

## Chapter 15: Retrieval Attempts

They didn't run.

Running was a clean shape. A chase. A narrative the valley already understood how to file.

They moved fast anyway—fast like professionals who refused to advertise panic. Mai led, the rope in her hand now doing double duty: tether between them, and crude tool to carry the stolen envelope without touching it.

The corridor narrowed again, stone tightening in. The air behind them—back toward the archive—didn't feel like pursuit.

It felt like process.

Like a machine spinning up.

Mai's eyes stayed forward. "It will try to retrieve," she murmured.

Ace didn't answer. She was already listening to absence. The way the corridor's silence had started to develop seams.

A sound arrived behind them—soft, papery, wrong.

Not footsteps.

Not ticking sand.

The sound of thin sheets sliding against each other.

Ace's spine tightened.

Mai heard it too. Her hand on the rope turned white-knuckled for a heartbeat.

"It's not coming as a thing," Mai whispered. "It's coming as... material."

Ace's mouth twitched, hard. "Paper knives."

Mai didn't smile back. "Yes."

The sound multiplied.

One sheet became many, layered, drifting. A whisper of pages turning without wind.

They reached a junction—three corridors branching. No markings. No symbols. Just geometry.

Mai stopped, breathed once, and made a choice without speaking it: left.

Ace followed instantly.

Two steps in, Ace felt the scar-sensation pulse under her collarbone.

Mai flinched at the same time.

They both stopped.

Because the corridor ahead had changed.

The stone floor—smooth a moment ago—now showed faint, parallel scratches, like a file had been drawn across it. Hundreds of thin lines, all running in the same direction.

Like instructions.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Trap."

Mai's voice stayed low. "Sort path. Retrieval lane."

Behind them, the page-sound grew closer. Not fast. Confident.

Mai pivoted without panic and backed them into the junction again. "Okay. Not left."

Ace's gaze swept the other two corridors.

Middle: wider, slightly downhill. Air cooler. A faint echo. Too open.

Right: narrower, rougher stone, uneven underfoot. Messy.

Mai looked at Ace. Ace gave the smallest tilt of her head toward the messy corridor.

Mai exhaled. "Ugly."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Good."

They took the right corridor.

The page-sound entered the junction behind them like a fog sliding into a room.

Ace didn't look back.

Mai didn't either.

They moved deeper into the narrow passage, rope taut between them.

Then the corridor behind them made a sound that was almost a laugh.

A page turned.

One crisp, deliberate flip.

Mai's jaw clenched. "It has our scent."

Ace's eyes went darker violet. "It has the file."

Mai corrected on instinct, but kept it minimal. "It has the absence."

Ace understood. They'd stolen something. The system wasn't angry in the way animals were angry. It was imbalanced.

Systems hate imbalance.

The air ahead thickened.

Then—without warning—the corridor’s right wall moved.

Not shifting stone.

A thin plane slid out from the wall like a sheet being pulled from a stack. Flat, pale, almost translucent. It didn’t reflect light correctly.

A page.

A page-sized barrier, gliding into the passage.

Mai stopped so fast the rope jerked. Ace stopped with her.

The barrier settled in front of them, blocking the way.

On its surface, faint letters began to appear—typed, clean, modern.

Not a symbol.

Text.

RETURN FILE: INTERACTION LOG (PHASE I)

Mai’s stomach turned. “No.”

Ace stared at the letters. The scar-sensation pulsed again, sharper. The valley was trying to do it cleanly: request, compliance, closure.

Mai lifted the rope-hook holding the stolen envelope slightly, keeping it off the floor.

The barrier responded.

New letters typed themselves into existence, one after another, as if an invisible machine was composing them.

COMPLIANCE REDUCES LOSS.

Ace’s shadow surged instinctively, a dark pressure trying to slam the barrier into dust.

Mai snapped her fingers—once—right next to Ace’s wrist.

A sharp human sound. Ugly. Interruptive.

Ace held back. Barely.

Mai whispered, “No verbs. No bargain.”

Ace’s jaw trembled. “It’s writing.”

Mai’s eyes were hard. “We don’t read.”

Ace’s gaze softened off-center, refusing the barrier full recognition. She shifted her weight, then deliberately scuffed her boot across the uneven stone, making a gritty, messy scrape.

The barrier hesitated—letters flickering, as if the system disliked noise not formatted as language.

Mai followed Ace's cue immediately. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a strip of black tape and slapped it—hard—onto the barrier's surface.

A blunt human rectangle across typed words.

The tape stuck.

The letters beneath it blurred, losing crispness like ink smeared under glass.

Ace took a slow step sideways, studying the edge of the barrier. Not looking at the text. Looking at the seam.

The barrier wasn't anchored like stone.

