

Chapter 33: The Dock

The pull behind Mai's eyes wasn't a straight arrow. It was more like a bias—pressure slightly heavier when she turned left, easing when she turned right. A grotesque version of intuition.

Ace hated that they were using it.

Mai hated it more.

But the stamp wasn't subtle anymore. It wanted to sync. And if it wanted to sync, it needed infrastructure. Infrastructure meant a place.

So they followed the bias deeper.

The tunnel narrowed, then widened, then narrowed again. Every time it opened into a bigger pocket of space, Ace's posture tightened—open areas meant staging. Staging meant forms.

The air grew colder, wetter. The rock underfoot turned slick and dark. Water dripped in slow, arrhythmic beats that didn't match their breathing.

Then the smell arrived.

Paper, faint. Ink, faint. Iron, faint.

Like a library left too long in a flooded basement.

Mai's throat tightened. "Near."

Ace's voice went low. "Yes."

They rounded a bend and stopped dead.

Ahead was a chamber with a low ceiling and a floor that wasn't stone.

It looked like stone.

But it behaved like paper terrain.

A broad, pale oval spread across the ground—fibers faintly visible in the sheen. The edges weren't clean—they frayed into the surrounding rock like a spill that had been pressed into place.

In the center of the oval stood something that made Mai's stomach drop.

A dock.

Not a platform like the archive plinth.

Not a circle-room.

A structure like a metal frame bolted into the pale ground, shaped vaguely like a chair without a seat—two vertical arms, a crossbar, a braced base.

A restraint waiting for a body.

And above the frame, suspended in the air like a hanging sign, floated a pale strip wider than the

earlier band.

Stitched into it, shifting letters:

RETENTION / FINALIZE

Mai's overlay flared so bright it made her vision swim:

ANCHOR: LOCK — READY

Mai gagged on a breath.

Ace's eyes went prismatic violet, shadow surging like smoke at her feet.

Mai whispered, tight, "Dock."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes."

The chamber didn't move. It didn't rush.

It didn't need to.

It was prepared.

Mai felt the stamp behind her eyes tug in a stronger, more focused way now—like a magnet aligning with a pole.

The dock was keyed to her mark.

It wanted her in that frame.

Ace's voice was low and shaking with controlled fury. "We destroy it."

Mai nodded, breath tight. "Ugly."

Ace didn't step onto the pale oval. She stayed on rock at the edge, refusing to give the paper terrain clean contact.

She lifted her katana and aimed for the dock frame.

Then the air stamped.

A heavy thunk rolled through the chamber—pressure like a gavel.

And the pale oval expanded outward, creeping toward their feet, trying to turn the rock edge into a sheet so it could force them onto compliant ground.

Mai's voice went hard. "No."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Move."

They sidestepped along the rock edge, staying off the pale, but the oval followed, spreading like a living laminate.

It wasn't fast.

It was inevitable.

Mai's overlay flashed:

TERRAIN SYNC: ACTIVE

Mai forced herself into the noise stream, rapid fragments: "Rock—edge—don't—step—here—"

Ace joined, harsh: "Together—present—no—no—"

The overlay spasmed, flickering.

The pale oval hesitated—just a heartbeat.

Not enough.

The dock's suspended strip lowered slightly, as if impatient.

The chamber was executing: force paper under them, then pull Mai onto the dock, then finalize lock.

Ace's eyes narrowed. She made her decision.

She sheathed one blade, crouched, and grabbed a jagged rock from the edge—heavy, wet.

She hurled it—hard—into the center of the pale oval.

The rock hit the paper terrain with a dull thud and sank slightly as if the surface had give to it.

Ace threw another rock.

Mai followed, throwing two.

They began pelting the oval with jagged stones, not aiming for clean destruction but for roughness—to break the plane, to pockmark it, to deny it smoothness.

The oval shuddered. Fibers rippled.

Good.

Then the dock responded.

The suspended strip snapped downward, fast, like a tongue striking.

Not toward Mai this time.

Toward Ace.

Ace moved, but not fast enough to avoid contact entirely—the strip grazed her shoulder.

For a split second, Ace felt something like a label attempting to adhere to her skin.

A cold itch, bureaucratic.

The strip's stitched letters flickered and attempted a new tag:

SUBJECT...

Ace's shadow surged violently, Violet's resonance flaring like a struck bell.

Mai didn't hesitate. She grabbed wet grit and flung it at the strip mid-snap, smearing its surface.

Ace slammed her shoulder into the rock wall, scraping the strip contact point against rough stone—abrading, ruining.

The stitched letters blurred. The strip recoiled, irritated, pulling back up.

Mai panted. "It's trying alternate handle."

Ace's voice went cold. "Desperate."

