

## Chapter 4: The Valley That Kept a Secret

They left the city the way you leave a room you no longer trust—without slamming the door.

Mai didn't take the highway. Highways were honest. Too honest. Straight lines, predictable exits, cameras that loved patterns. She chose older roads that wandered on purpose, cutting through neighborhoods that still carried their own names in the cracks of the pavement.

Ace sat in the passenger seat, quiet as always, but not resting. Her gaze tracked the world in angles: the way power lines sagged, the rhythm of streetlights, the small inconsistencies in how birds moved when the air was wrong.

Mai drove with one hand. The other stayed near the center console where the disruptor lay, hidden but ready. She didn't touch it. Touching something too often made it feel like an answer.

The radio stayed off.

Not out of superstition but discipline.

Silence wasn't safe; noise was an invitation.

As the city thinned behind them, the rain followed—normal rain at first, falling in obedient lines. Then, ten kilometers out, it began to misbehave again. Not the full reversal, not the obvious insult from earlier. Just pauses. Hesitations. A droplet lingering on the windshield a heartbeat too long before sliding down.

As if waiting for permission.

Mai glanced at Ace. "You seeing that?"

Ace nodded once. Eyes forward.

The wipers swept. The drop vanished.

Another appeared in its place, same spot, like the glass had been marked.

Mai's jaw tightened. "Okay. So it's persistent."

Ace didn't answer. She was listening.

Not with her ears.

With the thing inside her that noticed when the world's rules shifted by a millimeter.

The road climbed. Trees thickened. The air grew colder. The landscape changed from suburban sprawl to rolling dark-green hills and low, stubborn stone. A valley began to open ahead—wide, shallow, framed by cliffs that looked cut rather than worn.

A place shaped like a bowl.

A place that could hold things.

The GPS pinged once, then rerouted without warning, its polite synthetic voice offering a new direction as if it had always meant to.

Mai ignored it.

“Of course it wants us to take the safe path,” she muttered.

Ace’s gaze flicked to the dashboard screen. The reroute line formed a lazy curve—three arcs, intersecting without touching.

Mai shut the GPS off with one decisive tap.

The car immediately felt louder, as if the machine had been masking something.

They reached a small service station near the valley’s edge. Two pumps. One closed convenience store. A faded sign with half the letters missing. Wind chewing at the corners of an old poster.

Ace stepped out first.

The air hit her like a memory.

Not a specific image—no village, no blood moon—but the shape of it. The feeling that if you spoke too loud, something would count your syllables.

Mai walked around the car, stretching once like her body was trying to shake off a layer of unease. She glanced at the pumps, then at the empty road behind them.

“Dead place,” she said.

Ace crouched by a puddle near the curb.

The puddle was still.

Too still.

Ace stared into it. Her reflection looked normal. The sky above it looked normal.

Then the water trembled.

A shape formed—not drawn, not carved, simply arranging itself.

The trisected circle.

Ace straightened slowly, as if standing too fast might rip something.

Mai came closer, notebook already in hand. “It’s not following us,” she said quietly.

Ace’s voice came out low. “We’re inside it.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “Say that again.”

Ace didn’t. She didn’t want to give it repetition.

Mai looked at the puddle. The mark held for three seconds, then dissolved into nothing.

The water resumed its ordinary laziness, as if it hadn’t just made a decision.

Mai wrote without looking down, pencil moving fast.

Symbol manifests in reflected surfaces without light source.

Valley boundary correlates with increased manifestations.

Navigation systems attempt corrective guidance using symbol geometry.

Ace watched the horizon. The valley beyond the station looked empty from here—fields and trees, a thin ribbon of road descending into shadow. But her instincts insisted that emptiness was staged.

Something was being kept out.

Or in.

A truck passed in the distance. Old, loud, rattling. It slowed near the station, tires crunching gravel, then stopped at the far pump.

An elderly man stepped out, wearing a cap with a logo too faded to read. He glanced at Ace and Mai the way people glance at trouble when they've seen it before and don't want to invite it.

He didn't smile.

Mai offered one anyway. "Afternoon."

