

Chapter 6: Marquez's Margin

The envelope stayed in Mai's coat like a splinter you didn't dare pull.

Ace didn't ask again. She could feel it anyway—its weight wasn't physical, it was structural. A sealed thing inside a sealed place. A decision postponed.

They walked deeper into the valley.

The fog wasn't thick, not yet. It didn't obscure distance so much as it edited it—making far things look nearer, near things look irrelevant. The road had degraded into gravel, then into a dirt track that split and rejoined in ways that felt subtly dishonest.

Mai kept her notebook open but didn't write.

Writing was a verb.

And they were learning to starve verbs.

A cluster of low buildings emerged ahead, half-swallowed by weeds. Not a village—more like a service outpost that had once existed to support something bigger. The structures were too utilitarian for charm: concrete blocks, corrugated metal roofs, windows boarded from the inside. No graffiti. No vandalism. No sign of ordinary human decay.

As if people had avoided it on purpose.

As if even thieves had felt the wrongness and decided they didn't need whatever was inside.

Ace stopped at the edge of the compound.

Mai stopped with her.

Neither of them spoke.

The silence here didn't feel empty. It felt curated. Like sound had to submit an application before it was allowed to exist.

Ace's shadow pooled tight and dark at her feet. The emerald fracture-lines along its edges flickered faintly, as if her aura had been put under inspection.

Mai breathed once, slow. She reached into her coat and pulled out the thin gloves again.

Ace watched. No comment. No command.

Mai put them on and moved toward the nearest building, stepping over a collapsed fence line. The gate had been cut cleanly in three places, the metal bent back like someone had tried to open it without completing the motion.

A circle interrupted.

Mai glanced at it and didn't linger. She knew better now.

Ace followed.

At the first door, Mai didn't touch the handle. She leaned in and examined the frame instead. The wood around the lock was scarred, as if something had been pried open and then shut again too many times. A faint brown stain, old enough to be history.

Ace's gaze drifted to the window.

The boards were nailed from the inside.

Mai noticed where Ace was looking. "So either they locked themselves in," she murmured, "or something convinced them it was safer to be trapped."

Ace's mouth twitched. A humorless almost-smile. "Both."

Mai reached into her pocket and pulled out a strip of black tape. She placed it over the keyhole like she was sealing a wound.

Ace tilted her head. "Why."

Mai kept her voice low, careful. "So it can't see us through the habit of openings."

Ace didn't argue. That made sense in the way bad things made sense—like sleeping with your back to a wall even when the room was empty.

Mai moved to the window and pried one board loose with slow pressure. No sudden sounds. No sharp motions. She slid the board aside just enough to slip her hand through, then unlatched the window from within.

The window opened silently.

That bothered Ace more than a squeal would have.

They stepped inside.

The air was dead.

Not stale—dead. Like it had been vacuum-sealed for years and never forgiven the world for intruding.

Dust covered everything in a soft, even film. No footprints. No disturbed patches. Dust that looked too uniform to be natural. Dust that felt arranged.

Mai lifted her flashlight and clicked it on.

The beam cut a clean line through the gloom, revealing shelves, desks, filing cabinets. A workspace. A place where people had done paperwork and tried to pretend paperwork could protect them.

A stack of binders sat on a table like someone had set them down and stepped away mid-thought.

Mai approached slowly, reading the room before touching anything. Her eyes flicked to corners, ceiling joints, the gap under furniture—places where symbols liked to hide.

Ace stayed near the doorway, letting her senses spread out. She felt the mark in the building the way you felt static before a storm: not visible, but present as possibility.

Mai stopped at the binders.

The top one had a name on it.

Not a logo.

A person's name.

M. MARQUEZ

Mai exhaled through her nose. "There you are."

Ace didn't respond. She was watching the dust.

Near the far wall, three narrow streaks ran through it, as if something had dragged a finger lightly across the surface. Not an animal. Not wind.

A gentle, precise contact.

Mai opened the binder.

The pages inside were brittle, yellowed. Handwritten notes, clipped newspaper articles, photocopies of field reports. Someone had tried to build a library around the symbol without giving it what it wanted.

Mai flipped through quickly, then slowed. Her eyes softened with recognition.

"This is good," she whispered. "This is someone who learned the rules and survived long enough to write them down."

Ace's gaze shifted to her. "Survived?"

Mai didn't look up. "Longer than most."

She turned to a page where the symbol was drawn again—this time overlaid with grid lines and measurements. The arcs were annotated with tiny numerals. Distances. Angles.

