

## Chapter 22: Lose the Handle

They broke away from the ridge and dropped into rough ground—shale, wet scrub, loose stones that slid underfoot and made ugly, accidental noise.

Good.

Noise meant the world wasn't being curated into a clean record.

The paper-column followed, but it didn't glide as smoothly here. Its layers fluttered, catching on wind gusts, reacting to terrain in ways that weren't neat. Like a file dragged through mud.

Mai kept her breathing steady. Ace kept her eyes half-turned away. The rope between them stayed loose but present—tether and stubborn statement.

Behind them, the embossed words on the column shifted as it moved, like a status page updating.

Mai refused to read them.

But her peripheral vision caught one phrase anyway, stamped into pale layers like a bruise:

SUBJECT LOCATED

Ace heard the change in Mai's breathing, the tiny hitch. "Don't look."

Mai swallowed. "Not looking."

They reached the ravine mouth and slipped inside the jagged cut where rock rose steep and slick. Rainwater ran in thin streams down the walls. The air was colder, wet, honest.

Mai's shoulders tightened. "This is good terrain."

Ace nodded. "Hard to file."

The paper-column hesitated at the ravine entrance.

For half a second, it didn't follow.

Mai felt a flicker of hope—and killed it instantly. Hope was a clean shape too.

The column slid in anyway.

But it changed as it did.

Its layers thickened, edges tightening, becoming more rigid—less like loose paper, more like laminated sheets pressed together.

It was adapting.

Ace's jaw clenched. "It hardens."

Mai's voice was low. "It needs stability in here."

Ace glanced at the slick rock walls. "So we take it away."

Mai nodded, already thinking.

They moved deeper into the ravine, then stopped under a narrow overhang where the rock above formed a shallow ceiling. The space was cramped enough to force proximity—Ace and Mai almost shoulder to shoulder.

Mai whispered, “We lose the handle.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to her. “CI—PHER.”

Mai nodded. “Yes.”

Ace’s mouth twitched, hard. “We corrupt the file.”

Mai’s gaze sharpened. “We make it unusable.”

Ace’s eyes went violet and steady. “Do it ugly.”

Mai reached into her pack and pulled out her notebook again. She flipped to the bait page—CI—PHER with the cut hyphen.

Ace watched with that cold focus that meant she’d kill the world if it tried to touch Mai.

Mai tore the page out.

Not cleanly.

She ripped it at an angle, leaving ragged teeth along the edge.

Ace approved silently.

Mai held the torn page up, but not toward the column. Toward the ravine air, like she was showing it to the weather instead.

Then she did something perverse: she wrote on it—fast, messy—using the marker.

Not the bait name.

A different one.

MAI

Ace’s eyes snapped to her.

Mai’s face stayed hard. “Not mine,” she whispered immediately, as if the words were a protective charm. “Not mine. Not mine.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “Mai—”

Mai didn’t let her finish. “It needs a contradiction. A collision. It can’t anchor both.”

Ace’s eyes flashed violet, anger and fear braided together.

Mai kept her voice low and steady. “We don’t give it you. We don’t give it me. We give it a paper lie with our shapes on it.”

Ace's hands tightened on her sheaths. "And if it bites?"

Mai swallowed. "Then it bites paper."

Ace stared at the torn page. The name MAI in black ink looked obscene on ragged pulp.

Mai added one more line beneath it:

CI—PHER = MAI

Then she crossed it out violently with three thick slashes.

A lie. Then denial. Then damage.

Ace's breath came out sharp.

The paper-column drifted closer down the ravine, embossed text shifting like a hungry status bar.

Mai didn't look at it directly.

She held the torn page out with her arm extended, but not offering it like a gift—offering it like trash you throw at a dog to keep it away from your throat.

She flicked her wrist and threw the page into a shallow puddle.

The ink immediately began to bleed.

Perfect.

The page floated, warped, soaking.

The paper-column reacted.

It surged forward—faster than before—layers fluttering, edges sharpening.

Mai's stomach clenched.

Ace shifted, shadow tightening, ready.

The column stopped at the puddle, and its layers bent downward as if reading.

