

## Chapter 23: Extraction

The ravine narrowed into a crack that shouldn't have been passable.

Not a corridor—an insult in stone. Slick walls pressed close enough that Mai's pack scraped, and Ace had to angle her shoulders, moving like she was being threaded through rock.

The air inside the crack was colder. Damp. It smelled like mineral and wet decay. No paper. No ink.

But the silence here felt... tighter.

Not curated.

Targeted.

Mai felt it first: that prickling sense of being watched not from above, but from inside the walls. As if the rock itself had learned how to pay attention.

Ace felt Violet stir, impatient now. The resonance inside her pressed against her ribs like a fist wanting out.

Mai whispered, "Keep breath steady."

Ace didn't answer. She just did it.

They squeezed through the crack until it widened into a small grotto, low ceiling, uneven floor. Water pooled in shallow basins. Stalagmites rose like blunt teeth.

Mai stepped in and stopped.

Ace stepped in and stopped.

Because the grotto had something in it.

A shape on the floor.

Not paper. Not a sheet.

A bundle.

Wrapped in something pale and fibrous—like old cloth, like compressed pulp, like bandages made from pages that had forgotten they were pages.

It lay in the shallow water, half-submerged.

Mai's throat tightened. "No."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It's bait."

Mai nodded once.

The bundle twitched.

Not like an animal.

Like something being tugged by a mechanism.

Mai's stomach turned. "It's... extraction."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It pulled something out."

Mai didn't ask what. She could guess. The valley didn't need blood. It needed closure. But it could still tear pieces loose—memories, labels, reflexes.

Mai's voice came out low. "Don't touch."

Ace didn't move.

The bundle twitched again, and a pale strip unfurled from it—like a tongue made of cloth.

It floated on the water surface toward them, slow and deliberate.

Ace's shadow tightened reflexively.

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist—hard. Anchor.

The pale strip stopped about a meter away, hovering above the water like it didn't trust the surface.

Then words appeared on it.

Not typed.

Not embossed.

Stitched.

Letters formed like thread woven into fabric:

RETURN / NAME

Mai's blood went cold.

Ace's eyes flashed violet. The scar-sensation under her collarbone burned.

Mai whispered, "It's asking for the real."

Ace's voice was low and rough. "It's taking it."

The stitched words changed, thread shifting, reweaving itself into a new line:

OR WE TAKE

Mai's jaw clenched. "No."

Ace didn't speak.

The pale strip floated closer again, and a second strip unfurled from the bundle, drifting toward Mai.

This one stitched a different message:

## ANCHOR / ID

Mai's face went pale.

Ace's posture shifted—protective, predatory. The sisters hummed under their wrappings, offended at the implication that Mai was a file to be referenced.

Mai whispered, "It's targeting me to pull you."

Ace's voice came out cold. "No."

The grotto's air tightened.

The water in the pools began to ripple—not from wind, not from movement.

From pressure.

Mai felt it in her teeth.

Ace felt Violet rise another notch.

Then the bundle in the water opened.

Not like a flower.

Like a book being forced apart.

Layers peeled back, pale wrappings unfurling, revealing something inside.

Not a face.

A mask.

A thin, pale mask—smooth, blank, almost porcelain, except for three shallow grooves etched where eyes and mouth should be.

And across the forehead, carved faintly, the trisected circle.

Mai's stomach lurched.

Ace's eyes went hard. "It wants to wear us."

Mai's voice was tight. "Or make us wear it."

The mask lifted from the bundle without hands, rising above the water, turning slowly as if searching.

It didn't look at them.

It oriented toward Ace.

The stitched strips on the water tightened, drifting closer, now like tendrils.

Ace's shadow surged, thickening around her legs, emerald fracture-lines flaring.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist harder. "Stay."

Ace's jaw trembled. "It's pulling."

Mai nodded, voice fierce. "Yes. Extraction."

The mask drifted closer, and the air inside Ace's chest tightened, as if something unseen had hooked under her ribs—not pain, but a tug on identity.

A pull on the place where her name sat.

A pull on the seam where Violet lived.

Mai's breath hitched. She felt something tug in her too—a subtle pressure behind her eyes, like the valley was trying to label her as "anchor" and pull her into that role until she couldn't move.

Mai whispered, "Litany."

Ace's eyes flicked to her.

Mai began, low and steady. "Here."

Ace forced her voice out. "Here."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The stitched strip on the water shuddered, as if confused by noncompliance.

The mask drifted closer anyway, intent now, as if the room didn't care about words.

Mai's voice stayed steady. "Present."

Ace echoed, "Present."

The mask's carved grooves deepened slightly, as if the thing was trying to learn what a face should be.

Mai's voice tightened. "Wrist."

Ace: "Wrist."

The stitched strip above the water convulsed, the threads on it loosening, letters blurring.

Good.

But the mask didn't stop.

It slid closer to Ace, now within three meters.

Ace felt Violet press hard against her ribs, irritated, hungry, reacting to an enemy that thought it could handle her like a file.

Ace's hands tightened on her hilts.

Mai's voice snapped, harsh. "No blades."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's not paper."

Mai's eyes were wild for a heartbeat, then focused. "It's a mask. It's an interface. If you cut it clean, it learns clean cut. We ruin it."

