

Chapter 8: How to Draw a Circle Wrong

Stone replaced sand the way truth replaces denial—hard, cold, and impossible to smooth over.

The dead trees thinned out into a rocky corridor, narrow enough that the valley felt like it had finally decided to put its hands on them. Cliffs on both sides rose in rough, dark sheets, their surfaces pocked with old fractures. No moss. No lichen. Even the plants seemed to have learned not to cling.

Mai walked first now.

Not because Ace needed shielding—because Mai needed to read the corridor before Ace's instincts tried to solve it with steel.

Ace stayed half a step behind, eyes moving constantly, violet shimmer catching subtle wrongness in the shadows. Her aura pressed close to her body, disciplined, like a blade kept in its sheath.

The air here had a faint metallic taste.

Not blood.

More like old coins. Old locks.

Mai slowed at a bend where the corridor widened into a shallow alcove. The ground was flat stone, unusually smooth compared to the jagged rock around it.

Too smooth.

Ace felt the scar-sensation before she saw why.

The symbol was here.

Not drawn.

Not carved.

Inlaid.

Three shallow grooves cut into the stone as if something had scraped them with patient, perfect intention. The arcs intersected without touching. The circle refused closure.

A formal mark.

A door plaque.

Mai stopped short of stepping into it.

Ace stopped with her.

They stared at the grooves.

The quiet around them tightened, aligning itself, as if the corridor had been waiting for this moment—the moment when humans stood over a rule and considered how to break it.

Mai exhaled slowly. "Okay," she murmured, "so this is a node."

Ace didn't like that word either, but she let it pass.

Mai crouched at the edge of the inlaid symbol, careful to keep her boots outside the grooves. She reached into her coat and pulled out the chalk—still sealed in plastic.

Ace's eyes flicked to it, then to Mai. A silent question: Here?

Mai nodded once. "Here," she said, quiet. "But wrong."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Always."

Mai gave her a look—dry, affectionate in the smallest possible dose—and then tore the plastic open with controlled care. The crackle of plastic sounded like a gunshot in this corridor, but the valley didn't react.

Maybe it already knew.

Mai held the chalk between her fingers like a delicate weapon.

She didn't draw on the symbol.

She drew beside it.

A line, straight and crude, cutting across where a circle would want to be. A refusal of elegance. A scar across a scar.

The air shifted immediately, subtle but undeniable—like a lock turning half a notch and then stopping.

Ace's shadow tightened.

Mai drew a second line, angled, forming a hard corner.

Not a curve.

Never a curve.

Ace watched the chalk like it might catch fire. The sisters hummed faintly at her back, impatient.

Mai whispered, "If it's a protocol, it should respond to structural mimicry. But we don't give it clean mimicry. We give it bad handwriting."

Ace blinked once. Agreement.

Mai drew three arcs—not matching the inlaid grooves. Close enough to be recognizable, wrong enough to be offensive. One arc too long. One too short. One slightly jagged, as if her hand had slipped.

She stopped.

Waited.

The corridor held its breath.

Nothing happened.

Mai frowned, just slightly. "Maybe it needs—"

Ace's voice cut in, flat. "A verb."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Right."

She didn't say the verb.

She acted it.

Mai took the chalk and snapped it in half.

The sound was small. Dry. Final.

The corridor reacted like someone had touched a nerve.

A faint tremor ran through the stone under their feet—not enough to shake them, but enough to make dust drop from a crack above. The inlaid grooves darkened slightly, as if shadow had pooled inside them.

Ace felt the pressure brush the edge of her thoughts again, closer than before. Not inside. Not invasive. Just adjacent, like someone leaning near your ear to hear you breathe.

Mai didn't flinch. She placed the broken chalk pieces on the ground in a crude X over her wrong arcs.

Then she stepped back, slow.

Ace waited.

The inlaid symbol on the stone shimmered—not visually, not like light—but like definition shifting. The grooves looked deeper for a moment, as if the mark had tried to assert itself harder.

Then it hesitated.

And the air above the inlaid arcs rippled, faintly, like heat haze.

A shape began to form—not a creature, not a portal, something in between.

A thin plane of wrongness, like the idea of a doorway being tested.

Mai's voice stayed low. "It's trying to accept the key."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Don't let it."

Mai nodded, and her fingers moved without conscious thought—two fingertips touching Ace's wrist again. Anchor pulse. The gesture had become a language of its own: stay here, stay you.

Ace held herself still, but inside her the sisters were awake now, humming like restrained lightning.

The plane of wrongness grew more defined.

For a heartbeat, Ace saw something through it.

Not a world.

A rule-set.

A geometry that wasn't meant for eyes. Angles that implied sound. Curves that implied memory. A lattice that looked like it could catch a name and keep it.

Ace's skin prickled. Her shadow surged reflexively.

Mai tightened her grip—firm, grounding.

“Ace,” she murmured, almost too soft to hear, “don't look straight at it.”

Ace forced her gaze slightly off-center, as if she were watching the doorway through a reflection.

The plane shuddered.

It didn't like that.

It wanted direct recognition. It wanted the full stare. It wanted to be given the dignity of being seen clearly.

Mai whispered, “Good.”

Then she did something deliberately ugly.

She took the remaining half of the chalk and scrawled a crude rectangle around the inlaid symbol—hard corners, uneven lines, a box that trapped curves in a shape they hated.

The plane of wrongness jerked.

A vibration ran through the corridor, sharper this time.

The air tightened like a fist.

And then—without warning—the plane collapsed inward with a sound that wasn't sound.

A silent pop. A pressure drop. Like a vacuum seal breaking.

Ace staggered a half-step, not from force but from sudden absence—like something had been leaning on her mind and abruptly stepped away.

Mai steadied her with that same wrist contact, then let go immediately, as if holding too long might become another kind of verb.

The inlaid symbol remained.

But it looked duller now. Less confident. As if it had tried to open and been embarrassed.

Mai exhaled, slow. “Okay,” she said quietly. “So it does try to negotiate with wrong keys.”

Ace's eyes stayed on the grooves. “It adapts.”

Mai nodded. “Yes. But it also has to choose.”

Ace's mouth twitched. “And it chose wrong.”

Mai smiled—small, sharp. “We taught it something.”

Ace's expression didn't soften, but the pressure in her shoulders eased by a fraction.

Then Mai's smile faded, and she reached into her coat.

The envelope.

Wax-sealed, faintly marked.

She held it out toward Ace, not offering it like a gift, but like an object that needed shared responsibility.

“We're not opening this here,” Mai said.

Ace nodded once.

Mai tucked it back.

They both stood over the duller symbol for a moment longer, listening to the corridor's silence regain its alignment.

Then Ace spoke, voice low. “We can break its expectations.”

Mai glanced at her. “Yes.”

Ace's eyes were violet, steady, and there was something in them that looked almost like satisfaction. “Then we keep doing that.”

Mai's mouth twitched. “We will.”

They moved past the alcove, deeper into the stone corridor.

Behind them, the chalk rectangle on the ground began to smear—slowly, subtly, as if the stone was trying to erase the insult. Not immediately. Not angrily.

Patiently.

As if learning.

As if remembering.

And somewhere in the valley's quiet system, a file updated—not with their names, not with their actions—

—but with the simple, infuriating truth:

These two don't behave like keys.—

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