

## Chapter 30: Doorway

The corridor dipped, then opened into a larger hollow where the ceiling rose high enough to swallow their breathing. Water dripped from somewhere far above, slow and arrhythmic. The rock walls here were rough, pocked, old. Honest.

Too honest.

It felt like a place the valley hadn't fully finished claiming.

Mai should've liked it.

But the stamp behind her eyes pulsed faintly, and that pulse didn't care whether the stone was natural.

Ace kept her close—close enough that Mai could feel the heat of her through damp clothes. Ace's forearm still showed the red welt from the thin strip. A wrong handle. A temporary win.

They moved into the hollow carefully.

And then Mai froze.

Not because she saw something.

Because she felt something.

The air leaned toward her.

Like the room had a subtle slope, and all of it pointed inward to the mark behind her eyes.

Mai's overlay flickered, brighter than it had been in minutes:

ANCHOR: OPEN

Mai's blood went cold.

Ace saw her posture lock. "Mai."

Mai swallowed hard. "It's—" She stopped, corrected. "It's opening."

Ace's jaw clenched. "What is?"

Mai's voice was thin. "The stamp."

Ace's eyes flared violet. "No."

Mai's breathing turned shallow, fighting panic with technique. "Yes."

The hollow's darkness shifted—not like a creature moving, like a camera adjusting focus.

And then the rock wall in front of them—bare stone—began to show a faint rectangle, like a UI overlay projected onto it.

A doorway outline.

Not carved. Not cut.

Printed into perception.

Mai's overlay updated:

ANCHOR: PORTAL

Mai gagged on a breath.

Ace grabbed her shoulders, forcing her attention. "Look at me."

Mai forced her gaze up through the scarf slit.

Ace's voice was low and hard. "Stay here."

Mai nodded, breath shaking. "Here."

Ace: "Together."

Mai: "Together."

The doorway outline on the wall brightened anyway.

Mai could feel it in her skull like pressure equalizing—like something was about to push through a valve that had just been opened.

The valley had stopped trying to reach them through terrain.

It had decided to reach them through Mai.

Ace's shadow surged, thickening at her feet.

Mai whispered, "It will use me as a door."

Ace's jaw clenched. "No."

Mai's throat tightened. "It's not asking."

Ace's eyes went cold. "Then we shut it."

Mai swallowed. "How?"

Ace's gaze snapped around the hollow. Mud? Limited. Grit? Yes. Water? Yes. But this wasn't a wall patch whitening; this was a mental portal synced to the stamp.

You couldn't smear it off stone.

You had to break the reference.

Ace stared at Mai's scarf, then at Mai's eyes behind it.

"Blind it," Ace said.

Mai blinked. "Already."

Ace shook her head once. "Not you. The stamp."

Mai's stomach turned. "Meaning?"

Ace's voice stayed low. "Overload. Confuse. Make it misfire."

Mai swallowed hard. "Noise stream."

Ace nodded.

Mai began immediately—rapid, messy fragments, refusing sentence structure:  
"Drip—cold—stone—wrist—mud—breath—Ace—now—no—"

Ace joined, matching her rhythm, harsher, tighter: "Together—present—don't—don't—don't—"

Mai's overlay spasmed.

ANCHOR: PORTAL flickered.

The doorway outline on the wall wavered slightly, as if the projector had lost focus.

Good.

But the hollow escalated again.

A second rectangle appeared on the wall—smaller, offset—like a window inside the door.

Inside that window, faintly, a symbol formed:

The trisected circle.

Mai's stomach lurched.

The symbol sharpened, and with it came a sensation like someone trying to look through Mai's eyes from the other side.

Mai gasped and staggered, hands flying to her head.

Ace caught her instantly. "Mai!"

Mai's voice came out strained. "Something is looking."

Ace's eyes flared violet, prismatic undertone rising—Violet reacting to being observed.

Mai whispered, "It's using me as a camera."

Ace's jaw clenched. "No."

Ace pressed her forehead briefly against Mai's scarf-covered temple—an intimate, grounding contact, not romantic, just anchoring. A human override.

"Here," Ace said into her.

Mai forced breath. "Here."

Ace: "Together."

Mai: "Together."

The doorway outline brightened anyway.