Ace breathed once, controlled. She held.

Mai looked around the grotto fast—wet stone, mineral streaks, muddy pools.

She spotted a cluster of soft clay at the pool edge—thick, sticky, gray-brown.

Mai didn't hesitate.

She dropped to her knees and scooped up clay with both hands.

Hands.

A risk.

But the grotto didn't punish hands the way the archive did—because this wasn't bureaucracy. This was extraction.

Mai rose and hurled the clay—hard—at the floating mask.

The clay hit with a wet slap and stuck, coating the smooth surface, filling the carved grooves.

The mask shuddered violently, like a face being smothered.

Ace understood instantly and followed—kicking up mud and grit and throwing it too, making the mask heavy, lopsided, ugly.

The stitched strips on the water flailed, the stitched letters unraveling as the threads loosened.

The mask drifted backward, struggling to maintain shape.

Mai panted once, then forced breath steady again. "Keep it ugly."

Ace's eyes were violet, burning. "Always."

The mask tried to reorient, turning toward Mai now, perhaps seeking easier traction.

Mai's mouth tightened. "No."

Ace stepped between Mai and the mask without thinking, shadow surging like a shield.

Mai's hand locked on Ace's wrist—anchor and warning at once.

Then the grotto did something crueler.

The water in the pools began to rise.

Not flooding—lifting into thin sheets, like water trying to become paper.

A membrane formed across the grotto floor, shimmering, reflecting their faces back in distorted fragments.

Mai's stomach turned. "Reflection."

Ace's breath caught. The scar-sensation flared.

The membrane's surface began to print something—not ink—light. Pale letters forming from condensation.

A blank field again.

IDENTITY:

This time the prompt wasn't in their heads.

It was on the floor.

A field large enough for both of them to see.

A demand made physical.

Mai's voice went tight. "It's forcing the question into the room."

Ace's jaw trembled once. Violet surged. The resonance inside her rose like a tide, angry at being summoned.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist hard and leaned in, voice fierce and steady. "We don't answer."

Ace's teeth bared for a heartbeat. "It's pulling it out."

Mai nodded, eyes hard. "Then we ruin the field."

Ace stared at the reflective membrane.

Then she did something that felt insane and perfect.

She stomped.

Not gently. Not controlled. A brutal, ugly stomp into the membrane.

Water splashed. The printed blank field shattered into ripples.

Mai stomped too, splashing mud, ruining reflection.

They didn't let the surface settle.

They turned it into chaos—waves, droplets, dirt, clay.

The prompt on the floor blurred into nothing.

The mask above the water convulsed again, losing coherence.

The stitched strips unraveled completely, threads dissolving into the water like dead ink.

For a moment, the grotto's pressure released.

Mai's shoulders shook once with adrenaline.

Ace's eyes stayed violet, but the prismatic undertone eased as Violet's resonance lost traction again.

Then the grotto made its final move.

The cave walls sighed—a low, stone-deep sound.

And the crack passage behind them began to narrow.

Not collapsing. Closing.

Mai's eyes widened. "It's sealing."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It wants us trapped."

Mai's voice was tight. "Yes. Extraction with no exit."

Ace sheathed one blade, grabbed Mai's wrist—not the rope this time, direct—and pulled.

Mai didn't resist.

They sprinted—yes, sprinted—toward the crack passage as stone pressed in.

Not a clean run. A desperate scramble, boots slipping on wet rock, shoulders scraping stone.

Ugly movement.

They squeezed through the crack as it narrowed, bodies pressed tight, breath harsh, rope snagging once then tearing free with a snap.

Ace pulled, Mai shoved, both of them half-falling, half-climbing out into the wider ravine space.

Behind them, the crack sealed shut with a wet stone grind.

The grotto vanished behind rock.

The extraction chamber denied.

Mai collapsed to her knees in the mud, breathing hard.

Ace stood over her, scanning, shadow tight, eyes still violet.

Mai looked up at Ace, rain dripping from her hair, mud on her hands, and gave a harsh, breathless laugh.

"We ruined its face."

Ace's mouth twitched, fierce and grim. "Good."

Mai's laugh died into a shuddering exhale. Her eyes hardened again. "But it escalated."

Ace nodded once, cold. "Yes."

Mai wiped mud off her cheek with the back of her sleeve. "It tried to print you without consent."

Ace's jaw clenched. "And failed."

Mai nodded, then whispered the obvious truth that sat like a rock in her stomach:

“It will try again. It will try somewhere cleaner. Somewhere it can control the surface.”

Ace stared into the ravine darkness where rain fell unevenly, and her voice came out low, absolute.

“Then we don’t go somewhere cleaner.”

Mai’s mouth twitched. “Ugly forever.”

Ace’s eyes flashed violet. “Ugly until it breaks.”

And somewhere behind the sealed grotto, in a chamber full of ruined reflection and a mask clogged with clay, the valley recorded a new line in its invisible log:

PHASE III / EXTRACTION: FAILED — SUBJECTS RESISTED

Failure.

Again.

And systems that fail repeatedly do one thing next:

They stop negotiating with identity...

...and start targeting the bond.

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