

Chapter 37: Contamination

The crack tunnel spit them into another passage that felt older—rougher, less shaped, like a place the mountain had kept to itself. The air was colder again, thin enough that every inhale felt like a deliberate act. There were no crystals. No bowls. No still water.

Just stone and dark and the occasional drip.

Mai kept glancing back the way people glance back after something has erased a room behind them—like the mind refuses to accept that a place can be deleted.

Ace didn't look back at all.

Her whole body had tightened since the purge. Not fear-tight. Decision-tight. Like she'd accepted the valley had escalated to a level where "clever" wouldn't be enough anymore.

Mai whispered, "We need a root."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Mai swallowed. "How do we find something the purge can't erase?"

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Something the valley needs."

Mai nodded. "Core dependency."

Ace: "Yes."

They moved in silence for a while, letting the tunnel choose its own ugliness—twists, squeezes, uneven ground. If the valley wanted flat sheets and clean corridors, they would keep living in the cracks.

Then Ace slowed.

Mai felt it instantly—Ace had sensed something.

"What?" Mai whispered.

Ace didn't answer right away. She tilted her head slightly, listening to something Mai couldn't yet hear.

Then Mai heard it too.

A faint hum.

Not thread-whispering. Not paper friction.

A resonance. Low frequency.

Like a tuning fork pressed against rock.

Mai's throat tightened. "That's... Violet-adjacent."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "It's trying to touch you."

Ace's voice went low. "It's trying to contaminate me."

Mai swallowed. "If it can't lock me... it weaponizes you."

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

The hum grew stronger as they advanced—subtle, but insistent, like the tunnel itself was vibrating under their feet.

Then the air changed.

Not pressure.

Not deadness.

A faint warmth, like standing too close to a power supply.

Ace stopped dead.

Mai stopped with her.

Ahead, the tunnel opened into a chamber—small, irregular, but with something in the center that made Ace's shadow tighten reflexively.

A shard.

Not crystal. Not mineral.

A dark object embedded in the ground, protruding like a broken spear tip.

It was matte-black, but it didn't absorb light. It absorbed attention. The longer you looked, the harder it was to look away.

Mai's stomach clenched. "That's not stone."

Ace's eyes went prismatic violet. "No."

The hum came from the shard.

Mai whispered, tight, "It's a resonance coupler."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's calling Violet."

Mai's pulse hammered.

Because the shard wasn't paper. It wasn't bureaucracy.

It was something the valley had built to interface directly with Ace's internal resonance—Violet's frequency.

A direct contamination attempt: if the system could touch Violet, it could distort Ace, destabilize her, make her an uncontrolled weapon... or a doorway.

Mai's voice went low and urgent. "Don't go near it."

Ace didn't move. "It's pulling."

Mai grabbed Ace's wrist hard. "Then we don't give it range."

Ace's breathing tightened. The prismatic undertone in her eyes grew sharper.

Mai could see Violet reacting—like a storm behind glass.

Ace's voice came out rough. "It feels like home."

Mai's blood went cold. "That's a lure."

Ace's jaw clenched. "I know."

Mai swallowed and forced her voice steady. "Then noise."

Ace didn't respond.

The shard pulsed once—subtle, like a heartbeat.

Ace's shadow shifted, unconsciously leaning toward it.

Mai's stomach dropped. This wasn't paperwork logic anymore. This was resonance logic. And Violet didn't obey the same rules as the archive.

Mai stepped in front of Ace, blocking her line of sight to the shard with her body.

Ace blinked hard.

Mai's voice was low, fierce. "Look at me."

Ace's gaze snapped to Mai.

Mai repeated, slower. "Look at me."

Ace's eyes were bright and fractured. "It's singing."

Mai nodded. "Then I become the noise."

Mai began speaking—messy fragments again, but this time personal, human, unfileable:

"Your fingers—cold—my wrist—your breath—rain—Detroit—coffee—your stupid grin—"

Ace flinched—not in pain, like someone had yanked her attention sideways.

Mai kept going, voice harsh and grounded: "Sisters—green—steel—my name—your name—together—here—"

Ace's prismatic glare trembled.

The shard hummed louder, annoyed, like a radio station being jammed.

Mai leaned in closer, almost touching foreheads again. "Ace. Here."

Ace's voice came out strained. "Here."

Mai: "Together."

Ace: "Together."

The shard pulsed.

Ace's shadow surged—Violet pushing back against being denied.

Mai didn't retreat. She grabbed Ace's wrist with both hands, anchoring with sheer physicality.

"No," Mai whispered. "Not it."

Ace's teeth bared. "It wants Violet."

Mai's eyes hardened. "Then Violet stays yours."

Ace's breathing shook. "I can't—"

Mai cut her off, voice low and sharp. "You can."