Mai's breath caught. "He measured it."

Ace stepped closer, a slow glide. "Idiot."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Brave idiot."

She tapped the page gently with the pencil tip. "Look. The intersections aren't random. The arcs are aligned to something. It's like—"

She stopped and corrected herself. "It correlates."

Ace stared at the lines. The scar-sensation crawled under her skin again, but it didn't spike. Not yet. This binder didn't feel like bait the way the envelope had.

Mai flipped to the margins.

And froze.

Because the margins were full.

Not notes.

Warnings.

Short phrases written in a tighter hand, darker ink, as if the person writing them had been afraid even of their own pencil.

Mai read silently at first. Then her lips moved.

Do not finish circles. Do not record the mark directly. Do not ask direct questions. Do not speak full names in the valley. If rain rises, leave the verbs behind.

Mai's pencil hovered over that last line.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Leave the verbs behind."

Mai nodded once, slow. "He understood the same thing we did. Years ago."

Ace leaned closer to the binder. "Why is it here?"

Mai answered without hesitation. "Because he didn't want the Foundation to have it."

Ace's gaze flicked to the filing cabinets. "Then why leave it in a building?"

Mai's expression sharpened. "Maybe he didn't leave it. Maybe he never got to take it."

They both looked toward the back of the room.

There was a second door, half-hidden behind a shelf. Not locked—just closed.

Ace felt the air around that door tighten, the way it tightened before the symbol appeared.

Mai's fingers flexed once, gloved fingertips brushing the binder edge as if for courage.

She didn't speak a command.

She simply moved.

Ace followed.

Mai reached the door and paused. No handle. Just a flat metal plate with a small slot like a mail chute.

And above the slot, someone had scratched three curved lines into the paint.

Not a full circle.

Just enough.

Mai swallowed. "That's a delivery system."

Ace's voice came out low. "A mouth."

Mai nodded, almost imperceptibly. "A place where it takes things."

Ace's shadow surged forward, pressure building.

Mai raised her hand, palm toward Ace without looking back—an unspoken stop.

Ace stopped.

Mai leaned down and peered into the slot.

Darkness inside. No light. No depth cues.

Then something inside the slot moved—not forward, not backward—just shifted its attention.

Mai drew back instantly.

Her face was controlled, but her eyes had sharpened into something colder. “Okay,” she said quietly. “We don't feed that.”

Ace's jaw clenched. “But it fed us that envelope.”

Mai's hand drifted to her coat, touching the spot where the sealed wax sat.

She looked at Ace, and for a moment her voice went softer, more human. “We open it when we're not inside the place that wants us to read it.”

Ace nodded once. Approval. Not comfort.

Mai returned to the binder, flipping pages again, faster now, searching for something specific.

“A route,” she murmured. “He'll have left a route. He was methodical.”

Ace watched her move. The way her mind worked, even under pressure. Mai didn't panic. She reorganized.

Then Mai stopped.

One page had been ripped out.

Not torn.

Cut.

Clean edges.

Paper knife.

Mai traced the cut line with a gloved fingertip. “Someone removed something important.”

Ace's eyes flicked to the dust streaks near the far wall again. Three lines.

Mai saw it too.

A thin, sour tension settled between them.

“Not the Foundation,” Mai said quietly.

Ace didn't answer.

Because she'd just realized something that made her skin tighten under her coat.

The dust streaks weren't random.

They were at Ace's height.

As if something had reached out and tested the boundary of her silhouette.

Mai closed the binder with deliberate care.

No slam.

No harsh verb.

She tucked it under her arm like it was both treasure and infection.

Ace moved back toward the doorway.

Mai followed.

They stepped outside into the valley's thin air.

The fog had thickened while they were inside. Not dramatically—but enough that the edges of the compound looked softer. Less committed to being real.

Mai looked at Ace. “We take Marquez's work.”

Ace nodded.

Mai added, almost under her breath, “And we don't become his footnote.”

Ace's mouth twitched again, sharper this time. “Too late.”

Mai didn't smile, but something in her eyes warmed—stubborn affection, the kind that survived in hostile environments.

“Then we do it better,” she said.

They walked away from the building.

Behind them, the window they'd opened closed silently on its own.

Not with wind.

Not with gravity.

With decision.

And in the dust inside, three new streaks appeared—fresh, clean lines carved through uniform stillness, like someone had touched the room again after they left.

Not searching.

Updating.—

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