hummed under their wrappings like they disliked being ignored.

Mai took out the binder.

She hesitated.

Ace watched her. No pressure. Just presence.

Mai spoke quietly. "We do this without giving it a script."

Ace nodded once.

Mai opened the binder in her lap. The pages smelled like old fear and stubbornness. Marquez's handwriting crawled across the paper in tight, disciplined lines. In the margins: warnings like scars.

Mai didn't read aloud.

She pointed instead, letting Ace follow with her eyes.

A section title—handwritten, underlined twice:

LANGUAGE CONTROL: OPERATIONAL

Beneath it, a list.

Not theory. Not philosophy. Field rules.

Do not ask direct questions.

Avoid naming anomalies with singular terms.

Avoid verbs that imply intent ("wants," "chooses," "knows").

Avoid verbs that grant agency ("takes," "keeps," "learns").

Prefer description of state, not action.

Use incomplete sentences when required.

If forced to answer, answer with non-completion.

Mai tapped the “non-completion” line once with the blunt end of her pencil.

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “He did it.”

Mai nodded. “He wrote the rule after surviving it.”

Ace stared at the page for a long beat, then said quietly, “And the other one—Elias—”

Mai didn’t need the name. She knew. Her mouth tightened. “He paid for finishing.”

Ace’s shadow tightened under her like a coiled animal.

Mai flipped another page.

There were examples. Marquez had written mock dialogues—field operators practicing how to speak without feeding the thing in the valley. It was almost absurd.

Almost.

Except it wasn’t a game. It was a manual on how to keep your mind.

Mai traced one example with her pencil tip, then looked up at Ace. “We practice.”

Ace’s brow lifted a fraction. Now?

Mai answered the unspoken question anyway. “Before it forces us into it again.”

Ace exhaled through her nose. Agreement.

Mai’s eyes moved through the binder, choosing a page with the least amount of symbol exposure. She covered the corner doodles with her palm.

Then she said, “Okay. Scenario.”

Ace didn’t speak.

Mai adjusted. No verbs. No direct questions.

“Puddle voice,” she said.

Ace’s jaw tightened.

Mai continued, careful. “Name used. Borrowed voice. Offer.”

Ace nodded once.

Mai held her gaze steady. “Response style: incomplete.”

Ace stared at the tarp. The rock. The thin strip of sky above them. She felt the valley’s pressure in the background like distant thunder.

Then she spoke, testing the shape of words like you test ice with a toe.

"I am—"

Mai's hand lifted slightly. A stop sign without a verb.

Ace closed her mouth. Looked at Mai.

Mai said quietly, "Different. That one already on file."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "So we avoid it."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace leaned back against the rock, thinking. Her mind moved in angles, not paragraphs. She was good at tactics. She was good at cutting. Language was a different blade—harder to feel.

Mai waited.

Ace finally said, low, "State."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Yes. State."

Ace tried again, voice flat and precise. "Present."

Mai blinked once. "That's... good."

Ace's mouth twitched too, the ghost of a smirk. "Ugly."

"Ugly is good," Mai agreed.

They kept at it.

Mai fed scenarios without making them questions.

"Voice asks. Identity. Title."

Ace answered with state-words, fragments.

"Here."

"Not for you."

"Not offered."

Mai nodded each time, pencil tapping softly on the tarp as if marking cadence.

Then Mai tried the hardest scenario—the one she didn't want to speak but had to, because avoiding it was also a form of denial.

She lowered her voice. "Memory. Village. Blood-Moon."

Ace's shoulders tightened. The scar-sensation crawled under her ribs, sharper.

Mai didn't add anything. She didn't give it a narrative. She didn't frame it like a story the valley could steal.

She just placed the concept down between them like a live wire and waited.

Ace's breathing slowed. Controlled. Her eyes went a shade darker, violet prismatic undertone flickering.

She answered, after a long beat, with two words:

"Not accessible."

Mai exhaled, slow. "Good."

Ace looked at her. "That's a lie."

Mai shook her head once. "No. That's a boundary."

Ace stared at the tarp again. Her jaw shifted. She didn't like boundaries that felt like retreat.

Mai leaned a little closer, voice still quiet. "We aren't lying to it. We're refusing to let it choose the frame."

Ace's mouth twitched, humorless. "So we keep the verbs."

Mai nodded. "We keep them. We don't donate them."

Ace glanced at the binder. "Marquez wrote this. And still—"

Mai's face tightened. "Yes."

Ace didn't finish.

They both knew what the unfinished sentence held: and still he disappeared.

Mai closed the binder gently, as if even closing it could be a gift if she did it too dramatically. She tucked it back into the plastic bag.

Then she did something strange.

She smiled.

Small, tired, real.

"Do you realize," Mai said softly, "we're practicing how to talk like we're defusing a bomb made of grammar?"

Ace's eyes flicked to her. A fraction of amusement surfaced, sharp-edged but present.

"Bombs easier," Ace said.

Mai snorted quietly. "Of course you'd say that."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Bombs don't borrow my voice."

Mai's smile faded a bit, but the warmth stayed in her eyes. "No. They just explode."

Ace stared past Mai at the darkening valley, listening to the thin wind.

In the distance, something moved.

Not visible.

Audible.

A subtle shift in silence, as if the valley had adjusted its attention toward their little notch in the rock.

Mai felt it too. Her shoulders tightened. Her hand brushed Ace's wrist—anchor pulse.

Ace's eyes sharpened.

They waited.

The silence didn't press in like before. It hovered near, respectful in a way that felt wrong. Like a predator pretending patience.

Mai whispered, "It's listening."

Ace didn't correct the verb this time. It was accurate enough.

Mai's voice went even lower, almost nothing. "We don't speak for a bit."

Ace nodded.

They sat in the notch, side by side, watching the strip of sky turn from gray to black. The stars didn't appear. The clouds held the light hostage.

In the distance, a sound surfaced—soft, like paper rubbing against paper. A faint scratching.

Mai's fingers tightened on the tarp edge. She didn't reach for the disruptor. She didn't reach for the binder. She stayed still.

Ace felt the sisters hum again, low and irritated.

The scratching sound came closer.

Not footsteps.

Not ticks.

Something like a pen moving on paper.

Ace's skin prickled.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "It's writing," she breathed, then caught herself. Her mouth tightened. Verb.

Ace stared into the darkness.

Somewhere out there, in the valley that sorted silence and recorded rhythm, something was making notes.

Not with ink.

With them.

Ace’s jaw clenched.

Mai’s hand found her wrist again, firm. Anchor.

And Ace realized—coldly, clearly—that this was the next layer:

They’d burned paper.

They’d refused names.

So now the valley was going to write on something that couldn’t be thrown into a fire.

On memory.

On reflex.

On the places where language lived before words.

Ace didn’t speak.

Mai didn’t either.

They sat and listened to the sound of a pen that didn’t exist.

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