

## Chapter 21: When the File Looks Back

They didn't even get ten minutes of ordinary reality.

At first, nothing happened. The fog over the basin stayed where it was. The pylons stood like dead sentinels. The wind drifted through the missing wires with the same hollow, flutelike sound it always made.

Mai almost believed the bait had worked cleanly.

Almost.

Then the concrete under their boots vibrated—so faint Ace might have missed it if her body wasn't tuned to threat like an instrument.

Ace's head tilted a fraction.

Mai felt it a heartbeat later. Her eyes narrowed. "Below."

Ace didn't speak. She listened.

The vibration returned, rhythmic now, like a distant machine cycling.

Not footsteps. Not an engine. More like... something flipping pages at speed.

A heavy paper shuffle under stone.

Mai's stomach sank. "Retrieval."

Ace's eyes darkened. "Response."

Mai's fingers tightened around her notebook, then she shoved it back into her pack as if keeping it out would somehow make it less real.

The air above the basin thickened. The fog didn't move like fog anymore. It aligned, gathering into bands—horizontal layers like shelves.

Like an archive trying to stand up.

Ace felt the scar-sensation under her collarbone pulse hard. Violet shimmer flashed in her eyes.

Mai whispered, "It accepted the bait."

Ace's voice came low. "And now it wants to see it."

The fog beneath them bulged upward.

A shape formed—not a creature with limbs, not a human, not even a clean silhouette.

A column.

Pale, semi-translucent, like stacked paper compressed into a vertical form. Its edges fluttered, layers shifting like a thousand thin sheets sliding against each other.

It rose from the basin and drifted toward the pylons.

No sound of breathing.

Just the constant whisper of paper friction.

Mai's throat tightened. "Don't look straight."

Ace already wasn't. Her gaze stayed off-center, reading the thing the way you read a reflective surface without letting it see your eyes.

The column stopped at the edge of the basin, as if it needed permission to cross into their higher ground.

Then the air changed again.

A prompt surfaced in their minds—cleaner than before, sharper:

CONFIRM IDENTITY: CI—PHER

Mai's jaw clenched. "No."

Ace's shadow tightened.

The prompt blinked once, waiting like a polite bureaucrat with infinite patience.

Mai whispered, "We don't answer."

Ace nodded.

The column of paper shifted, and a faint indentation formed near its top—like a mouth trying to decide what shape to take.

It didn't speak.

It printed.

Words appeared on the surface of the column, not written, not typed, but embossed into the layers like a stamp.

CI—PHER: FILE OPENED

Mai's stomach lurched. "It made it real."

Ace's voice was flat. "It made it usable."

The column drifted forward, crossing the basin edge.

It didn't need permission.

It had a file now.

It approached the pylon line slowly, like it was savoring the act of retrieval.

Mai whispered, "It will try to anchor that name to you."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "Let it try."

Mai's hand found Ace's wrist—harder than usual. Anchor. A warning. A reminder: this is where pride becomes leverage.

Ace didn't pull away.

The paper-column stopped ten meters away.

A new line embossed itself into its surface:

CI—PHER: ASSOCIATION PENDING

Mai's breath caught. "It's building a linkage."

Ace's jaw clenched. "We break the linkage."

Mai nodded, fast. "Ugly. Contradiction."

Ace's gaze flicked to Mai. "We do it now."

Mai swallowed. "Yes."

Mai reached into her pocket and pulled out a marker—permanent, black. She'd brought it for labeling gear. She held it up like it was a weapon.

Ace's mouth twitched. "Good."

Mai didn't step toward the column.

Instead, she turned to the concrete base of the pylon and wrote—fast and messy—three letters:

CI—

Then she stopped. Deliberately incomplete.

Ace understood instantly and moved beside her, drawing her finger through the wet ink to smear it—ruining the legibility, making it an insult instead of a label.

The paper-column reacted.

Its layers fluttered harder, as if irritated.

A new prompt hit their skulls:

COMPLETE: CI—PHER

Mai's teeth clenched. "No."

Ace didn't answer.

She did something else.

