

## Epilogue: No Boxes

They didn't go back the way they'd come.

The island had changed, or maybe it hadn't and they were the ones who'd been bent enough that every slope looked suspicious. Either way, neither of them wanted to give the valley any clean "return" line—no familiar ridge, no remembered path, no neat loop that would let the place pretend it had closure.

So they walked the ugly way.

Loose rock. Scrub that scratched. Wind that shoved them sideways. A gray sky that couldn't decide whether it wanted to snow, rain, or just watch.

Mai kept touching her face like she expected to find paper there. She didn't. No overlay. No ghost text. No faint pressure behind the eyes.

Just headache and exhaustion and the aftertaste of being used as a door.

Ace stayed close—not hovering, not performing concern, just there, half a step behind or beside, the way you position yourself when you've decided the universe doesn't get a second chance.

They reached the shoreline by late afternoon. The sea was a sheet of steel, chopped into small violent waves. The boat—Marquez's battered thing, half-hidden behind rocks—was still there.

Mai stared at it for a long second, then laughed once, short and cracked.

Ace glanced at her. "What?"

Mai shook her head, still staring. "It feels... insultingly normal."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Good."

Mai nodded, then stopped smiling. "If it was still in me, I'd feel it now."

Ace didn't answer with reassurance. She answered with a glance that said: I'm watching the same thing.

Mai stepped closer to the waterline and knelt, scooping seawater into her hands. She splashed it on her face. Salt stung the tiny cuts, and the cold snapped her awake.

She breathed in and held it.

No pull. No stamp.

She exhaled.

Ace watched her like she was waiting for a glitch.

None came.

Mai stood and turned to Ace. Her eyes were tired, raw, unmistakably human.

"It's gone," Mai said.

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

Mai swallowed hard. "I felt it close. I felt it try to make me... smooth."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Partitioned."

Mai nodded. "Like a version of me that would say 'stay calm' forever. Like a file that never argues."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "No."

Mai's voice turned low, bitter. "It tried to turn me into compliance."

Ace stepped closer, her voice firm. "And you didn't."

Mai blinked. "I almost—"

Ace cut her off, voice like steel under cloth. "You didn't."

Mai looked at Ace for a long moment. The wind pushed her hair into her face. She didn't brush it away.

"I heard you," Mai said quietly. "When you said 'no.' It wasn't loud. It was... absolute."

Ace didn't flinch from the weight of that. "I meant it."

Mai's throat tightened. "Thank you."

Ace's gaze held hers. "Always."

They stood there, salt wind and gray sky, both of them shaking in tiny ways they didn't try to hide.

Then Mai's eyes flicked to Ace's forearm—where the thin strip had tried to tag her earlier, leaving that red welt. It had faded into a faint bruise now, still visible if you looked.

Mai reached out without asking, fingers light on Ace's skin. A small, careful touch.

Ace's shoulders eased a fraction.

Mai's voice went low. "It tried to label you too."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Mai traced the bruise once, then let her hand fall. "It wanted a subject."

Ace's mouth twitched, humorless. "It got nothing."

Mai gave a real laugh this time—still tired, still cracked, but real.

"Good," Mai said, and there was teeth in it.

They got the boat ready without ceremony. Fuel. Rope. A quick check of the engine that sounded like it hated its own existence but would still do the job.

Ace didn't look back at the island as she pushed the boat off.

Mai did.

Not long, not reverent—just a measured stare, the kind you give a place that tried to rewrite you and failed.

The wind carried a faint smell of paper for a heartbeat.

Mai's spine went rigid.

Ace's head turned instantly. "What?"

Mai listened hard, eyes narrowed. Then she exhaled slowly.

"Nothing," Mai said. "Just... memory."

Ace nodded, accepting that distinction.

They started the engine. It coughed, then caught, and the boat moved out onto the steel water, leaving the rocks behind.

Minutes passed. The shoreline shrank. The island became a dark smear under the gray sky.

Mai kept waiting for the stamp to wake again.

It didn't.

No overlays. No internal closure. No sudden "RETURN."

Just sea, wind, and the ache in her muscles from being restrained and fighting her own body.

Ace sat at the controls, posture still rigid, eyes scanning the horizon like she expected the sea to file them next.

Mai watched her for a long time.

Then she leaned closer, voice low so the wind couldn't carry it.

"You know what the worst part was?" Mai asked.

Ace didn't look away from the water. "Tell me."

Mai swallowed. "It wasn't the restraints. It wasn't the thin things."

Ace's jaw tightened.

Mai continued quietly, "It was how reasonable it tried to sound."

Ace's eyes flashed violet, brief. "Yes."

Mai's mouth twisted. "Retention improves stability. Anchor integrity required. Like it was helping."

Ace's voice turned cold. "Like it had consent."

Mai nodded once. "Exactly."

Silence.

The boat cut through waves, engine rattling.

Then Ace spoke, still not looking at Mai. "It asked us to tick a box."

Mai's throat tightened again. "Yes."

Ace's voice was low, almost flat. "Two boxes. One mark."

Mai stared at the shrinking island and felt anger flare again, pure and clean.

"No boxes," Mai said.

Ace finally glanced at her. "No boxes."

Mai nodded. "Ever."

Ace's mouth twitched, the smallest hint of something that wasn't rage. "Ever."

The coastline ahead—faint now—began to appear through the haze. Civilization as a smear of geometry: distant structures, suggestions of lights, something that obeyed ordinary laws.

Mai let herself breathe a little easier.

Then she realized something and looked down at her hands—still dirty under the nails, still scraped.

The valley hadn't just tried to file them—it had taught them something by accident.

You can break frames. You can ruin legibility. You can refuse premise. And sometimes, if you hit the right nerve, the whole system bleeds.

Mai looked up at Ace again.

Ace's eyes were still violet, but not fractured. Calm. Focused. Human.

Mai said softly, "It's not done."

Ace nodded. "No."

Mai whispered, "But it can be hurt."

Ace's voice was low and certain. "Yes."

Mai swallowed. "And next time it tries to frame us—"

Ace finished, without hesitation: "We break the frame."

Mai's mouth twitched, tired but fierce. "Ugly."

Ace nodded once. "Ugly."

They rode the rest of the way in a hard kind of quiet, the kind that doesn't need filler.

When the boat finally bumped against the dock, the sound was small and ordinary and almost

insulting after everything.

Mai stepped off first, legs shaky, and stood there on real wood, real rope, real salt air.

Ace stepped off behind her.

Neither of them said “we’re safe”—they didn’t give the universe that sentence.

Mai looked at the water one last time.

Ace’s hand found her wrist—gentle now, not a grip. Mai’s fingers curled around Ace’s, returning the contact.

No premise accepted.

No story completed on the valley’s terms.

And no boxes—ever again.—

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