

Chapter 9: Names Are Expensive

The corridor let them go too easily.

That was the first sign.

The stone walls loosened their grip without drama, widening into open air as if the valley had decided to pretend it wasn't trying. The sky reappeared in a long strip overhead—gray, heavy, indifferent. Wind returned, thin and cold, moving through the rocks with a sound like someone riffling paper.

Mai didn't relax. Ace didn't either.

Ease was just another kind of trap.

They emerged onto a plateau scattered with low scrub and broken stone. A line of old pylons marched across the horizon, their wires gone, their silhouettes still doing the work of distance. Far below, the basin of sand looked like a pale bruise.

Mai stopped near a half-collapsed concrete marker post—one of those government survey things nobody pays attention to.

Ace stopped with her.

Mai's eyes were fixed on something near the base of the post.

Ace followed her gaze.

A set of shoes.

Men's, maybe. Mud-caked. Laces untied. Standing upright in the grass as if someone had just stepped out of them and walked away barefoot.

Mai's throat tightened. "No."

Ace moved closer, slow.

There was no body.

No blood.

No sign of struggle. Just shoes, abandoned in a posture that screamed absence.

Mai crouched. She didn't touch them. She leaned close enough to see the ground around them.

There were footprints leading to the shoes.

Then nothing.

Like the person had been erased mid-stride.

Mai swallowed hard, and when she spoke, her voice was careful—like even emotion could become a verb.

"This isn't normal loss," she murmured.

Ace's eyes narrowed. She scanned the plateau.

A few meters away, half-hidden behind a boulder, was a small campsite.

Not old. Not decades. Recent.

A tarp tied low, a cold fire pit, a few crushed food wrappers. A backpack slumped against the rock like a tired animal.

Mai stood slowly. "Someone was here."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "And left badly."

They approached the campsite together.

Ace felt the scar-sensation again as they crossed the threshold of the tarp's shadow. Not sharp, but present—like the valley had flagged this spot as relevant.

Mai knelt by the backpack and unzipped it with slow, controlled pressure. No sudden motions. No loud zips. Her gloved hands moved like she was disarming a bomb made of paper.

Inside: a notebook.

Mai pulled it out.

Ace's posture tightened immediately.

Paper.

Mai held it at arm's length for a second, eyes scanning the cover.

On the front, in block letters, was a name.

ELIAS K.

Mai's face went pale.

Ace's eyes flicked to her. "You know it."

Mai shook her head once. "Not personally." She swallowed again. "But that format—initial plus letter—that's Foundation field labeling. Someone tried to half-hide a name."

Ace's voice came out low. "And paid anyway."

Mai opened the notebook.

The first page was blank, except for three curved pencil lines in the corner—faint, like a nervous doodle that couldn't be finished.

Mai flipped forward.

Pages of notes. Mostly practical. Routes. Observations. A map sketch. The valley. The compound. The basin.

Then, halfway through, the writing changed.

The words got less stable. Letters stretched. Sentences lost coherence as if the writer's thoughts were sliding off the page.

Mai's eyes moved fast, reading without letting her lips form the shapes.

Ace watched Mai's face. She recognized the pattern: a mind trying to hold itself together while something tugged at the seams.

Mai stopped at a page where the handwriting had collapsed into cramped, frantic lines.

She read silently.

Her fingers tightened on the notebook edge.

Ace said, "What."

Mai's voice came out thin. "He started forgetting what to call himself."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Show."

Mai hesitated—then tilted the notebook so Ace could see without touching.

The page had a list, written and rewritten.

Elias Eli E. K. — (I can't) (it takes the end) (don't let it finish) (don't let it ask)

Ace's skin prickled. The scar-sensation climbed her ribs, stopped, then crawled again, impatient.

Mai flipped to the next page.

It was worse.

The handwriting had become careful again, too careful—like someone forcing control with sheer will.

If I write it, it becomes real. If I say it, it becomes mine less. The valley keeps what you complete. Names are expensive.

Mai's eyes lifted to Ace. "He figured it out too late."

Ace's gaze drifted to the abandoned shoes again, visible between stones like a small, humiliating monument.

Mai turned another page.

This one had a final sentence, written larger, as if the person had wanted it to be seen quickly.

DON'T TRY TO SAVE ME WITH QUESTIONS.

Mai's stomach lurched. Her face tightened. She read it twice, like her brain refused to accept that someone could predict how help would become harm.

Ace's voice was flat. "He knew someone would come."