New embossed text formed on its surface, glitching as it tried to parse the wet, bleeding ink.

CI—PHER... MAI... CI—PHER...

The letters stuttered, repeated, misaligned.

The column shuddered.

Mai whispered, "Good. Confusion."

Ace's voice was low. "Now sever."

Mai reached into her pack and pulled out the black tape. She tore a strip with her teeth—ugly—and slapped it onto the wet page, pinning the bleeding ink under a blunt rectangle.

Then she tore another strip and slapped it crosswise, making an X.

The page was now a mess: torn edge, smeared ink, tape scars.

Ace nodded once. "Unfiled."

The paper-column convulsed.

Its embossed text began to smear, like the letters themselves were melting:

SUBJECT... LOCATED... SUBJECT...

The word SUBJECT couldn't hold shape.

It flickered, repeated, then collapsed into blankness.

Mai exhaled hard. "It lost the label."

Ace's eyes stayed sharp. "For now."

The column reacted to that loss the way systems react to missing pointers:

It escalated.

Instead of hovering politely, it unfolded—layers peeling outward, expanding, forming a wide, flat sheet that slid across the ravine like a curtain.

A barrier.

Not blocking them physically—blocking them conceptually.

A new prompt hit their skulls, sharper than anything so far:

RE-ENTER TRUE IDENTITY

Mai's face went pale. "No."

Ace's eyes flared violet. The scar-sensation under her collarbone burned.

The barrier-sheet in front of them began to whiten, becoming a blank field on a massive scale.

And then—like a form being auto-filled—it started to print a name.

Not CI—PHER.

Not Mai.

Something else.

Something the valley had been circling since the beginning.

Ace felt Violet stir violently inside her, resonance rising like a tide slamming against a dam.

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist hard. "Stay."

Ace's jaw clenched, teeth bared for a heartbeat.

The name on the barrier didn't fully appear. It formed in fragments, like the system couldn't decide what letters were safe to commit.

A first letter.

Then a smear.

Then another.

Ace's chest tightened. The system was trying to pull her true label out of her by brute force—printing it into the world without needing her to say it.

Mai's breath shook once. She whispered, fierce and urgent, "We don't let it print you."

Ace's voice came out low and rough. "How?"

Mai looked around—fast—and her eyes snapped to the ravine wall. Wet. Slick. Mineral streaks. Mud at the base.

Real mess.

Mai didn't hesitate.

She scooped a double handful of mud from the ground and flung it—hard—at the blank barrier-sheet.

Mud slapped against the pale surface and stuck, dripping.

The printed letters smeared, losing crispness.

Ace understood instantly.

She followed—grabbing wet grit and mud and throwing it too, making the barrier dirty, chaotic, unreadable.

The valley's quiet convulsed.

The barrier-sheet shuddered like a document being ruined.

The attempted name on it blurred into meaningless streaks.

Mai panted once, then forced her breath down.

Ace's eyes stayed violet, but the prismatic undertone eased slightly as Violet's resonance lost traction. The system couldn't print a clean name through mud.

Mai whispered, "We keep it dirty."

Ace nodded. "Always."

The barrier-sheet retracted—layers folding back into the column form, embarrassed, irritated, forced to abandon clean printing.

The paper-column drifted backward down the ravine, its embossed surface now blank, as if it had lost

its UI.

Mai's shoulders shook once with adrenaline.

Ace watched the retreating column, jaw clenched.

Mai whispered, "It lost the handle."

Ace's voice was cold. "So it will try to grab the wrist instead."

Mai swallowed, eyes hard. "Yes."

Ace tightened the rope between them gently, reasserting proximity.

They moved again, deeper into the ravine, leaving behind the taped, ink-bleeding paper in the puddle like a decoy corpse.

Behind them, the paper-column didn't vanish.

It waited.

Recalculating.

Because a system that can't anchor a name will stop asking politely and start collecting data the old way:

By taking pieces.

By separating.

By forcing the thing it wants to print to rise closer to the surface.

And Ace could feel it already—Violet stirring like a sleepless animal, annoyed at being referenced, hungry at being provoked.

The valley had failed to close the file.

So it opened a different one.

PHASE III: EXTRACTION

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