Ace's eyes flickered—the real Ace, under the storm.

Mai whispered, "You already did. You shut the door."

Ace's jaw clenched hard.

The shard hummed again, and this time Mai saw it: a faint violet sheen on its surface, like it was reflecting Ace's resonance back at her.

A feedback loop.

A trap.

Mai whispered, "It's making a loop to amplify you until you break."

Ace's voice came out hoarse. "Yes."

Mai swallowed. "We break the coupler."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "How. No clean cuts."

Mai's gaze darted around the chamber—rock, damp, debris.

Then she saw it: the shard wasn't fused seamlessly. It was wedged into cracked ground, held by surrounding stone.

Not indestructible.

Just... anchored.

Mai whispered, "We don't cut it. We unseat it."

Ace blinked, focus sharpening. "Pry."

Mai nodded. "Pry. Ugly."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Okay."

Ace stepped sideways, keeping her eyes on Mai as much as possible, minimizing direct stare at the shard. Mai stayed between Ace and the object whenever she could.

Mai grabbed a long, jagged stone from the chamber edge—like a crude lever.

She jammed it into the crack beside the shard and pressed down hard.

The stone resisted.

The shard hummed louder, agitation rising, as if it didn't like being treated like hardware.

Ace grabbed another rock and hammered at the crack—not at the shard's face, but at the stone around it. Ugly impacts, breaking the surrounding "mounting" instead of the coupler itself.

The ground cracked further.

The shard pulsed.

Ace's eyes went prismatic again.

Mai snapped, "Look at me!"

Ace's gaze locked back onto Mai.

Mai pressed down with the lever rock again—harder.

Something shifted.

A faint grinding sound—stone on stone.

The shard tilted by a few degrees.

The hum wavered.

Good.

Ace hammered again, cracking more ground.

Mai pressed again.

The shard lifted—slightly—like a tooth being loosened.

And then the chamber reacted.

The rock around the shard whitened suddenly, trying to paper-seal the cracks, trying to reframe the mounting in clean planes.

Mai's stomach clenched. "It's reinforcing."

Ace's jaw clenched. "No."

Ace slammed the flat of her katana into the whitening patch—crushing it, breaking the plane before it could stabilize.

Mai kept prying.

The shard tilted more.

The hum spiked into a painful frequency.

Ace hissed, Violet flaring.

Mai gritted her teeth, voice shaking with effort. “Almost—”

Ace hammered again.

The ground cracked.

And then the shard came free.

It popped up with a harsh grinding sound, then fell onto the stone floor—no longer upright, no longer anchored.

The hum died instantly, like a power cord being yanked.

Ace staggered back a half step, breathing hard.

Her eyes remained violet, but the prismatic fracture eased.

Mai dropped the lever rock, hands shaking.

The shard lay on the ground like a dead piece of night.

Mai whispered, breathless, “Coupler unseated.”

Ace’s voice was hoarse. “Yes.”

Mai swallowed. “Now what.”

Ace stared at the shard—careful not to stare too long—and her mouth tightened.

“We don’t leave it,” Ace said.

Mai nodded. “Agreed.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “We ruin it.”

Mai’s throat tightened. “Ugly.”

Ace nodded once.

She didn’t slice it.

She picked up a rock and smashed it down on the shard—hard, brutal impact.

The shard didn’t shatter like glass.

It cracked like dense ceramic—fracturing, splintering, but resisting.

Ace hit it again.

And again.

Each impact was ugly and relentless.

Mai joined in, smashing with another rock from the side, turning the shard into jagged fragments.

With each fracture, Ace felt Violet's resonance settle further, like a hook being removed.

Finally the largest fragment split, and the hum vanished completely.

Silence.

Real silence.

Mai exhaled slowly, shaking. "It tried to weaponize you."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Yes."

Mai's eyes hardened. "So it's desperate."

Ace looked at the shattered shard fragments, then up at the tunnel beyond.

Ace's voice went low and cold. "Good."

Mai swallowed. "Because desperate systems make mistakes."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "And we exploit them."

They left the chamber fast, before the valley could rebuild another coupler.

Behind them, the shards sat inert on the stone like broken teeth.

And in the valley's invisible log—if it could still log cleanly after the wound—there would have been an entry, sharp and furious:

CONTAMINATION ATTEMPT: FAILED — COUPLER DESTROYED

Failed.

Again.

But purge had already shown its hand.

The valley didn't need finesse anymore.

So the next move would be crude and final:

Collapse the tunnels.

Erase the path.

Force them upward onto paper terrain where it could print, file, and finish the story.

And now, with the stamp broken and the coupler destroyed, Ace and Mai had only one real option:

Find the root fast.

Before the mountain itself became a form.

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