

Chapter 27: The Stamp

They didn't stop until the plateau was behind them and the ground turned ugly again—broken shale, wet scrub, scattered boulders that didn't line up in any pleasing way.

Mai's lungs burned. Ace's shoulders rose and fell in controlled rhythm, but her eyes stayed too bright—violet burning close to prismatic. Violet inside her didn't like forms. Didn't like being called.

And that checkbox plateau had been a siren.

Mai wiped rain off her face and forced herself to slow. Running became a narrative if you let it. They needed movement, not performance.

They found a low ravine cut again—less deep than the last, but jagged enough to feel unscripted. They dropped into it, boots slipping, mud grabbing at their soles like hands.

Mai whispered, "We broke the frame."

Ace nodded, voice low. "So it will stop framing."

Mai's throat tightened. "Yes."

They moved deeper into the cut, following the jagged line until it narrowed into a bend that blocked sightlines. Good. No long views. No stage.

Mai stopped under a rock overhang and pressed her palm against the stone—grounding. She didn't close her eyes. She didn't let herself drift.

Ace stood just behind her, scanning the ravine mouth.

For a moment, there was only rain.

Then the air changed.

Not pressure this time—impact.

A sensation like a rubber stamp being slammed down on the inside of Mai's skull.

Mai gasped and staggered, hand flying to her temple.

Ace snapped to her instantly. "Mai!"

Mai's breath came out sharp. "Something—"

She stopped. No verbs. She corrected. "A hit."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Where?"

Mai swallowed hard, fighting nausea. "Behind my eyes. Like... a mark."

Ace's jaw clenched. The sisters hummed beneath their wrappings, angry.

Mai forced her breathing down. "It didn't ask."

Ace's voice went cold. "Stamp."

Mai nodded, shaky. "Yes."

The rain around them seemed to quiet, as if the world held its breath for what the mark would do next.

Mai blinked—and for a split second, her vision overlaid.

A faint rectangle floated in her sight, like an augmented interface:

ANCHOR: CONFIRMED

Mai's stomach lurched.

Ace saw her expression change and went instantly still. "What?"

Mai's voice was low, strained. "It marked me."

Ace's eyes flared violet. "No."

Mai swallowed bile. "Yes."

Another stamp-impact hit—this time deeper, like it landed in bone.

Mai doubled over briefly.

Ace grabbed her shoulders, steadying her. "Mai. Look at me."

Mai forced her eyes up.

Ace kept her voice low and hard. "Stay."

Mai nodded once, breath trembling. "Here."

Ace: "Here."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The overlay flickered, as if the system disliked ritual words but couldn't erase the stamp it had already applied.

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

Ace's jaw clenched, anger tightening her posture. "Then we remove the mark."

Mai's voice came out thin. "How?"

Ace's gaze snapped around the ravine—wet rock, mud, grit.

"Dirty it," Ace said.

Mai blinked. "It's in my head."

Ace's eyes stayed hard. "Then we ruin the input. We flood it with noise."

Mai swallowed. "Okay."

Mai pulled the scarf back up—over her eyes, not fully, just enough to force peripheral view again.

The overlay still hovered faintly behind the fabric like a ghost.

ANCHOR: CONFIRMED

Ace grabbed mud—thick, cold—and smeared it across Mai's scarf and cheekbones. Not gentle. Not neat. Ugly.

Mai flinched, then held. "Okay."

Ace smeared more—across Mai's forehead, across the fabric, making her face a mess.

Mai breathed through it. "Yes."

Ace's voice was low. "If it wants a clean anchor, we give it sludge."

Mai's mouth twitched, grim. "Sludge."

Another stamp-impact hit.

Mai staggered, nausea spiking.

The overlay updated:

ANCHOR: STABILIZE

Mai's teeth clenched. "It's persistent."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "So are we."

Ace leaned in, close, and spoke in Mai's ear—two words only, hard as nails:

"Don't comply."

Mai nodded, breath shaky. "No."

The overlay flickered.

Then the ravine wall behind them printed something.

Not with ink.

With condensation, like letters forming out of wet air.

