

Chapter 13: Litany Without Names

The passage was too narrow for comfort.

Not a natural squeeze—more like the valley had shaped stone into a throat on purpose. The walls pressed in close enough that Ace's shoulders nearly brushed both sides, and Mai had to angle herself slightly to keep her pack from scraping.

They stayed tied by the rope.

Loose, visible, stubborn.

A small ugliness threaded through a place that loved clean geometry.

No symbols marked the entrance. No warning scratches. No trisected circle politely announcing itself.

That absence was its own message.

Ace felt it immediately: this wasn't a place for marks.

It was a place for rules.

The quiet here didn't sort sound.

It sorted impulse.

Ace's body wanted to move fast. This kind of corridor was made for ambush—tight angles, blind corners, perfect places for something to step out and press you into stone.

Mai's body wanted to map, to measure, to understand.

The passage punished both desires equally by making every movement feel like an announcement.

Even the rope seemed to vibrate with awareness, as if the valley's silence could feel fibers.

Mai kept her breathing slow. Her eyes tracked the walls, but not too directly. Not with that clean attention that might count as recognition. She looked like someone reading a text without letting her pupils linger on any one word.

Ace moved like a knife slid into a sheath—controlled, minimal, quiet pressure held tight against her own ribs.

After ten meters, the passage turned.

A hard right angle.

No curve.

Mai's mouth twitched, almost amused even now. "It's avoiding circles," she whispered.

Ace didn't answer. The observation made her skin tighten. If the valley avoided circles here, it meant it was enforcing something else.

They rounded the corner.

And the air changed.

Not colder, not warmer—drier. Like the passage had drained moisture out of the world. The stone ahead looked pale, almost chalky. The smell of wet rock vanished, replaced by something faintly chemical.

Ace felt the scar-sensation under her collarbone pulse once.

Mai noticed, her fingers tightening on the rope for a heartbeat. Anchor through friction.

They reached a doorway.

Not a door. An opening—perfectly rectangular, edges sharp as if cut by machinery rather than time.

Beyond it was a room.

A flat chamber carved into stone, large enough for three people to stand with space between them, small enough that space itself felt like an object.

The floor was smooth.

Too smooth.

And in the center of the floor—nothing.

No symbol. No mark. No inlaid arcs.

Mai stepped just inside the threshold and stopped.

Ace stepped up beside her and stopped.

The quiet in the room was different than anything they'd felt so far.

It wasn't silence.

It was withholding.

Like a mouth held shut.

Mai's voice came out as barely a breath. "This is the place."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Hands."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

They could both feel it without saying it: the rule that lived in this space.

Do not touch.

Do not draw.

Do not act.

Do not complete.

A room designed to starve verbs.

The rope between them felt suddenly heavier, as if the valley resented its presence.

Mai leaned in close enough to keep her words inside Ace's personal space. "We need a litany," she whispered. "No names."

Ace's gaze flicked to her. Violet shimmered, tight. "We don't pray."

Mai's mouth twitched. "No. We recite. It's different."

Ace stared at the empty room. She didn't like anything that sounded like ritual—ritual implied the enemy had authored the playbook.

But this was Mai's domain: systems, patterns, rules you could bend without breaking.

Mai continued, voice low and firm. "We need a sequence of state-phrases. Things we can say that keep us us without giving it agency."

Ace's jaw clenched. "A tether."

Mai nodded once. "A tether made of language it can't use."

Ace thought for a long beat. Her mind moved like it always did—fast, sharp, nonverbal, slicing toward what mattered.

Then she spoke, quiet and precise.

"Here."

Mai's eyes stayed on the room, but she nodded. "Good."

Ace added, "Together."

Mai breathed out. "Yes."

Ace's fingers flexed unconsciously against her own thigh—an urge to do something with her hands.

The room felt it.

The quiet tightened.

Mai's gaze sharpened. She touched the rope with her fingertips—just a brush, minimal.

The quiet tightened again.

This room was sensitive to touch. To action. To contact. It wanted them static.

It wanted them passive.

Mai whispered, "Okay. So we say it and we don't move."

Ace nodded once.

Mai began the litany, not like a prayer, but like a code.

“Here,” she said.

Ace responded, “Here.”

Mai: “Together.”

Ace: “Together.”

Mai: “Present.”

Ace: “Present.”

Mai: “Not offered.”

Ace: “Not offered.”

They said it slowly, matching breath, letting the words settle into their bodies like a rhythm. No verbs of intent. No commands. No definitions.

State. State. State.

The room didn’t react at first.

Then, on the third cycle, the air shifted.

A pressure brushed the edge of Ace’s thoughts again, closer than before, testing. Like fingers pressing gently against a sealed envelope.

Mai didn’t stop speaking.

“Here.”

“Here.”

“Together.”

“Together.”

“Present.”

“Present.”

Ace felt Violet stir, not waking, but noticing the touch. The resonance inside her flexed, like something at her core had lifted its head.

Mai’s voice tightened slightly, but she kept the cadence steady. “Not offered.”

Ace echoed, “Not offered.”

The pressure increased.

Not painful. Just insistent.

The room wanted something else.

It wanted a name.

It wanted an identity.

It wanted a finished sentence it could file.

