

Chapter 29: Thin Things

The fissure narrowed the deeper they went, walls sweating cold water that made their sleeves cling. The air tasted like wet stone and old minerals—no paper, no ink, no clean antiseptic archive smell.

But the stamp behind Mai's eyes didn't care about smells.

It sat there like a bruise with a barcode.

Mai kept her scarf half-up, gaze peripheral, breath steady. Ace stayed close, one hand near her hilt, the other occasionally brushing Mai's wrist—anchor, choice, a quiet "you're not alone in this."

They descended until the fissure widened into a slanted corridor of natural rock, just barely tall enough to stand without crouching.

Mai paused and listened.

Above them, faintly, that sliding friction continued—the sound of terrain being flattened, rewritten.

But down here... there was something else.

A faint whispering, almost inaudible.

Not pages.

Not wind.

A soft, thin sound like thread being pulled through cloth.

Mai's stomach tightened. "Do you hear—"

Ace cut in, low. "Yes."

The sound came from ahead.

From a bend where the corridor dipped into deeper darkness.

Mai swallowed. "Thin things."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

They moved forward slowly, boots careful on slick rock. No rushing. No narrative.

As they rounded the bend, they saw them.

Not creatures. Not bodies.

Strips.

Long, pale strips sliding along the rock wall like ribbons in water—thin as paper, but behaving like living tendons. They moved with a steady, searching purpose, brushing the stone, tasting texture.

One strip lifted slightly, as if sensing them.

And stitched into its surface—faint, threadlike letters—was a word that made Mai's blood go cold:

ANCHOR

Mai's overlay flickered behind her eyes, as if answering:

ANCHOR: LOCK

Ace's jaw clenched. "It found the mark."

Mai whispered, tight, "Yes."

The strips didn't rush them.

They approached like careful hands.

One slid toward Mai's face—toward her eyes.

Mai's throat tightened. "No."

Ace stepped between them immediately, shadow surging.

The strip changed course toward Ace instead—probing, testing.

Ace felt Violet stir, annoyed at the intrusion. Her eyes flashed violet-bright.

The strip hesitated, as if Violet's resonance confused its targeting.

Mai whispered, "It wants me."

Ace's voice went low and hard. "Then it doesn't get you."

The strips advanced again—three of them now, moving with coordinated patience. One aimed for Mai's wrist. One for her scarf. One for the space between Ace and Mai—as if trying to wedge a separation line without needing terrain.

Mai's breath hitched.

Ace didn't draw her blade.

Not yet.

Cutting these cleanly would be a verb the system could learn and replicate.

Mai whispered, "Ugly."

Ace nodded once. "Ugly."

Mai grabbed a handful of wet grit from the corridor floor and flung it at the nearest strip.

The grit stuck, clinging to the pale surface.

The strip shuddered, like it hated texture.

Ace followed immediately—kicking up a spray of muddy water from a shallow puddle and splashing it across two strips.

The strips reacted, twitching, recoiling slightly, but not retreating.

They adapted.

Their surfaces tightened, becoming slicker, more water-resistant, like laminated ribbon.

Mai's stomach sank. "They're hardening."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes."

The strip aimed at Mai's wrist surged forward—fast now, no longer patient.

Ace grabbed it—not with bare hands.

With her sleeve.

She wrapped fabric around it and yanked, forcing it into a twist, knotting it against itself.

Ugly contact. Not a clean cut. A tangle.

The strip convulsed, thrashing, trying to slide free.

Mai grabbed another strip with her scarf—yanking it sideways, wrapping it around her forearm like a lasso, then slamming it against the rock wall.

The strip shuddered, threads on its surface blurring.

Ace pinned her strip against the ground with her boot, grinding grit into it.

The strip's surface began to lose its pale cleanliness, darkening with mud.

Good.

Then the corridor itself reacted.

The rock wall beside them whitened in a sudden patch—paper terrain trying to form inside the fissure now that thin things had made contact.

Mai's overlay flared:

TERRAIN SYNC: INITIATE

Mai's stomach lurched. "No—"

Ace snapped, low. "Noise."

Mai forced herself into fragment-speech again, rapid and messy: "Mud—hands—rock—now—no—"

Ace joined: "Together—present—ugly—no—"

The overlay flickered, the sync text stuttering.

But the whitening patch on the wall continued to spread.

The system was using the thin strips as anchors to print paper surfaces even down here.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "We remove the anchors."

Mai panted. "Meaning?"

Ace didn't answer with theory. She acted.

She grabbed the strip she'd pinned—still writhing—and dragged it across jagged rock, scraping it hard until it frayed. Not cut. Abraded. Ruined.

The strip's surface shredded, threads unraveling.

It convulsed violently, then went limp—like a ribbon whose meaning had been destroyed.

Mai did the same with her strip—slamming it against the wall repeatedly, grinding grit into it until the pale surface tore and the stitched letters dissolved into wet pulp.