Then the stamp hit again—hard.

Mai screamed, small and involuntary, and her overlay updated with brutal simplicity:

OPEN

No "anchor." No polite label.

Just a command.

The doorway on the wall activated.

The rock inside the rectangle didn't change physically, but it changed behaviorally—becoming a surface that wasn't stone anymore.

Depth appeared where none existed.

A thin, pale seam opened down the center like a page being split.

Mai's stomach dropped. "No."

Ace's shadow surged forward instinctively, trying to cover the rectangle like a blanket.

The seam widened.

And something inside the rectangle moved.

Not a body.

A presence.

A stack of forms, sheets, labels—like the archive had compressed itself into a single moving intention.

Mai felt the pull behind her eyes intensify, like the stamp was acting as a tether to drag the presence through.

Ace saw the seam and moved.

Not with blade.

With ruin.

She grabbed a rock—jagged, wet—and smashed it against the wall inside the rectangle.

The rock passed through the surface like it was breaking into a different medium.

The doorway wasn't rock.

It was access.

Ace smashed again, again—ugly impacts, vandalism.

The seam inside the rectangle shuddered, wavering.

Mai's overlay flickered wildly, symbols replacing words for a heartbeat.

Ace's eyes were violet-bright, voice low and furious. "Close."

Mai clenched her teeth and forced herself into the noise stream again, faster, harsher, refusing coherence: "Mud—stone—hit—no—here—together—no—no—"

Ace joined, pounding words like nails: "Present—together—stay—stay—"

The seam trembled.

The presence inside the rectangle surged toward the opening, trying to push through before it closed.

Mai felt nausea spike as if something were crawling behind her eyes.

Ace reacted instantly—she grabbed Mai's scarf and yanked it fully down over Mai's eyes, blindfolding her completely.

Mai startled. "Ace—!"

Ace's voice was hard. "No camera."

Mai swallowed, then forced herself still.

Blindfolded, Mai couldn't see the doorway outline—but she could still feel it.

The pull behind her eyes weakened slightly, like a lens cap had been applied.

The seam in the wall flickered, losing focus.

Ace smashed the rectangle again with the rock, then dragged the rock sideways, scraping, scarring, making a mess in the doorway surface.

No clean cut.

Just abrasion.

The seam shuddered.

The presence inside recoiled, as if it couldn't tolerate the doorway being vandalized.

Mai, blind, whispered, trembling but controlled, "Here."

Ace, voice low in response: "Here."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The doorway outline dimmed.

The seam narrowed.

The presence inside the rectangle pressed forward one last time—

and then the wall snapped back into ordinary stone, as if the portal had never existed.

Mai's overlay collapsed into static for a heartbeat.

Then faded to a faint ghost again:

ANCHOR: LOCK (PARTIAL)

Mai sagged, breathing hard.

Ace held her by the shoulders, steady. Ace's eyes were still violet and prismatic, Violet inside her snarling at the intrusion.

Mai whispered through the blindfold, voice ragged, "It used me."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes."

Mai's breath shook. "As a doorway."

Ace's voice was low and absolute. "Never again."

Mai swallowed. "We have to break the stamp."

Ace didn't argue.

Because now it was clear: terrain tricks, mud tricks, frame breaking—those were delaying actions.

The real problem was the mark behind Mai's eyes.

A piece of the valley inside her.

A handle with a heartbeat.

And the valley had just proven it could open a door through it.

Ace loosened the blindfold slightly, letting Mai see a sliver again.

Mai's eyes were wet, furious, focused.

Ace's voice came low. "We find the source."

Mai nodded once. "Yes."

Ace: "We destroy it ugly."

Mai's mouth twitched, grim. "Ugly."

They moved out of the hollow, deeper into the fissure corridor, leaving behind a wall scarred with rock impacts where a doorway had tried to exist.

And behind them, in the valley's invisible log, the system recorded something new—something closer

to satisfaction:

PORTAL TEST: SUCCESSFUL / BRIEF OPEN

Brief.

But real.

Enough to prove the method worked.

So the next time it wouldn't test.

It would open longer.

And it would send something through that didn't care about mud, cracks, or vandalism.

Something that could hold Mai still and force the stamp to lock fully.

Something designed for one job:

Retention.

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