Mai nodded slowly. "And he knew how we'd react."

Ace's shadow tightened beneath her feet, a dark pool wanting to surge outward and make the world submit. Violet shimmer flared in her eyes, prismatic undertone pressing closer to the surface.

Mai touched Ace's wrist—anchor pulse, firm. “Stay.”

Ace forced her shadow back. The effort made her jaw tremble once.

Mai exhaled and flipped to the last page.

The last page was almost blank.

Almost.

In the center, the trisected circle had been drawn—one arc left unfinished, as if the writer had stopped himself mid-stroke.

And beneath it, a single line:

It offered to keep me if I gave it the rest of my name.

Mai stared at that sentence for too long.

Ace felt the valley's attention tighten around them like a noose made of quiet.

Mai whispered, barely audible, “This is what it does. It doesn't kill you. It files you.”

Ace didn't answer, but something in her posture shifted—an internal locking mechanism engaging.

She looked at the notebook.

Then at Mai.

Then at the plateau around them—the pylons, the wind, the indifferent sky.

“Burn it,” Ace said.

Mai blinked. “What?”

Ace's voice stayed low, steady. “Burn the notebook. Don't let it keep a copy.”

Mai's jaw tightened. “If we destroy it, we lose the route. We lose—”

“We lose his voice,” Ace cut in, and the sentence came out with a hardness that wasn't cruelty—it was mercy sharpened into a blade. “He didn't want to be saved with questions. He doesn't want to be saved with records either.”

Mai swallowed, eyes shining faintly with anger that had nowhere to go. “He wrote it so we'd learn.”

Ace nodded once. “We learned.”

Mai stared at the notebook, then at the cold fire pit.

She moved slowly, deliberately, like each motion had to be chosen with care not to become a gift.

She tore out the map page first.

Ace watched. "Why."

Mai's voice was tight. "I'll memorize it. Then the paper goes."

Ace didn't argue. That was acceptable—dangerous, but acceptable. Their world ran on tradeoffs.

Mai held the torn map page in her gloved hands and studied it—hard, fast, imprinting. Her eyes moved like a scanner, building a mental model. Then she folded it once, twice, and tucked it into her notebook between blank pages, hidden.

Then she took the field notebook—Elias K.—and placed it into the fire pit.

Ace felt the valley's attention sharpen, as if the system disliked seeing its record threatened.

Mai pulled out a small lighter.

She hesitated for one heartbeat.

Not because she doubted the choice.

Because she could feel how much the act would matter.

Then she clicked the lighter.

Flame bloomed.

Mai touched it to the corner of the notebook.

Paper curled. Blackened. Caught.

The fire took with that hungry, simple certainty only fire possessed.

For a second, the valley went perfectly silent—as if even the wind had stopped to watch.

Ace felt pressure brush the edge of her thoughts again, closer, colder.

Not a voice.

A suggestion.

A bargain shaped like pity.

Ace didn't blink.

Mai kept her gaze on the burning pages. Her face stayed controlled, but her eyes shimmered with something raw.

"Goodbye," she whispered.

The flame ate the name first.

Letters collapsed into ash.

The pages crackled, then fell inward, collapsing into a black, light weight.

The valley's silence released slightly—like a creature pulling back after realizing it couldn't bite this time.

Mai stepped away from the fire pit.

Ace watched the ash lift in the wind.

The ash didn't drift normally.

For half a second, it rose.

Just a little.

As if the valley wanted to keep even that.

Then the wind scattered it, messy and ugly, refusing clean pattern.

Mai exhaled, shoulders tight. “Okay,” she said. “We cross a line when we do that.”

Ace nodded once. “We already crossed.”

Mai looked at her. “You sure about that?”

Ace's violet eyes held steady. “It knows we'll destroy records.”

Mai's mouth twitched, humorless. “So it'll stop giving us paper.”

Ace's gaze shifted to the plateau edge, toward the darker rock beyond. “Then it'll use something else.”

Mai's fingers brushed the wax-sealed envelope in her coat like a reflex.

Ace noticed.

“Not here,” Ace said quietly.

Mai nodded once.

They left the campsite behind, the burnt ash smearing into nothing.

Behind them, the abandoned shoes stood in the grass, still upright, still waiting for someone who would never need them again.

And in the valley's quiet system, something updated not with a name—

but with a new rule:

These two will burn the file.

Names are expensive.

And now the valley understood that Ace and Mai were willing to pay in smoke.—

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