She took the marker from Mai—without looking at the column—and wrote on the concrete base beneath the smeared letters:

CI—PHER / NOT CI—PHER

Two lines. Contradiction. A file that negated itself.

Mai's eyes widened slightly at the elegance of the ugliness.

The paper-column shuddered.

The embossed text on its surface blurred, then reformed, as if the system tried to parse the contradiction:

CI—PHER: ASSOCIATION... ERROR

The air tightened.

For a heartbeat, the fog bands over the basin shifted, shelves rearranging, the system reallocating.

Mai whispered, "Push harder."

Ace nodded.

She didn't use her blade.

She used the thing the valley hated most: messy human context.

Ace wrote again, quickly, on the concrete base:

CI—PHER IS A LIE

Mai immediately smeared part of it with her sleeve, ruining the clean reading.

Then Mai added, beneath it:

CI—PHER WAS NEVER HERE

Another contradiction. A lie about a lie.

The paper-column convulsed, layers fluttering like a book being shaken.

The embossed text on its surface stuttered:

CI—PHER: STATUS...

The word STATUS couldn't complete.

It flickered, half-formed, then disappeared.

The column's top indentation—its "mouth"—collapsed inward as if it had tried to speak and failed.

Ace felt the scar-sensation ease slightly, like a pressure valve releasing.

Mai exhaled through clenched teeth. "It can't anchor it."

Ace's eyes stayed hard. "Not yet."

The paper-column drifted back a half meter—retreating, recalculating.

Mai whispered, "Now we sever."

Ace nodded once.

She stepped forward—one step only—then stopped. No chase. No clean aggression.

Ace lifted her hand and held it out toward the column.

Not touching.

Not offering.

Just presenting a gesture that meant nothing formally.

The column reacted anyway, like it wanted to interpret every motion.

Ace spoke two words, flat, cold:

"Not yours."

The paper-column shuddered.

The embossed letters on its surface warped, bending like wet paper:

CI—PHER: OWNERSHIP... DENIED

Mai's breath hitched. "It's... obeying?"

Ace's mouth twitched, humorless. "It's recording."

Mai nodded, tight. "Yes. Recording denial as data."

The column drifted sideways, as if looking for a different angle. Its layers slid, forming a new line on its surface:

REQUEST: TRUE IDENTITY

Mai's stomach turned.

Ace's eyes flared violet.

The valley wasn't satisfied with the counterfeit closure. It had used it as a lever to pull the real one closer.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist hard. "No."

Ace's jaw trembled once. She forced her breath slow.

She didn't answer.

Instead, she did the thing that saved her last time.

She gave state.

"Present," Ace said.

Mai echoed instantly, "Together."

The paper-column's layers fluttered, irritated. The request line blurred, then reformed:

REQUEST: TRUE IDENTITY

It insisted.

Mai whispered, "We leave."

Ace nodded once.

They backed away from the pylon base, keeping eyes off-center, refusing to give the column a clean stare. They moved along the ridge line, away from the basin, away from the system's center.

The paper-column followed—slow, persistent.

A clerk with legs made of pages.

Mai whispered, "It's tracking."

Ace didn't argue. "Yes."

Mai's voice tightened. "So the bait did something. It gave it a handle."

Ace's eyes were cold. "And now we take the handle away."

Mai swallowed. "How?"

Ace didn't answer with explanation.

She answered with intent disguised as state.

"Switch."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "Switch what?"

Ace's gaze flicked toward the ravine route they'd used last night—the unstructured terrain.

"Environment," Ace said.

Mai nodded slowly. "We move out of authored space again."

Ace's mouth twitched. "And we make it lose the file."

Mai's jaw tightened. "It will try to keep the association alive."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "Let it try."

They moved fast now—not running, but not slow—heading toward the edge where rock became mess again.

Behind them, the paper-column drifted, patient, persistent.

And on its surface, the embossed letters shifted one last time into something that made Mai's blood

go cold:

CI—PHER: SUBJECT LOCATED

It had decided.

It had chosen.

And the valley, having tasted a name it could almost close, was no longer experimenting.

It was hunting.

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