

Chapter 3: Quarantine: Notes on a Symbol

They didn't go straight back to whatever counted as "home" anymore.

Not after Jakarta. Not after learning that walls could be polite and still be hungry. Not after realizing that a room could be a mouth if it wanted to be.

They took the long route—streets with too many people, too much noise, too many ordinary things stacked on top of each other like insulation. Mai chose it. Ace didn't argue.

Crowds made it harder to listen.

And harder to be listened to.

The sky had turned the color of old dishwater. Light without commitment. The kind of afternoon that felt like it had been accidentally left on.

Mai walked half a step behind Ace, not because Ace needed protection, but because Mai needed proximity to read her. Their rhythm had changed since the alley. Not frantic, not broken. Just calibrated.

Ace kept her gaze ahead. She noticed everything anyway—vector-lines in movement, reflections in windows, the tiny out-of-place pauses in pedestrian flow that meant someone had seen something they couldn't explain.

The symbol had followed them in small ways.

Not as an apparition. Not as a dramatic sign.

As coincidence with intent.

A street sign missing a letter in the exact place a circle would close.

A puddle reflecting three arcs instead of one.

A brochure in a café rack, torn so the logo became a trisected ring.

Mai didn't point these out.

Ace didn't need her to.

They crossed an underpass where the sound changed—where footsteps became too clean, too separate from the air. Ace's shadow tightened again, like a muscle bracing for impact.

Mai slowed.

Ace slowed with her.

"Here?" Ace asked quietly.

Mai nodded. "Here."

She stopped beneath a concrete support pillar, the kind tagged with layered graffiti and old election posters. Mai reached into her coat and pulled out a small notebook, worn at the edges. Not a tablet.

Not a phone. Paper—because paper didn't log you. Paper didn't transmit.

Paper just bled if you pressed too hard.

Mai flipped it open.

The first page already held the symbol, drawn in pencil. Three arcs. The circle that refused to close.

"It's not a logo," Mai said. "Not a cult stamp. Not a warning sign in the normal sense."

Ace watched the pencil lines like they might move.

Mai tapped the notebook once, firm. "It's a protocol."

Ace's eyes narrowed a fraction. "Protocol for what?"

Mai's mouth twitched. A half-smile that didn't reach comfort. "Quarantine."

Ace didn't like how the word felt in her throat.

She didn't say it.

Mai continued anyway. "Not quarantine like disease. Quarantine like... information. A containment boundary for something that spreads by being known."

Ace's fingers flexed near her hip, empty hands making a small, useless fist. The sisters at her back hummed, faint. She kept them quiet.

Mai took the pencil and drew a second line beside the symbol. A simple arrow.

"Look," she said. "Everything in our world has rules. Doors, locks, language, bodies. This thing behaves like a lock that wants to choose who it locks in with."

Ace stared at the arcs. "It tracks."

Mai nodded. "Yes. But not movement alone. It tracks permission."

Ace's gaze flicked to her. "Meaning?"

Mai didn't answer immediately. She listened to the space around them—cars above, a distant laugh, the subtle hum of an electrical junction box. Nothing wrong. Which was, in its own way, wrong.

Then Mai spoke carefully, each word placed like a tool.

"In the alley, the moment we treated it like weather, it stayed passive. The moment we treated it like a thing with intent, it responded."

Ace's eyes darkened. "It likes being recognized."

"Yes," Mai said. "But more than that—it likes being given verbs."

Ace exhaled slowly. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she let it go.

Mai flipped to another page. This one held a list of short phrases, some crossed out.

Don't name it.

Don't command it.

Don't bargain with it.

Don't describe it precisely.

Keep the verbs.

Ace read the last line twice.

Mai followed her eyes. "It feeds on action-languages. Instructions. Causality. If we say 'it wants' or 'it does', we give it a shape to occupy."

Ace's voice came out flat. "So we stop speaking."

"No." Mai's tone sharpened, quick as a blade. "We stop speaking carelessly. There's a difference."

Ace's jaw shifted. A tiny tell. She hated games where the rules changed mid-step.