It was anchored like paper.

It had a "binding."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Edge."

Mai's eyes flicked to her. "Edge."

Ace nodded once.

She didn't draw her blades.

Instead, she used the thing the room couldn't outlaw: her own ugliness.

She reached down, grabbed a loose pebble from the floor—stone, not paper—and flicked it at the barrier's lower corner.

The pebble struck with a dull clack.

The barrier shivered.

A corner lifted, slightly, like a page caught by a breeze.

Mai's eyes sharpened. "It behaves like a sheet."

Ace nodded.

Mai moved fast—still controlled—using the rope (not her hand) to hook the lifted corner and tug. The barrier resisted, not with strength, but with stubborn adhesion—as if the system expected compliance, not pulling.

Ace crouched, grabbed another pebble, and flicked it again. Clack. Clack.

Each impact made the barrier's corner lift a little more, the "page" trying to settle back flat.

Mai whispered, "Keep it ugly."

Ace exhaled. "Always."

Mai yanked harder with the rope.

The barrier tore.

Not dramatically—quietly, like paper ripping in a library where no one is supposed to make noise.

A ragged tear split upward through the typed words, shredding the clean request into meaningless fragments.

The corridor's silence convulsed.

The page-sound behind them surged—multiple sheets now, faster, irritated.

The torn barrier fluttered, losing definition, then collapsed into a pale drift that slid back into the wall like a rejected document.

Mai didn't wait.

They moved forward through the opening, deeper into the messy corridor.

Behind them, the junction area filled with that whispering slide of pages, now aggressive—not loud, but dense, like a swarm made of bureaucracy.

Ace felt the pressure at the edge of her thoughts again, and this time it carried an emotion she didn't like:

Not hunger.

Not curiosity.

Entitlement.

It believed the file belonged to it.

Mai's breathing stayed steady, but her voice tightened. "It will try again."

Ace nodded. "Different form."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

They rounded a bend—and the corridor widened into a low room where the ceiling dipped close, forcing them to stoop slightly. The floor here was littered with debris: broken rock, fallen chunks of old mortar, dirt.

Mess.

Good.

But in the middle of the room lay something that didn't belong.

A sheet of paper.

Perfectly white.

Perfectly clean.

Sitting on dirt like a lie.

Mai stopped.

Ace stopped.

The paper was blank.

That was the problem.

Blank paper is never blank in the valley.

Mai whispered, "It wants us to pick it up."

Ace stared at it, violet eyes steady. "It wants hands."

Mai nodded once.

They stood there, both refusing to move, rope taut, envelope dangling from Mai's improvised hook.

The blank sheet did nothing for three seconds.

Then the air above it shimmered, and words began to appear—not typed this time.

Handwritten.

In Mai's handwriting.

Two words:

OPEN IT

Mai's face went pale with anger. "No."

Ace's jaw clenched so hard it looked like it hurt. The sisters hummed under their wrappings, furious at being told what to do by someone else's script.

The blank sheet waited, like a polite command.

Ace took one slow step forward.

Mai's hand tightened on the rope. "Ace—"

Ace didn't answer.

She didn't step on the paper.

She stepped beside it.

Then she did something so petty and so human it almost felt like sacrilege.

She spat.

Not on the paper.

Next to it. On the dirt. A small wet insult.

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

The words on the paper wavered.

Mai's mouth twitched—half horror, half admiration. “That's... profoundly disrespectful.”

Ace's eyes stayed fixed. “Good.”

Mai didn't argue.

She reached into her pocket, pulled out another strip of tape, and threw it—not placed it—onto the paper from a distance.

The tape landed crooked.

The words blurred beneath it, like the paper had lost the ability to hold clean instruction.

The page-sound behind them surged again, now closer, irritated by the refusal.

Ace stepped past the paper without looking at it directly, gaze softened, off-center.

Mai followed, rope and envelope swinging.

As they left the low room, the blank paper lifted off the dirt—not by wind—by decision.

It rose into the air behind them like a reprimand.

Then it folded itself.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

A clean little packet.

And floated after them.

Mai's breath tightened. “Retrieval drone.”

Ace's eyes went colder. “Let it follow.”

Mai glanced at her, sharp. “Why?”

Ace didn't give a full answer. She gave state.

“Proof.”

Mai understood immediately. “We show it that following doesn't mean winning.”

Ace nodded once.

They kept moving, deeper into the valley's under-structures, the folded white packet drifting behind them like a silent clerk trying to recover a misfiled document.

And with every step, Ace felt the valley learning a new frustration:

These two did not obey requests.

They did not bargain.

They did not complete.

So the system escalated—not with monsters, not with teeth—

With procedures.

With forms.

With paper that wanted hands.

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