The whitening patch on the wall hesitated—stuttered—then dimmed slightly, as if losing its foothold.

Good.

But the remaining strips reacted.

They slid backward briefly—retreating, recalculating—then split.

A strip divided into two thinner strips, like a ribbon tearing lengthwise.

Mai's breath caught. "It's multiplying."

Ace's eyes went colder. "Yes."

And now there were more—six, eight—thin pale tendons sliding along rock, searching for Mai's eyes, her wrists, the space between them.

Mai's stamp overlay flickered hard:

ANCHOR: LOCK / COMPROMISE

Mai's nausea spiked. She staggered.

Ace grabbed her shoulders. "Stay."

Mai's voice came out strained. "Here."

Ace: "Here."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The thin strips surged again.

Ace's jaw clenched. Enough.

She drew one katana—emerald glow filling the narrow corridor.

Mai flinched. “Ace—”

Ace’s voice was low and furious. “Not a clean cut.”

Mai swallowed. “Then what?”

Ace didn’t slice.

She shattered.

She slammed the flat of the blade into the wall where a whitening patch had started, striking it like a hammer. The impact rang ugly. The pale patch cracked, splintering like laminated sheet-rock.

Then she struck again—sideways, brutal, crushing the pale surface into fragments.

The thin strips recoiled, as if their structural support had been compromised.

Mai understood and grabbed a loose stone, smashing it into the whitening wall patch too, ruining the plane.

The corridor filled with gritty dust and wet rock debris.

The thin strips thrashed in confusion, their searching motion disrupted by collapsing reference surfaces.

Ace didn’t stop.

She slammed the blade flat into the floor, cracking a thin pale film that had started to form there too.

No clean cuts.

Just vandalism.

Mai panted, eyes hard behind her scarf slit. “Good.”

But then one thin strip—smarter, faster—darted straight toward Mai’s face, aiming for the scarf slit.

Mai’s breath caught.

Ace moved without thinking.

She stepped into it and took the strip across her forearm—fabric and skin—letting it wrap around her like a cold band.

The strip tightened.

Ace hissed. Violet surged.

Mai’s stomach dropped. “Ace—”

Ace’s jaw clenched, eyes burning. “Stay behind me.”

Mai’s hands shook. “It’s—”

Ace didn’t let her finish. “I know.”

The strip around Ace's forearm stitched new letters into itself as it tightened:

SUBJECT

Ace's shadow surged, emerald fracture-lines flaring.

Mai whispered, desperate, "It's tagging you."

Ace's voice came low and rough. "Let it."

Mai's eyes widened. "What?"

Ace stared at the strip, then at Mai—hard, controlled.

"If it wants a handle," Ace said, "it gets the wrong one."

Mai's throat tightened. "Ace, no—"

Ace didn't give her time.

She plunged her forearm—strip and all—into a puddle of black mud at their feet and ground it hard against the rock, smearing, drowning, ruining the stitched letters.

The strip convulsed, the word SUBJECT blurring into nothing.

Ace hissed through teeth as the strip tightened reflexively, then weakened—losing definition under mud and abrasion.

Mai lunged forward and slammed her muddy hands onto the strip too, adding more texture, more chaos.

Together, they ground it into the rock until it frayed and went limp.

Ace's breathing was tight, controlled.

Mai's hands shook, but she didn't stop until the strip was dead pulp.

The remaining thin strips recoiled—retreating down the corridor, sliding back into darkness like frightened worms.

The whitening patches on wall and floor dimmed, losing traction.

Mai exhaled hard, nearly sobbing from adrenaline. "It—"

She stopped. No verbs. She corrected. "It retreated."

Ace flexed her forearm. There was a red welt where the strip had tightened. Not bleeding. But marked.

Ace's eyes were violet, prismatic undertone visible now.

Mai stared at the welt. "It tried to label you."

Ace nodded, jaw clenched. "Yes."

Mai whispered, “As subject.”

Ace’s mouth twitched, humorless. “Better me than you.”

Mai’s throat tightened. “It will come back.”

Ace’s eyes stayed hard. “Yes.”

Mai swallowed, gaze dropping to her own hands—muddy, shaking.

The overlay behind her eyes flickered faintly, still there.

ANCHOR: LOCK (PARTIAL)

Not gone.

But the thin things had proved something important:

The valley could reach into cracks now.

It didn’t need flat land.

It only needed an anchor.

And it already had one behind Mai’s eyes.

So the next escalation wouldn’t be more strips.

It would be something that made Mai’s mark a doorway.

A way to pull the whole system through her—unless they broke the stamp itself.

Ace sheathed her blade slowly.

Mai pulled her scarf tighter.

They moved deeper into the fissure corridor, leaving behind shredded pale pulp and cracked whitening patches.

And in the darkness ahead, the whispering thread-sound returned—fainter now, but present.

Not retreat.

Regroup.

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