Mai softened again, enough to keep the anchor intact. "We can speak. But we speak like we're handling a live wire. We don't offer it the ladder."

Ace nodded once. Then her eyes shifted—not to Mai, but to the underside of the overpass, where the graffiti stopped in a clean, unnatural line as if the paint had refused to cross a boundary.

"What is that," Ace asked.

Mai followed her gaze.

For a moment, nothing.

Then the air there thickened. Not visually. Not physically. Just... conceptually. Like the idea of distance had been edited.

Ace felt the scar-sensation again—under her skin, along her ribs. A ghost of a mark she hadn't earned.

Mai's hand moved without thinking—two fingers touching Ace's wrist. Not gripping, not restraining. Just contact. Anchor pulse.

"Okay," Mai murmured. "It's close."

Ace didn't look away from the clean line in the graffiti.

The line moved.

A fraction.

Not sliding, not crawling—deciding.

Ace's shadow surged forward instinctively, a dark pressure trying to fill the gap. Mai's fingers tightened, just slightly, like a reminder: don't.

Ace forced her shadow back. She did it like you hold back a sneeze—ugly, uncomfortable, but

possible.

Mai opened her notebook again and, with the pencil, drew the symbol a second time.

Then she drew it wrong.

One arc slightly too long. One intersection shifted by a millimeter.

Ace felt something in the air react. A subtle tightening—like a lock trying a key that almost fit.

Mai whispered, “If it’s a protocol, it should reject invalid structure.”

The space under the overpass flickered.

Once.

Then the clean line in the graffiti snapped back to normal, as if offended.

Mai’s breath let go. “Good. It has standards.”

Ace’s mouth twitched. “So do I.”

Mai gave her a look—dry, faintly amused even now. “Yes. And yours are a lot more expensive.”

Ace didn’t answer.

They moved again, leaving the underpass behind.

Mai kept the notebook open as they walked, flipping pages. Each one held observations, not interpretations. Raw data first.

Rain inverted in a localized pocket.

Silence behaves like sorting.

Symbol asserts presence without light emission.

Response observed after recognition-language.

Artifacts appear in unrelated environments (coincidences with intent).

Ace watched the street, but she was listening to Mai’s pencil scratches like they were a heartbeat.

After a block, Mai slowed.

Ace slowed.

Mai stopped at a crosswalk. Red light. Cars passing. Ordinary.

Mai spoke without looking at Ace.

“There’s something else.”

Ace waited.

Mai's voice lowered, careful. "Jakarta wasn't the beginning."

Ace's eyes narrowed.

Mai finally glanced at her. "Some of the reports I pulled—the old ones. The ones someone thought we wouldn't read. This mark appears near riftlines. Near 'silent events.' Places where people forget what they saw but remember they were afraid."

Ace's throat tightened—a memory edge. The village. Blood-Moon. The first time silence wasn't peace.

Ace didn't let it rise.

Mai continued. "It's not just following us because we're interesting. It's following us because something in you—"

She stopped.

Not because she couldn't say it.

Because saying it might hand the thing a verb.

Ace looked at her. Violet eyes steady, brutal in their calm.

Mai swallowed and corrected course.

"—because you are compatible."

Ace's katanas hummed once, like an annoyed exhale.

Mai offered her a tiny smile, more warmth than the world deserved. "And before you make that face, no, I'm not leaving."

Ace blinked once.

That was her version of a laugh.

The light turned green.

They crossed.

Halfway over, Ace felt it again—pressure at the edge of her thoughts, close enough to be disrespectful.

A voice that wasn't a voice.

A question that wasn't phrased.

Mai's hand brushed Ace's sleeve as they reached the curb. A wordless check-in.

Ace didn't answer in words.

She simply changed direction—turning away from the route Foundation security had "recommended," away from the clean, safe streets, toward the older parts of the city where the buildings leaned slightly as if tired of standing straight.

Mai followed without hesitation.

Behind them, in the puddle at the crosswalk, the reflection didn't show the sky.

It showed three curved lines, intersecting without touching.

A circle that refused to close.

And the rain—still falling here like normal rain—began to hesitate.

Just for a second.

As if gravity was something it could reconsider.

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