

Chapter 24: Cut the Rope

They didn't talk about it, but both of them felt it.

That slight shift in the air after the grotto sealed. The way the ravine's darkness no longer felt like "terrain" and more like a corridor leading into a decision someone else wanted.

The valley had failed to take a name.

So it would take the next best thing.

A separation.

A clean line.

A cut.

Mai's hands were still muddy. She wiped them on her pants, but the grit stayed under her nails. It was fine. Dirt was a language the valley didn't speak well.

Ace kept one blade sheathed, one hand near the hilt, posture tight. She looked like she was listening to the rock itself.

They moved along the ravine, following a route that stayed broken and irregular. No polished stone. No clean geometry. No "rooms."

Just wet rock and sharp angles and places where the world didn't pretend to be a form.

Then the ravine opened into a wider gully where the ground leveled out. Puddles everywhere. Mud deep enough to swallow boots. A few dead shrubs clawed at the air.

Mai's shoulders tightened. Open space meant visibility. Visibility meant stories.

Ace slowed instinctively.

Mai did too.

The rope between them felt suddenly... present. Not just a tether, but a target. A visible statement the valley could attack because it represented something simple:

Connection.

Mai's voice came low. "It will try the bond."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Rope is a handle."

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

Mai blinked. "Cut it?"

Ace didn't answer with a full sentence. She answered with intent in a single word.

"Cut."

Mai's throat tightened. The rope had been safety. It had been defiance. It had been a visible "no" to separation.

Cutting it felt like... yielding.

Ace saw that hesitation and spoke quietly, sharper than comfort but not cruel. "We choose. Not it."

Mai swallowed and nodded once. "Okay. We choose."

They stopped at the edge of the gully.

Mai knelt, pulled the rope slack between them, and set it on the mud like an offering they were about to destroy.

Ace drew her katana—just the tip visible in the green glow.

Mai's eyes flicked to the blade, then away. "Ugly cut," she whispered.

Ace's mouth twitched. "Always."

She didn't slice clean.

She sawed.

Back and forth, grinding the blade against fibers until the rope frayed, shredded, snapped with a wet jerk.

A messy end.

No neat severing.

No clean story.

The two halves of rope fell into the mud like dead snakes.

Mai stared at the severed ends for a heartbeat, chest tight.

Ace didn't let her linger.

Ace stepped closer and took Mai's wrist in her hand—direct skin contact through fabric—firm, grounding.

"No rope," Ace said quietly. "Still together."

Mai exhaled, relief and fear mixed. "Yes."

They moved into the gully.

Mud sucked at their boots. The sound was obscene—wet, slurping, irregular.

Perfect.

Then the air changed.

A cold pressure slid between them—not from the valley, not from ahead, but from the space where

the rope had been.

Mai felt it like a draft through a crack in a wall.

Ace felt Violet stir, irritated.

Mai whispered, "It noticed."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Something moved in the mud behind them.

Not footsteps.

A ripple.

Like a line being drawn through water.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Don't look back."

Ace didn't. She watched forward, scanning for anything that looked too clean.

The gully ahead narrowed slightly, funneling toward a stand of dead shrubs and a low rock lip that could be climbed.

Ace's instincts screamed: funnel.

Mai's instincts screamed: pattern.

They slowed.

Then the mud between them hardened.

Not all of it—just a strip, a thin band across the gully floor that suddenly turned from wet muck into dry, pale, smooth stone.

A line.

A separation line.

Mai's stomach turned. "No."

Ace's shadow tightened.

The pale strip widened, pushing outward like ice spreading on a pond.

It aimed for the space between them.

Mai stepped closer to Ace instantly, shoulder to shoulder.

The strip hit their boots and stopped, as if confused.

The valley wanted a line between them. It couldn't find it if they refused to give it space.

Mai's voice came out low and hard. "It wants distance."

Ace nodded. "So we deny distance."

The strip pulsed, then a second strip formed—this time from the left side of the gully, rising up like a wall of pale, paper-smooth stone.

Not paper.

Not rock.

Something in between—like a page that had been taught to be structural.

It rose to chest height and extended forward, trying to wedge itself into the space between Ace and Mai like a divider.

Mai's breath hitched.

Ace's eyes flashed violet. Her shadow surged, ready to smash.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist. "No clean cut."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Then we ruin it."

Mai's gaze snapped to the mud at their feet. Thick, black, gritty. Useful.

Mai scooped mud and flung it at the pale wall.

Mud splattered, stuck, dripped.

The pale surface shuddered as if offended by the lack of legibility.

Ace followed immediately—kicking mud up with her boot, splashing it across the divider.

The wall trembled, trying to hold shape.

Mai grabbed a dead shrub branch and scraped it along the wall, leaving ugly streaks, tearing at the surface like vandalism.

The wall reacted—its surface briefly showed faint text, trying to label the act:

SEPARATION / REQUIRED

Mai smeared the text with her muddy hand, destroying readability.

Ace drove her shoulder into the wall—not a clean strike, not a cut—just brute contact.

The wall buckled.

Cracked.

Not like stone, like laminated paper tearing.

It split down the middle with a wet rip, two halves sagging into mud.

Mai panted once. Ace's eyes stayed hard.

Then the gully went silent.

Not natural silence.

System silence.

A pause like a process recalculating after a failed step.

Mai whispered, "It will try again."

Ace's voice was low. "Different method."

Mai nodded.

They climbed the low rock lip ahead, pulling themselves up onto uneven ground.

No funnel now. No mud. Just jagged shale and scrub.

They moved fast.

Behind them, the pale divider halves dissolved into the mud like they'd never existed, leaving only dirty streaks and the memory of text.

Mai's hands shook slightly as she wiped mud off her palms.

Ace watched her and said quietly, "You did good."

Mai gave a harsh, breathless laugh. "I just vandalized a wall made of paperwork."

Ace's mouth twitched. "That's our genre now."

Mai's laugh died into an exhale. She looked at Ace, rain dripping from her hair.

"No rope," Mai said quietly. "But still... together."

Ace's eyes softened a fraction, violet glow dimming at the edges. She reached out and squeezed Mai's wrist once—anchor.

"Always," Ace said.

And somewhere deep in the valley, the system recorded another failure:

SEPARATION ATTEMPT: RESISTED — SUBJECTS MAINTAINED PROXIMITY

It couldn't cut the rope.

So it would try something worse.

It would try to make one of them the rope.

A handle with a heartbeat.

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