

## Chapter 25: Handle With Care

They kept to the broken ground, moving along a ridge of shale that crumbled underfoot. The rain eased into a thin mist that coated everything—hair, sleeves, stone—with that cold slickness that made the world feel like it had been wiped down.

Not cleanly. Just... damply.

Mai's hands still smelled like mud. Good. She wanted that smell on her, the way you want smoke on your clothes after a fire: proof you'd been somewhere real.

Ace didn't speak much. She scanned, listened, adjusted pace. The violet in her eyes had settled back to its usual intensity—still luminous, still dangerous—but less prismatic. Violet's resonance stayed coiled inside her, annoyed, watchful.

Mai could feel the valley behind them like a pressure gradient. Not a presence chasing them, exactly.

A process continuing.

They crested a ridge.

And the landscape ahead dropped into a shallow basin—not sand this time, but slick black stone with puddles pooled in depressions. The basin was ringed by jagged boulders, like teeth that hadn't decided if they wanted to bite.

Mai stopped instinctively.

Ace stopped too.

The basin felt... authored.

Not as clean as the archive. Not as perfect as the circle-room. But arranged. Considered.

Mai whispered, "This is a stage."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "For what?"

Mai's throat tightened. "For the bond."

Ace's jaw clenched.

They moved into the basin carefully, stepping from rock to rock, avoiding the puddles where the surface reflected too clearly. Reflection had already tried to print them once. They weren't giving it a second clean mirror.

Halfway across, Mai felt it.

A subtle tug—not on her wrist, not on her mind.

On her role.

Like someone had written "ANCHOR" on the inside of her skull and was now pulling the label by its corner.

Mai's breath hitched.

Ace's head snapped toward her instantly. "Mai."

Mai forced her voice steady. "I feel it."

Ace's eyes went darker violet. "Where?"

Mai swallowed. "Behind my eyes. Like... indexing."

Ace's shadow tightened around her feet, emerald fracture-lines brightening. The sisters hummed, offended that Mai was being treated like a tool.

Mai whispered, "It's trying to make me the handle."

Ace's jaw clenched. "No."

Mai didn't argue. "Yes."

The basin's puddles trembled slightly.

Not from wind.

From attention.

Ace moved closer, shoulder nearly touching Mai's.

Mai reached out and touched Ace's wrist—anchor gesture, mutual now.

"Here," Mai said quietly.

Ace replied, "Here."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The tug eased—slightly.

Then the basin responded.

A shape emerged from one of the puddles—slowly, like something rising from ink. Not a paper column this time.

A figure.

Humanoid silhouette, height similar to Mai.

Its "skin" wasn't skin. It was smooth, pale, almost porcelain—but wet, as if it had been poured and hadn't dried.

No face.

Just a faint trisected circle carved where a face should be, like a watermark.

Mai's stomach turned. "Interface."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It's wearing your outline."

The figure stepped out of the puddle without sound.

Then it did something worse than walking.

It posed.

It turned its head toward Ace the way Mai did when she was about to say something important.

It lifted its hand the way Mai lifted her hand when she grounded Ace.

A perfect imitation of a tender gesture.

Ace's breath caught. Her eyes flared violet, a spike of something hot—anger, fear, disgust, protectiveness all braided together.

Mai's voice went low and sharp. "Don't react."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's using you."

Mai nodded, throat tight. "Yes. That's the point."

The imitation-Mai stepped closer, stopping a few meters away.

Then it "spoke."

Not with voice.

With pressure.

A thought that tried to enter Ace's skull wearing Mai's tone:

ACE. STOP. COME HERE.

Mai's stomach dropped. "No."

Ace's hands tightened on her hilts.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist hard. "That's not me."

Ace's jaw trembled. "I know."

The imitation tilted its head again, as if disappointed.

Then the basin's puddles began to ripple—multiple surfaces trembling as if more figures could rise.

Mai's breath tightened. "It's scaling."

Ace's eyes flashed. "We break the handle attempt now."

Mai nodded, fast. "Yes. Ugly."

Ace's gaze snapped to the imitation's smooth surface. "Mud."

Mai followed instantly—scooping grit and damp shale from the ground and flinging it at the imitation's chest.

The grit struck and stuck, leaving ugly streaks on pale "skin."

