

Chapter 32: Relay Map

They moved for a long time after the retention chamber—downward, sideways, then through a stretch where the fissure widened into a low tunnel that forced them to crouch. The rock scraped their backs and shoulders, and the damp cold got into joints like a slow insult.

Mai's breathing had steadied, but her face still carried that post-choke pallor. The scarf stayed around her neck now, not covering her eyes—she needed sight in tight terrain—but she kept her gaze soft, peripheral whenever possible.

Ace kept checking Mai without making a show of it—small glances, wrist touches, the way her body angled subtly to shield Mai from open space even underground.

The stamp behind Mai's eyes still existed.

It didn't scream now.

It waited.

Mai felt it like a faint pressure on the bridge of her nose. Like a finger resting there, patient.

They reached a pocket in the tunnel where the ceiling rose just enough for them to stand. A natural alcove. Rough walls. A shallow basin of water that looked like it had been dripping into the same spot for a century.

Mai stopped. "Pause."

Ace didn't argue. "Pause."

Mai sat on a rock ledge, shoulders slumping for the first time in what felt like hours. Ace stayed standing, scanning the tunnel mouth behind them, listening for thread-whispers.

None.

For now.

Mai reached into her pack and pulled out the taped envelope—Marquez's notes. The stolen warning. Their physical proof that the valley had procedures and failures and a mind like a filing cabinet with teeth.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "No reading here."

Mai nodded. "Not reading. Mapping."

She pulled out her notebook—her own pages, not the stolen ones. She flipped to a blank page.

Ace watched, tense. "No clean symbols."

Mai met her eyes. "Fragments only."

Ace nodded once.

Mai began to draw—not circles, not arcs, just jagged lines, broken boxes, arrows that didn't connect smoothly.

A schematic that looked like it had been drawn by someone trying not to be understood.

Mai whispered as she drew. "We've seen modules."

Ace's voice was low. "Circle room. Archive. Blank field."

Mai nodded. "Yes. And now relay."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "And thin things."

Mai drew a long jagged line and wrote beside it:

STRIPS (THREAD)

She drew a rough square with a crack through it:

RELAY (CRESCENT)

She drew a bigger, uglier shape—not a circle, just a broken ring with gaps:

CORE?

Mai tapped her pencil once, thinking.

Ace waited—impatient in her stillness.

Mai's voice was low. "The valley has infrastructure. It doesn't just feel things. It routes."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Mai swallowed. "And it used my stamp as a key."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes."

Mai added to her map: a small jagged box labeled:

STAMP NODE (MAI)

Then she scratched it out partially, smearing graphite with her thumb so it wouldn't be clean.

Mai continued, "If there are relays, there's a feed line."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "We follow it."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace's voice went colder. "We destroy every relay."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Ugly. Not surgical."

Ace: "Yes."

Mai exhaled. "But we need one more thing."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "What."

Mai hesitated before saying it. "A diagnostic."

Ace's posture tightened. "Meaning."

Mai touched the side of her head, just above her temple. "When it tries to sync... I feel direction. Subtle. Like pressure bias."

Ace stared at her. "You can... sense the feed."

Mai nodded, grim. "Yes."

Ace's eyes went hard. "It will use that too."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Yes. But we can use it faster."

Ace didn't like it. But she didn't deny the utility.

Mai drew a jagged arrow from the stamp node toward the "CORE?" shape.

"Next time it spikes," Mai whispered, "we move toward the pressure source. Not away."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "That's dangerous."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace's jaw clenched. "But it gets us to core."

Mai: "Exactly."

A long silence.

Then Ace spoke, low. "You okay?"

Mai didn't bother pretending. "Not really."

Ace's eyes softened a fraction. "Breath."

Mai nodded and breathed—slow, controlled, deliberate.

Ace's shadow eased slightly, as if it responded to Mai's steadiness.

Then the tunnel did something that made both of them freeze.

A soft, thin sound.

Thread through cloth.

Mai's blood cooled instantly.

Ace's eyes went violet-bright.

The whispering came from behind.

Not from the tunnel mouth they'd entered.

From the rock wall to their left.

Mai stared at the wall.

A thin pale line appeared on it—like a hairline crack filling with whiteness—not enough to become a sheet, just enough to serve as a seam.

Mai's overlay flickered faintly:

ANCHOR: SYNC

Mai whispered, tight, "It found us."

Ace's voice was low and lethal. "Yes."

The seam widened slightly.

And a strip slid out—thin, pale, searching.

Then another.

Then a third.

Mai's stomach clenched. "Strips again."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Retention will follow."

Mai swallowed. "It's syncing."

Ace leaned in close, voice hard. "Noise."

Mai began the fragment stream again, faster this time, more jagged:
"Alcove—rock—water—breath—now—here—"

Ace matched, harsh: "Together—present—no—no—"

The overlay spasmed. The seam hesitated.

But the strips kept coming, sliding out like tongues.

Ace didn't wait for them to reach Mai's face this time.

She lunged to the wall seam and slammed the flat of her katana into it—ugly hammer-strike.

The seam cracked.

The strips convulsed.

Ace struck again—crushing the whitening patch before it could lay flat and become structural.

Paperforming denied.

The strips flailed, trying to pull back.

Mai grabbed a loose stone and smashed the edge of the whitening seam too, adding chaos, grit,

crumbling rock.

The seam broke apart.

The strips tore mid-emergence, fraying into wet pulp that fell to the ground like shredded bandages.

The whispering sound died abruptly, like a thread snapping.

Mai panted. "Good."

Ace's eyes were violet, hard. "It's probing."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace glanced at Mai's map on the notebook page.

Mai grabbed the page and ripped it out immediately—ragged tear, no clean edges—and shoved it into the taped envelope so it wouldn't be visible.

Ace's gaze sharpened. "We move."

Mai nodded, breath steady. "Yes."

They left the alcove fast, deeper into the tunnel network. The world here was natural enough to resist full stamping, but not immune.

Mai could feel the stamp in her skull waking again, pressure bias shifting slightly.

A direction.

Not a compass.

A pull.

Mai whispered, through clenched teeth, "It's... that way."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Toward core."

Mai nodded, grim. "Yes."

Ace didn't hesitate.

They followed the pull.

Not because they trusted it.

Because sometimes the only way to kill a system is to walk toward the part of it that thinks it owns you.

And somewhere ahead, deeper in rock, the valley prepared a bigger relay.

Not a crescent this time.

A full dock.

A place where retention could lock permanently.

A place where the stamp behind Mai's eyes could finally become what it was designed to be:

A key that never left the door.

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