A clean line of text appeared on the stone:

ANCHOR REQUIRED FOR SUBJECT RETENTION

Mai's stomach turned.

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's threatening again."

Mai whispered, "It's making the threat conditional on me. It's making me the lever."

Ace's voice went cold. "It's lying."

Mai didn't argue. "Maybe. But it can still hurt."

Ace stared at the printed line on the rock.

Then she did what she'd done before—she ruined legibility.

She dragged her muddy hand across the condensation letters, smearing them into gray streaks.

The text dissolved.

The rock went blank again.

Ace whispered, "No messages."

Mai's breath shook once. "It's in me."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Then we counter-stamp."

Mai blinked through the scarf slit. "How?"

Ace's gaze went distant for a heartbeat—tactical, brutal.

Then she spoke.

"Overwrite."

Mai's throat tightened. "With what?"

Ace didn't answer with a speech.

She answered with the only thing that had consistently disrupted the valley: ritual words and mutual anchoring.

Ace took Mai's muddy hands in hers—direct contact, firm—and held them like she was pinning Mai to the present.

"Here," Ace said.

Mai echoed, breath ragged. "Here."

Ace: "Together."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Present."

Mai: "Present."

The overlay in Mai's vision shuddered.

The rectangle flickered.

The words ANCHOR: CONFIRMED blurred, as if the system couldn't decide whether "anchor" referred to its stamp or to their mutual choice.

Mai felt the tug behind her eyes ease slightly—still there, but less locked.

Mai whispered, "It's confused."

Ace nodded, jaw clenched. "Good."

Mai's breathing steadied a fraction.

Then the stamp returned—harder.

Mai gasped, knees buckling.

Ace caught her instantly.

The overlay updated again, more aggressive:

ANCHOR: LOCK

Mai's voice came out broken. "It's locking."

Ace's eyes flared violet-bright, prismatic undertone rising—Violet pushing closer, furious at the violation.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist reflexively, desperate. "No—don't—"

Ace's jaw clenched. "I'm here."

Mai swallowed, forcing breath. "No clean violence."

Ace's teeth bared, but she held.

Mai's mind raced through options: mud, scarf, noise, breaking frames. None of that could fully remove a stamp inside her skull.

So Mai did the only thing left that was truly unfileable:

She changed herself mid-process.

Not identity. Not name.

State.

Mai took a shaky breath and began to speak in fragments, rapid, messy, not forming a clean sentence—an intentional glitch stream:

"Rain—cold—hands—mud—stone—breath—Ace—now—here—"

Ace caught on instantly.

She joined, matching the rhythm with her own broken list:

"Boots—slip—water—dark—together—no—no—no—"

The overlay in Mai's vision spasmed. The system couldn't parse the stream into a clean anchor state. It was like feeding an OCR engine a shredded page.

The words ANCHOR: LOCK flickered.

Faded.

Reappeared.

Then fractured into nonsense symbols for a heartbeat.

Mai's nausea eased slightly.

Ace kept the stream going, low and harsh, until Mai's breathing steadied.

Mai whispered, exhausted, "It hates noise."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Mai swallowed, eyes hard behind the scarf. "But it can stamp again."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Then we move."

Mai nodded, shakily. "Yes. We move."

They left the overhang and pushed deeper into the ravine cut, staying in broken terrain, keeping close, hands occasionally touching—wrist, shoulder, sleeve—anything to reinforce their anchor instead of the valley's.

Behind them, the rain continued, irregular, honest.

But in Mai's vision, the overlay didn't vanish completely.

It lingered faintly, like a watermark behind her eyes.

Not a full lock.

A claim.

And somewhere in the valley's invisible log, the system recorded its first true success:

STAMP APPLIED — ANCHOR DATA PARTIALLY LOCKED

Partially.

Not fully.

Yet.

The valley didn't need perfection.

It needed progress.

And now it had a mark on Mai, a handle it could keep trying to tighten.

So it prepared the next stamp—not on her mind...

...but on the world.

A stamp that didn't ask permission.

A stamp that rewrote terrain into paper.

A stamp that forced them into an authored room whether they wanted it or not.

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