Ace felt it like a hook sliding under her ribs, gentle but determined.

Mai's eyes flicked to Ace's face for a heartbeat—reading the prismatic flare in her pupils.

Mai didn't add words.

She changed the litany.

She spoke one phrase that wasn't on Marquez's list, something purely theirs.

"Wrist," Mai said softly.

Ace blinked once, then understood.

She replied, "Wrist."

The room's pressure hesitated. That word meant nothing to it. No power. No agency. No label.

But for them it was everything—a tactile memory, an anchor gesture, the small stubborn contact that kept Ace from slipping into the wrong tide.

Mai continued, voice steady.

"Here."

"Here."

"Together."

"Together."

"Present."

"Present."

"Wrist."

"Wrist."

The pressure eased slightly—confused.

Then the room tried again.

A whisper slid into the space, not out of any mouth, not from any wall.

It came from the gap between their repetitions, using their own breath as a carrier.

"Ace."

Mai's spine went rigid.

Ace's eyes flared violet.

The rope between them twitched, not because they moved, but because their muscles tensed.

The room's quiet tightened like a fist.

Mai didn't look at Ace. She didn't break cadence. She made her voice a blade: calm, flat, unyielding.

"Here."

Ace forced her own voice into steadiness. "Here."

The whisper tried again.

"Mai."

Mai's throat tightened, but she kept speaking. "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The whisper grew denser, like Chapter 10's puddle chorus, but cleaner now—less persuasion, more procedure.

"Designation," it murmured.

Mai's jaw clenched.

Ace's chest tightened.

The room wanted to sort them again. It wanted to file them into roles.

Ace felt Violet press closer, almost irritated. A low, predatory readiness.

Mai pivoted the litany again, fast and ugly.

"Not accessible," Mai said.

Ace repeated, "Not accessible."

The whisper stuttered.

It tried to push.

"Answer," it insisted.

Mai's voice went colder. "Not offered."

Ace echoed, "Not offered."

The room trembled faintly—not with anger, but with recalculation.

And then the floor changed.

Not visually. Not moving.

Just... resisting.

A subtle increase in pressure on their soles, as if the stone had become a hand pressing down, encouraging stillness.

Encouraging surrender.

Mai's breath shook once.

Ace felt her own body want to fight, to push back, to take an action.

Hands.

The room forbade hands.

Mai kept speaking anyway.

"Wrist."

Ace: "Wrist."

"Together."

"Together."

"Present."

"Present."

The pressure shifted off their feet and moved upward, a slow climb like water rising. Not drowning them—measuring them.

Mai's eyes flicked to the empty center of the room.

A faint sheen appeared on the stone there, like moisture gathering, like a reflection trying to form without a surface.

The trisected circle began to appear—not drawn, not carved—condensed.

A ghost-mark forming from the idea of the room itself.

Mai didn't look at it directly.

Ace didn't either.

They kept the litany going, voices low, steady, stubborn.

"Here."

"Here."

"Together."

“Together.”

“Not offered.”

“Not offered.”

The ghost-mark sharpened.

The room’s pressure leaned in.

And Ace realized what this place was trying to do:

It wasn’t asking questions.

It was trying to force a response by compressing them into discomfort until they acted.

Until they used their hands.

Until they drew, touched, grabbed, fought—anything it could record as action.

Mai’s voice cracked slightly, a tiny human flaw.

Ace heard it and felt something inside her clamp down—not Violet, not rage—something simpler.

Protectiveness.

Ace’s next repetition came out stronger.

“Together.”

Mai’s eyes flicked to her, startled at the intensity.

Ace repeated, quieter but iron. “Together.”

The ghost-mark on the floor faltered.

Just a fraction.

As if the room had expected fear, not insistence.

The pressure eased slightly.

Mai swallowed, steadied, and kept the cadence.

“Present.”

Ace: “Present.”

“Wrist.”

Ace: “Wrist.”

The room’s quiet shifted again, less confident now. The ghost-mark faded, losing definition like a thought losing focus.

The pressure withdrew inch by inch, like a tide retreating after realizing the shoreline wasn't moving.

Mai exhaled, slow and shaky.

Ace didn't relax yet. She watched the empty center of the room, waiting for the next tactic.

Nothing came.

For a long, tense moment, the room simply held its breath.

Then, from the far wall, a thin seam appeared—an outline that had not been there before.

A door.

Rectangular. Sharp edges. No handle.

A release.

Mai's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's letting us through."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Or guiding us."

Mai didn't argue. "Both possible."

They didn't rush.

They didn't touch.

They stayed tied by the rope and walked slowly toward the seam, their litany quiet now, almost under-breath, more instinct than speech.

"Here."

"Together."

"Present."

At the seam, the door opened without hands.

The quiet didn't resist this time. It didn't tighten.

It simply... recorded.

Ace felt the scar-sensation pulse once under her collarbone—an acknowledgement.

Mai felt it too. Her fingers brushed the rope again, grounding herself.

They stepped through the door.

The room behind them sealed itself soundlessly.

And as the stone swallowed the seam, the last thing Ace heard—barely, almost imaginary—was a whisper that sounded like paper being folded:

"Good."

Not praise.

A note.

A system marking down that the litany worked.

For now.

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