

Chapter 36: Purge

The pulse hit like a pressure wave through bone.

Not stamped. Not typed. Not a prompt.

A system-level decision: if it can't file it, it deletes it.

Mai's teeth clicked once from the shock of it. Ace's shadow tightened around them both like a reflexive brace.

The rock rim trembled under their hands.

Below, the wound-darkness roiled—not with movement, but with erasure. It looked like the shimmer was trying to flatten into nothing, like a page burning without flame.

Mai's breath came in sharp. "Purge."

Ace's eyes flared violet. "Yes."

A sound rose from the cavity—low, steady, like paper being shredded continuously.

The envelope they'd thrown in wasn't coming back.

It was being processed to nonexistence.

The erasure pressure climbed the cavity walls, turning the air thin and nauseating. Not poison—absence.

Mai's stomach lurched. She whispered, hoarse, "It's deleting the wound."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's healing by removing the exception."

Mai nodded, throat tight. "And us with it."

Ace didn't answer. She moved.

She grabbed Mai's wrist and pulled her along the ledge fast—no running, just urgent climbing along jagged rock.

The purge climbed behind them like a tide of silence.

Where it touched the rock, details dulled—edges softened, texture reduced, as if the world lost resolution.

Mai looked back once and regretted it instantly. The rock behind them had become... smoother. Less real. Less defined.

Ace snapped, "Don't look."

Mai forced her gaze forward.

They reached a narrow split in the rim where a natural crack led sideways into darker stone.

Ace shoved into it first—shoulders scraping—and pulled Mai after her.

The crack tightened around them, wet rock pressing in close. It felt like being swallowed by geology itself.

Behind them, the purge tide reached the ledge.

The air went suddenly colder.

And then there was a sound like a file being closed—final, absolute.

The crack they'd been on ceased to exist.

Not collapsed.

Not sealed.

Just... gone.

Mai's breath hitched. "It erased the ledge."

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

They kept moving through the crack, crawling now, dragging themselves over slick stone. Mai's lungs burned, but she pushed on.

The purge wasn't a creature to outrun. It was a decision to escape.

They emerged from the crack into a new tunnel—narrow, twisting, low. No open space. No staging.

Good.

For a moment the air felt normal again.

Then Mai felt something worse.

A faint itch behind her eyes—like an afterimage of the overlay, even though it was gone.

Not text.

A sensation of being targeted again—this time without a stamp.

Mai whispered, tight, "It's still tracking."

Ace's jaw clenched. "By proximity."

Mai swallowed. "The purge didn't need the mark."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Purge didn't require keys.

It just removed the whole room.

Mai forced a breath. "So we can't fight it directly."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "No. We outmaneuver it."

Mai nodded, breathing hard. "Find boundary. Find 'real.'"

Ace's gaze sharpened. "Yes."

They moved deeper into the new tunnel, following instinct and ugliness—choosing routes that broke sightlines and avoided smooth surfaces.

Then the tunnel ahead began to brighten—a pale glow in the rock, not paper, not whitened fiber. A different light.

Mai stopped. "Light."

Ace narrowed her eyes. "Not from us."

Mai whispered, "Exit?"

Ace's voice was low. "Or another stage."

They approached slowly.

The tunnel opened into a small cavern studded with mineral crystals—natural ones, faintly luminous, giving the space a dim, cold blue-white glow.

It was the first natural light they'd seen in what felt like forever.

Mai's shoulders eased a fraction despite herself. "Real."

Ace didn't relax. She scanned.

The crystals weren't arranged. They were random, messy, genuine.

Good.

But in the center of the cavern floor was a circular depression—a natural sinkhole, maybe. Not a carved circle-room.

A bowl.

And inside the bowl, pooled shallow water.

The water was still.

Too still.

Mai's stomach tightened. "Reflection."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes."

They stayed at the cavern edge.

Mai whispered, "We don't go near that."

Ace nodded. "We go around."

They started to skirt the bowl carefully, keeping to rough stone.

Then the purge found them again.

Not as a wave this time.

As a sudden deadness in the air—like the cavern’s light dimmed by a fraction.

Mai felt it in her teeth.

Ace felt it in her shadow tightening.

The far tunnel mouth behind them—where they’d entered—blurred. The rock texture softened.

Erasure approaching.

Mai whispered, “It’s coming.”

Ace’s voice went low and urgent. “We need an exit.”

Mai’s eyes darted around. Two possible paths: one narrow crack on the left, one wider tunnel on the right.

But the right tunnel’s entrance had a pale smoothness to its edges—too even.

A trap.

The left crack looked jagged and ugly.

Mai pointed. “Left.”

Ace didn’t argue. They moved.

As they approached the left crack, the cavern bowl water rippled—still no wind, but attention.

The water surface began to show something.

Not their faces.

A word.

Floating on the surface, formed from condensation:

PURGE COMPLETE

Mai’s blood chilled. “No.”

Ace’s eyes flared violet. “It’s lying.”

The water text changed quickly:

RETURN TO FILE

Mai’s stomach turned. “No.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “Ignore.”

They reached the crack and began squeezing through.

The cavern behind them dimmed further.

The purge deadness thickened.

Mai felt her skin crawl.

Then the bowl water did something brutal.

It rose.

Not flooding.

Rising as a vertical sheet—like a mirror being lifted into place.

And in that mirror-sheet, Mai saw Ace's face—prismatic violet eyes, shadow armor—staring back.

But the reflection smiled.

Ace's real face didn't.

Mai's breath caught. "Fake."

Ace snarled, low. "Don't look."

Mai forced her gaze away and shoved deeper into the crack.

The mirror-sheet moved, sliding across the cavern like a curtain, trying to sweep toward them.

Purge and mirror working together now: erase the exits, then present a clean return option.

Ace squeezed into the crack behind Mai, shoulder scraping rock.

The mirror-sheet reached the crack entrance and stopped—unable to compress into jagged stone.

It wavered like a liquid wall, frustrated.

Then it printed a final line across its surface:

SUBJECTS MUST BE RETAINED

Ace's voice came low and vicious. "No."

Mai panted, shaking. "It's panicking."

Ace nodded once. "Good."

They crawled through the crack until it widened enough to stand again.

Behind them, the cavern light dimmed into nothingness.

Not darkness.

Nothingness.

As if the cavern had been erased from the map.

Mai's breath shook. "It deleted the room."

Ace's eyes stayed hard. "Yes."

Mai swallowed. "So it can't afford exceptions."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Which means we can hurt it by creating them."

Mai nodded, grim. "Wounds."

Ace: "Wounds."

They moved onward, deeper through ugly stone.

But purge had changed the rules.

Now the valley didn't need to win with forms.

It could simply delete their routes until only one remained—the one that led back to filing.

So they needed something bigger than vandalism.

They needed a boundary the purge couldn't erase.

A place the valley couldn't delete without deleting itself.

Mai whispered, through clenched teeth, "A root."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "A root."

And somewhere ahead, in deeper rock, the valley's system prepared its simplest countermeasure:

If it couldn't stamp Mai...

it would stamp Ace.

Not with paperwork.

With Violet.

A contamination attempt.

If the system couldn't claim the anchor, it would try to weaponize the vessel.

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