The man's eyes flicked to Mai's notebook, to Ace's stance, to the way the air seemed to curve around her like it didn't want to touch.

"Don't," he said.

Mai froze. "Don't what?"

The man swallowed—his throat bobbing as if he was pushing down something he'd learned not to say.

He jerked his chin toward the valley.

"Don't go down there," he finished, voice dull with the certainty of someone repeating a rule he didn't invent.

Mai's smile faded. "We're not tourists."

"I know what you are," the man said, and then immediately regretted the sentence. His eyes widened, as if he'd just handed someone his name.

Ace's gaze sharpened. She didn't move, but the pressure around her shifted, tightening the air.

The man flinched.

Mai stepped in smoothly, her tone softening. "Okay. Then tell us what you know. Without... labeling."

The man's lips pressed together. He looked away, toward the valley. "It listens," he said.

Ace didn't like the verb.

Mai's pencil paused.

The man noticed their reaction and corrected himself, face pinching with effort. "It's... near. All the

time. Down there. You go in and you come back wrong.”

“Wrong how?” Mai asked.

The man hesitated. “You can’t say it right,” he murmured. “The words... don’t stick. Like you’ve got holes in your mouth.”

Ace felt that pressure again, not on her skin but near her thoughts, as if something leaned in closer to hear the man’s metaphor.

Mai spoke faster. “Has anyone marked the place? Signs? Symbols?”

The man’s eyes flashed with sudden anger. “We don’t draw it,” he snapped, voice cracking. “That’s how it learns you saw it.”

Ace’s shadow tightened.

Mai nodded slowly, letting the man’s fear settle without challenging it. “So you avoid describing.”

The man’s shoulders sagged. “You keep your head down. You keep your people close. And you don’t—” He stopped again, lips trembling, then forced the last word out like it hurt. “—finish circles.”

Ace’s gaze flicked to Mai.

Mai didn’t look away. She whispered, barely audible, “Quarantine.”

The man heard it anyway.

His face went pale. “Who taught you that,” he asked, voice almost childlike now.

Mai didn’t answer.

Ace spoke instead, quiet, controlled. “We’re not here to give it more.”

The man stared at her, and for a moment his eyes softened—as if he saw not a weapon, not a threat, but a person carrying something too heavy for her size.

Then his gaze dropped to Ace’s back, to where her katanas rested under her coat.

“Those,” he said. “They don’t help here.”

Ace’s expression didn’t change, but something inside her bristled. Not pride. Instinct. The sisters didn’t like being dismissed.

Mai stepped between the man and Ace’s line of sight, gently. “Thanks,” she said. “We’ll be careful.”

The man shook his head slowly. “Careful isn’t enough.”

He climbed back into his truck without buying fuel, started the engine, and drove away too fast for the road.

Dust hung in the air after he left, glittering in weak sunlight.

Ace watched the dust.

The particles didn't fall.

Not right away.

They hovered.

Then, like a quiet decision, they drifted upward.

Mai's eyes followed them. Her jaw clenched.

"We're at the boundary," she said.

Ace nodded.

Mai opened the trunk and pulled out what they'd packed after Jakarta—simple gear, not tactical theater. Water. Rope. A small first-aid kit. Chalk, sealed in plastic. A roll of black tape. A thin metal compass whose needle was slightly bent, because straight needles were too confident.

Mai looked at Ace. "We go down. We don't let it write us."

Ace's mouth twitched once.

"Try," she said.

Mai's smile returned—small, stubborn. "That's what I like about you. You talk like everything's a knife."

Ace didn't deny it.

They started toward the road that led into the valley.

The wind shifted.

For a second, it smelled like wet stone and old paper.

Like a library left open in a storm.

Ace stepped onto the descending road and felt the world subtly change its posture—like a room turning its head.

Mai stayed close.

No names.

No commands.

No finished circles.

Behind them, the service station sign creaked. One loose letter swung on its rusted hinge.

It spun once.

Three arcs, intersecting without touching.

Then it stilled.

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Last update: **16/03/2026 17:00**