Mai's overlay flashed again:

ANCHOR: LOCK — READY

The dock wanted Mai. It kept wanting Mai.

Mai's nausea spiked as the stamp tugged.

Ace saw it. Her eyes narrowed.

Ace grabbed Mai's wrist—hard. "Stay on rock."

Mai nodded, jaw clenched. "Yes."

Ace leaned close, voice low and brutal. "If it pulls, you resist with everything."

Mai's breath shook. "Yes."

Ace looked at the dock again.

Then she did something that made Mai's heart stutter.

Ace stepped onto the pale oval.

One boot.

Deliberate.

Instantly, the paper terrain reacted—fibers tightening, the surface brightening beneath her.

Mai's overlay flared:

ANCHOR: LOCK — ENGAGE

Mai gasped. "Ace—"

Ace's voice was low, hard. "I'm bait."

Mai's stomach dropped. "No—"

Ace didn't look at her. "It wants a body in the frame. It wants you."

Mai's breath came ragged. "It will take you instead."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "Let it try."

Mai shook her head violently. "Ace—don't—"

Ace lifted her katana—not the edge, the flat—and slammed it down into the dock frame with a brutal impact.

Metal squealed.

The frame shuddered.

Ace slammed again.

And again.

Each strike was ugly, brutal vandalism.

The dock frame began to bend, bolts creaking, the base cracking the paper terrain underneath.

The suspended strip convulsed and lowered again, as if trying to wrap Ace, to restrain her and end the procedure fast.

Mai's overlay spiked again, nauseating:

ANCHOR: LOCK — PROGRESS 14%

Mai gagged. "It's—"

Ace snapped, without looking, "Noise."

Mai forced the fragment stream through clenched teeth: "Ace—hit—frame—no—together—here—"

Ace joined while striking: "Break—break—break—present—"

The overlay stuttered. 14%... 13%... 14%...

Ace slammed the dock frame again.

A bolt snapped.

The frame tilted.

The suspended strip dropped, trying to catch Ace's shoulders—

Mai moved.

She didn't step onto the oval. She stayed on rock, but she grabbed a long jagged stone like a club and struck the suspended strip as it lowered—smashing it sideways, not cutting.

The strip tore at the edge, threads unraveling.

Ace used the opening to drive the flat of her blade into the frame's base, crushing it.

The dock shuddered violently.

The pale oval under it rippled, trying to stabilize.

Mai's overlay flashed:

RETENTION / FINALIZE — FAILING

Ace's eyes went prismatic violet, voice low and shaking with rage. "Good."

She slammed again.

The dock frame finally collapsed with a harsh metal groan, folding into a twisted heap on the pale ground.

The suspended strip convulsed, its stitched letters blurring into unreadable thread.

Mai's overlay spasmed—symbols, static—then dimmed slightly.

The stamp behind her eyes pulsed, but the pull direction fractured—like the magnet had lost its pole.

The chamber's air tightened, furious.

The pale oval surged outward again, trying to swallow the rock edge and force them both onto paper terrain.

Ace stepped backward off the oval immediately—back onto rock—boots scraping.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist hard as she returned. Anchor. Choice.

Ace's breathing was harsh. Her eyes were still violet and prismatic.

Mai's voice came out ragged but fierce. "Dock destroyed."

Ace nodded once. "Relay destroyed."

Mai swallowed. "Not core."

Ace's jaw clenched. "No. But we hurt it."

For a moment, the chamber trembled as if the system couldn't decide whether to stamp harder or retreat.

Then the pale oval began to dim—slowly—retracting like a tide pulling back, leaving the twisted dock heap on the ground like a dead machine.

The suspended strip rose, frayed and trembling, then slid into the ceiling darkness and vanished.

Mai exhaled hard, trembling.

Ace's hand tightened on Mai's wrist, grounding.

Mai whispered, "It will build another."

Ace's voice was low and absolute. "Then we destroy another."

Mai's mouth twitched, grim. "Ugly forever."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "Ugly until the core is rubble."

They left the dock chamber fast, moving back into irregular tunnels before the valley could reroute another retention tool into place.

Behind them, the twisted metal heap lay on the dimming paper terrain like proof that the valley's infrastructure wasn't invincible.

And in the valley's invisible log, a new entry appeared—less polite now, more urgent:

FINALIZE DOCK: DESTROYED — ESCALATE TO DIRECT LOCK

Direct lock.

No more relays.

No more docks.

The valley was done with intermediate tools.

Next time it would try to finish the stamp in Mai's skull without infrastructure.

A pure internal closure.

A lock that completed itself.

And Ace could feel Violet stir at that idea—offended, dangerous, ready.

Because if the valley tried to finish a lock inside Mai...

Ace would stop caring about "no clean verbs."

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