

Chapter 28: Paper Terrain

They moved until the ravine cut thinned into a twisted channel of rock and roots, then climbed out onto higher ground where the wind could get at them properly. The rain had eased into a fine mist, cold needles drifting sideways. Everything glistened. Everything slipped.

Mai kept rubbing her fingers together—tiny, repetitive movements, like she could scrub the stamp out of her skull by friction alone. The scarf stayed half-up, her gaze narrowed into peripheral.

Ace stayed close enough that their shoulders brushed now and then, a deliberate denial of distance. No rope. No clean line.

The valley followed anyway—not as footsteps, not as paper whispers.

As reformatting.

The first sign was subtle.

A patch of ground ahead looked pale.

Not snow. Not sand.

Just a lighter tone in the shale, like a sheet of something had been laid over the rock.

Mai stopped. Ace stopped.

Mai's voice came low, tight. "That's new."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Stamped."

Mai swallowed. "Yes."

They approached slowly.

The pale patch wasn't soft. It was hard, flat, and smooth—too smooth. Like paper pressed into stone until it became structural. The surface had faint fibers in it if you looked wrong. If you looked right, it pretended to be rock.

Mai didn't like either version.

Ace stepped close and scuffed her boot across it—hard. The surface didn't chip like stone. It scored like laminated pulp.

A thin line appeared—clean and dark—as if her boot had written on it.

Mai's stomach turned. "It records contact."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Then we don't touch."

Mai nodded. "But it's spreading."

Because the pale patch wasn't isolated.

Beyond it, more pale surfaces appeared—like islands in the broken terrain, forming a path. Not a path that guided politely. A path that replaced what wasn't compliant.

A stamped corridor made of land.

Mai whispered, "It's turning terrain into paper."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "So it can file us in the open."

Mai's overlay flickered behind her eyes, faint text ghosting:

ANCHOR: STABILIZE

Mai clenched her teeth. "It's syncing my mark to the terrain."

Ace's jaw tightened. "It's using you as a reference."

Mai swallowed. "Yes."

The pale patches shifted—edges creeping outward, slow but deliberate, like mold spreading across bread.

Mai stared at the expanding edge and felt that sickening bureaucratic certainty: if they waited, they'd be standing on paper whether they wanted to or not.

Ace looked at the terrain beyond—broken shale, dark rock, scrub.

"Jump," Ace said.

Mai blinked once. "Meaning?"

Ace pointed with two fingers. "We stay off the pale. We move on dark."

Mai nodded. "Okay."

They began to move sideways along the ridge, picking routes that kept them on dark stone, leaping over pale islands whenever they had to. Every jump was ugly, risky, irregular.

Good.

Irregular made filing harder.

But the valley adapted.

The pale surfaces began appearing where they were about to land.

Mai noticed first. She hissed, "It's anticipating."

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

Mai's voice was tight. "It's using my mark as a sensor."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Then we blind the sensor."

Mai's stomach turned. "How?"

Ace didn't answer with theory. She answered with a move.

She grabbed Mai by the wrist and pulled her hard to the left—off the ridge line and down into a shallow dip where wet shrubs and loose stones formed a messy pocket.

Mai stumbled, caught herself, then understood.

Low ground. Vegetation. Mud. Noise.

Less clean surface.

Mai's overlay flickered again, the words blurring:

ANCHOR: STABILIZE...

The last letters couldn't hold.

Ace spoke low. "No flat."

Mai nodded, breathing hard. "Yes. No flat."

They pushed through the shrubs, branches snagging sleeves, mud sucking at boots. The world here was all irregular texture—nothing a stamp could lay cleanly without work.

For a minute, it worked.

No pale islands.

No laminated ground.

Just wet dirt and rock and plant matter.

Mai felt the stamp pressure behind her eyes ease slightly, like the system had lost line-of-sight.

Then the stamp hit the world.

A heavy thunk—not sound, but sensation—rolled through the ground under their feet.

Mai staggered, nausea spiking. Ace's eyes flared violet.

The shrubs around them whitened at the tips like frost—but not cold. Paper.

Leaves stiffened, flattening. Branches lost texture, becoming pale strips with faint fibers.

Mai whispered, horrified, "It stamped the vegetation."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's making everything fileable."

The bushes around them began to flatten into planar shapes, like someone pressed the world between book covers. The ground underfoot paled too, turning slick and smooth.

Mai's overlay flashed sharply:

ANCHOR: LOCK — TERRAIN SYNC

Mai gasped. "It—"

Ace cut her off, voice low and hard. "Noise."

Mai forced herself to speak in fragments again, rapid, messy:
"Mud—branches—wet—slip—breath—now—"

Ace joined instantly: "Dark—move—no—together—now—"

The overlay spasmed. The sync text flickered.

But the terrain kept whitening.

This wasn't a prompt. This wasn't a request.

It was a mechanism.

A stamp rewriting the map.

Ace's eyes narrowed. She scanned fast for anything the stamp couldn't easily flatten.

Her gaze snapped to the right: a scatter of boulders, jagged, stacked irregularly, with a narrow gap between them that dropped into a darker fissure.

A hole.

Not clean.

Not flat.

Ace grabbed Mai's wrist and hauled her toward it. "There."

Mai stumbled, boots slipping on newly-slick ground. "It's—"

Ace didn't let her finish. "Move."

They reached the boulder pile. The rocks here were jagged enough that the whitening couldn't form a continuous plane. Pale patches appeared on some surfaces, but the angles broke them, preventing a full sheet.

Mai clambered up, fingers scraping rock. Ace followed, shadow tight, eyes bright.

The fissure gap between boulders was narrow but deep—blackness below, damp air rising.

Mai looked down and swallowed. "Down."

Ace nodded. "Down."

They dropped into the fissure.

It wasn't a graceful descent. It was a scramble—boots sliding, palms scraping rock, bodies bumping.

Ugly.

Perfect.

As they descended, the stamped whitening above them continued, but it couldn't easily follow into a

vertical crack. The paper terrain needed surfaces to lay flat. The fissure refused flatness.

Mai's overlay flickered, the sync text blurring:

TERRAIN... SYNC...

Then breaking into nothing.

Mai exhaled, shaking.

Ace's voice came low. "Better."

Mai nodded, breath ragged. "Yes."

They reached a ledge inside the fissure and paused, pressed into the rock, listening.

Above them, faintly, came a soft friction sound—not pages turning, but surfaces sliding as the world reflattened itself.

The stamp was still working up there, rewriting the ridge into something that could be filed.

Mai's eyes were hard in the dark. "It's terraforming."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Paperforming."

Mai gave a short, cracked laugh. "Yes."

Ace didn't smile. "It wants us on a sheet."

Mai nodded. "So it can print."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "Then we stay in cracks."

Mai's voice came low. "Forever, if we have to."

Ace's hand found Mai's wrist again, firm. Anchor. Choice.

"Together," Ace said.

Mai answered, equally firm. "Together."

And somewhere above, on the whitening ridge, the valley stamped again—harder—trying to make the world flat enough to end them.

But down here in the fissure, where stone refused neat geometry, the stamp's power thinned.

Not gone.

Just weaker.

Which meant the valley would do what any stubborn system did when it couldn't reach through cracks:

It would send something that could.

Something thin.

Something that didn't need flat land.

Something that could slide into gaps and lock onto the mark behind Mai's eyes.

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Last update: **16/03/2026 17:09**