The imitation flinched—tiny, uncanny—like it wasn't expecting to be treated like an object.

Ace followed, stepping forward one pace and slamming her boot into a puddle—not toward the imitation, just near it—splashing black water and mud across its torso.

The imitation's surface mottled, losing the clean "Mai outline."

It tried to hold shape.

Mai hurled more grit, more mud.

Ace did the same, violent splashes, no clean strikes.

The imitation staggered—not from pain—from loss of definition.

Its outline started to blur.

Good.

Then the basin tried a smarter move.

The tug behind Mai's eyes intensified sharply.

Mai gasped, hand going to her temple. "Ah—"

Ace snapped to her, fear flickering. "Mai!"

Mai clenched her jaw, forcing breath through. "It's... indexing harder."

Ace's eyes went violet-bright. The prismatic undertone stirred.

Mai's voice was strained but steady. "It's trying to pull me out of me."

Ace's shadow surged.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist again, desperate. "No blades. No clean verbs."

Ace's teeth bared. "Then what?"

Mai's eyes darted. Puddles. Rock. Mud. The imitation losing definition. The tug behind her eyes like a hook.

And then Mai did something that felt insane but right:

She laughed.

Not pretty. Not controlled. A harsh, cracked burst of sound that didn't resolve into meaning.

Ace blinked.

The tug behind Mai's eyes stuttered—just for a second—as if the system couldn't file laughter into “anchor compliance.”

Mai used the opening.

She grabbed her own pack strap and yanked it off her shoulder, letting the bag hit the ground with a wet thud. Then she pulled out something simple: her scarf—dark fabric, worn, human.

She wrapped it around her own head, covering her hair, covering her eyes for a moment like a blindfold.

Ace's breath caught. “Mai—”

Mai spoke through fabric, voice muffled. “If it indexes my eyes, I hide my eyes.”

Ace understood instantly.

Mai wasn't surrendering.

She was denying data.

She pulled the scarf down just enough to see through a slit, keeping her gaze soft, peripheral.

The tug eased slightly.

Ace exhaled.

Mai turned to the imitation and spoke low, hard.

“Not me.”

Ace echoed, “Not hers.”

They moved together, shoulder to shoulder, and began to ruin the imitation with mud and grit and splashed puddle-water until it no longer resembled Mai at all.

The imitation's surface cracked—not like stone—like dried clay flaking.

The trisected circle watermark where its “face” should be smeared under grime.

Then the figure collapsed back into the puddle, losing cohesion, as if it couldn't survive without a clean outline to imitate.

The basin went still for a heartbeat.

Mai panted behind her scarf.

Ace kept a hand near her hilt, posture tight.

Then the puddles around them began to ripple again—faintly, like the system was considering a second batch.

Mai's voice came rough. “We leave. Now.”

Ace didn't argue.

They moved toward the basin edge, stepping rock to rock, avoiding reflective surfaces. Mai kept the scarf partially over her eyes, gaze narrowed to peripheral. Ace stayed close enough that their shoulders brushed occasionally—no rope required.

Behind them, one puddle rose slightly, as if another imitation wanted to form.

Ace didn't look back.

Mai didn't either.

They climbed out of the basin onto jagged ground again.

Only then did Mai loosen the scarf, pulling it down to her neck, breathing hard.

Ace's voice was low, furious in a controlled way. "It tried to wear you."

Mai nodded, wiping rain from her face. "Yes."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "It will try again."

Mai's mouth twitched, grim. "Yes. But now we know: it needs definition. It needs clean outlines."

Ace nodded slowly. "So we stay ugly."

Mai's voice came low. "Ugly. Messy. Unfiled."

Ace's gaze hardened toward the distant valley bruise. "And if it tries to make you the handle again..."

Mai didn't let her finish. She reached out and touched Ace's wrist—anchor, mutual.

"We ruin it," Mai said.

Ace replied, quiet and absolute. "Always."

And somewhere in the valley's invisible log, the system recorded another failure, more irritated now:

HANDLE ATTEMPT: FAILED — ANCHOR DATA DENIED

Denied.

Denied.

Denied.

The pattern was forming: these two didn't obey.

So the system would try the only thing left that didn't require obedience.

It would create a situation where refusal itself caused harm.

A forced choice.

A "save one" form.

And the valley was very, very good at paperwork.

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