

Chapter 20: The Name You Can Throw Away

They moved before dawn.

Not because they wanted to—because staying long enough to feel safe was how the valley got leverage. Comfort was a hook too. So Mai woke Ace with a light touch to the wrist, and Ace rose without complaint, eyes already sharp, body already braced.

The ravine was darker than it should have been. The clouds hung low, swallowing moonlight. Rain came and went in uneven sheets. The world smelled like wet stone and cold soil.

Real.

They followed the ravine upward until it forked into a broken hillside of shale and scrub. From there, they climbed—slow, careful—until they could see the valley again.

It lay in the distance like a bruise.

Sand basin pale. Plateau pylons faint. The dead-tree line like stitches.

And above it all, the fog hovered, thinner now, as if the valley was holding itself back. Waiting for them to come back into its authored space.

Mai crouched behind a rock outcrop, binoculars up.

Ace stayed beside her, shadow tight, eyes narrowed.

Mai scanned the valley for movement.

Nothing obvious.

No patrol.

No vehicles.

No people.

But the air above the valley looked... subtly wrong. Not visually—behaviorally. A sense of alignment.

Mai lowered the binoculars. "It's reorganizing."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Because we broke the corridor."

Mai nodded. "Yes. And because we refused the exit."

Ace's gaze stayed on the sand basin. "And because we stole a file."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Yes."

They sat with that for one breath.

Then Mai reached into her pack and pulled out her notebook—not the binder, not Marquez's pages. Her own. Blank enough to be safe. She flipped to a clean page.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "No writing."

Mai didn't look up. "Not for it. For us."

Ace's posture didn't soften, but she didn't stop Mai either.

Mai wrote one word at the top of the page, slowly, carefully:

BAIT

Under it, she drew a line—hard, straight.

No circles.

No arcs.

Then she wrote, in smaller text:

A name you can throw away.

Ace stared at the page for a long beat.

"You want me to—" Ace began, and stopped herself. Verb. She corrected. "You want a counterfeit."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace's eyes sharpened. "It must be wrong enough that it can't close."

Mai tapped her pencil once. "And plausible enough that it tries."

Ace's jaw clenched. "And not tied to you."

Mai's gaze lifted to Ace. "Or to me."

Ace stared back. "Or to Violet."

Mai's throat tightened slightly at that, but she nodded anyway. "Yes. Not that."

The wind shifted across the hillside, bringing a faint scent from the valley—paper and iron again, drifting like a reminder.

Mai lowered her voice. "We need a token identity. A procedural answer. Something it can accept into the blank field."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Like a call sign."

Mai nodded. "Exactly. A call sign with a built-in error."

Ace thought for a long beat.

Her mind didn't move in language easily. It moved in tactics. In angles. In what you could afford to lose.

Finally she said, quiet, "A name with a missing part."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Yes."

Ace's gaze dropped to Mai's notebook. "Write candidates."

Mai did. Not names from their past. Not real.

Fragments. Ugly. Incomplete.

A—

Null

Shift

Unfiled

Not-Listed

K—

No-Answer

Ace watched the list grow, eyes narrowing at each one like she was judging blades.

"Too obvious," Ace said quietly.

Mai nodded. "Yes. It needs to feel like a human answer, not a stunt."

Ace leaned closer, looking at the words like they were weapons.

Then she said a single thing that surprised Mai—not because it was clever, but because it was personal.

"Use my style."

Mai blinked. "Meaning?"

Ace's eyes stayed hard. "Short. Sharp. Like a blade name."

Mai's pencil hovered. "Okay."

She wrote:

Ash

Cinder

Vane

Splice

Rook

Cipher

Ace's eyes paused on Cipher.

Mai noticed. "That one?"

Ace's jaw shifted. "Maybe."

Mai underlined it once.

Then Ace spoke, low. "Break it."

Mai nodded slowly.

She wrote it again, but wrong:

CI—PHER

A hyphen. A cut. A forced seam.

Ace stared at it. The shape of the word felt like something the valley would hate: a name that looked complete but contained a wound.

Mai whispered, "It can try to close the gap."

Ace nodded. "And fail."

Mai added a second variant beneath it:

CIPHER?

A question mark.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Question mark is... dangerous."

Mai nodded. "Yes. It invites a response."

Ace pointed with two fingers—never touching the paper. "Hyphen."

Mai underlined CI—PHER again.

They sat with it.

Then Mai looked up at Ace. "We need delivery."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "We feed it at intake."

Mai nodded. "At the blank field."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It will try again."

Mai's voice went low. "Soon."

Ace looked toward the valley, toward the bruise of fog. "So we decide where."

Mai thought, then pointed with her pencil toward the plateau pylons. "High ground. Edge of authored space."

Ace nodded. "We don't go back deep."

Mai's mouth tightened. "No. One step in, one step out. Minimal."

Ace's eyes went colder. "And we keep the rope."

Mai nodded once.

They moved down the hillside, skirting the valley rather than entering it directly. They stayed on rocky ground, avoiding sand. Avoiding smooth stone. Avoiding anything that looked like it had been polished by intent.

As they approached the plateau's edge, the air changed gradually—paper smell strengthening, silence tightening, the valley's attention rising like pressure in a deep sea.

Mai felt it and whispered, "It knows we're near."

Ace didn't correct the verb. Her body already knew.

They reached the line of pylons.

Up close, they looked more real than the replica exit had. Rust streaks. Concrete bases cracked. Old metal bolts.

But the wires were gone, and the absence between pylons felt like missing teeth.

Mai stopped at the base of one pylon and crouched, using the concrete base as a partial shield. Ace stood beside her, scanning.

Mai opened her notebook to the CI—PHER page.

Ace watched her, eyes sharp. "No full sentence."

Mai nodded, breath slow.

Then the air shifted.

A blankness slid into their heads like a form opening.

The same prompt as before, cleaner now, more aggressive:

IDENTITY:

Mai's stomach tightened.

Ace's jaw clenched.

The cursor blinked in the mind.

Waiting.

Demanding.

Mai whispered, barely audible, "Now."

Ace didn't hesitate.

She didn't say "Ace."

She didn't say anything true.

She spoke the broken name like she was throwing a knife she didn't want back.

"CI—PHER," Ace said quietly.

The blank field shuddered.

For a heartbeat, it felt like the valley tried to smooth the hyphen away—like it wanted to complete the word.

But the cut held.

The system tried to accept it anyway.

The air tightened with a strange satisfaction, like the valley thought it had finally gotten what it wanted: an identity. A completion. A filed answer.

Mai felt a cold wave of nausea. "It took it," she whispered.

Ace's eyes stayed hard. "Good."

The blank field vanished.

For three seconds, the world went very still.

Then the valley responded.

Not with paper.

Not with a voice.

With a sound like a stamp hitting a page.

A single, heavy thunk in the air.

Mai flinched.

Ace didn't.

Mai whispered, "It filed the bait."

Ace nodded once. "Now we watch."

They waited.

And somewhere in the fog below, something shifted—subtle, but real—like a mechanism in the valley had turned, accepting a new entry:

CI—PHER.

A counterfeit closure.

A name they could throw away.

The question was whether the valley would choke on it...

...or whether it would learn to swallow broken things.—

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