

## Chapter 38: Root

The tunnel began to change after the coupler chamber.

Not structurally—still rock, still wet, still ugly—but behaviorally. The air carried a sense of impatience now, like the valley had run out of elegant procedures and was reaching for brute force.

The ground under their boots vibrated faintly—not with hum, but with distant movement, stone shifting somewhere far away.

Mai noticed first. “It’s moving the map.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “Collapsing.”

Mai swallowed. “Yes.”

A low groan rolled through the tunnel—rock under strain.

Ace didn’t wait for a second confirmation. She grabbed Mai’s wrist and pulled her forward. “Run.”

Not panicked running. Controlled sprinting. Breath managed. Eyes wide.

They moved through twists and low squeezes, boots slipping, shoulders scraping. Behind them the groan deepened and turned into a crackling grind.

A section of tunnel somewhere in their wake gave up with a dull roar.

Dust rolled forward, cold and choking.

Mai coughed once, then forced herself to keep moving.

Ace’s voice was low and urgent. “No stopping.”

Mai nodded, throat burning.

The tunnel forked abruptly—two passages, both ugly, both narrow.

Mai froze for a fraction—no stamp pull, no overlay, just choice.

Ace’s gaze flicked left, then right.

Then she did something simple and brutal: she dropped to a knee and pressed her palm against the floor.

Mai blinked. “Ace—?”

Ace’s eyes narrowed, listening through skin to stone. Violet’s resonance didn’t surge—didn’t perform—but it tasted the vibration.

Ace’s jaw clenched. “Left.”

Mai didn’t argue. She followed.

They took the left passage. Ten meters in, the right fork behind them collapsed with a muffled roar.

Stone sealed it.

Mai's breath hitched. "Good call."

Ace didn't answer. She kept moving.

The air changed again—warmer, faintly metallic—and then a new smell slipped in, subtle but unmistakable:

Ozone.

Like electronics.

Mai's stomach tightened. "That's not cave."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "No."

They pushed forward into a wider tunnel that sloped upward slightly. The rock walls began to show something unfamiliar—veins of dark material, not mineral, but embedded structure.

Thin lines that looked like cables fused into stone.

Mai's throat tightened. "Infrastructure."

Ace nodded, voice low. "Root-adjacent."

Mai swallowed hard. "We're close."

The tunnel widened into a chamber that made both of them stop despite the collapsing threat.

It wasn't a stage.

It wasn't an authored room.

It was... wrong in a different way.

The ceiling rose high into darkness. The walls were raw rock, but threaded with those embedded lines—dark veins that converged toward the center like roots converging toward a trunk.

In the center of the chamber stood a column.

Not paper.

Not stone.

Something like petrified cable-bundle—twisted, braided, thick as a tree trunk. It rose from the floor and vanished into the ceiling, pulsing faintly with a slow, deep rhythm.

Mai's skin crawled.

Ace's shadow tightened.

Mai whispered, "Root."

Ace's voice went low. "Yes."

This wasn't a relay. Not a coupler. Not a dock.

This was the feed.

The thing the valley used to distribute its logic into terrain, into stamps, into thin strips.

A central nerve.

Mai stared at it and felt something strange—absence of overlay, absence of stamp pull—yet her body recognized the structure like a pain recognizes its source.

Ace's eyes burned violet, but not prismatic. Controlled. Focused.

Mai whispered, "If we destroy it..."

Ace didn't let her finish. "We cut the valley's hands off."

Mai swallowed. "Ugly."

Ace nodded once. "Ugly."

They approached cautiously, staying on irregular rock, avoiding smoother patches that looked like they might paper if stepped on too cleanly.

As they got closer, the column's pulse became more noticeable—not sound, but pressure. Each pulse made the embedded veins in the rock flash faintly, like the heartbeat of a system.

Mai's teeth tightened. "It's alive."

Ace's voice was low. "It's a machine pretending to be anatomy."

Mai nodded, stomach tight. "Yes."

Then the root reacted to their presence.

The pulse sped up slightly.

The embedded veins in the walls brightened.

And from the column's surface, a faint projection shimmered into existence—no longer a form, not a prompt, but something else.

A single symbol.

The trisected circle.

Mai's stomach dropped. "It recognizes."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's tagging us."

Mai whispered, "No."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "We don't negotiate."

Mai nodded, breath tight. "We strike."

Ace stepped closer and raised her katana—not to slice the column cleanly.

She brought the flat down like a hammer.

The impact rang through the chamber like hitting a massive drum.

The column didn't bleed. It reverberated.

The pulse hiccupped.

The embedded veins on the walls flickered.

Mai's eyes widened. "It felt that."

Ace hit it again.

The column shuddered.

The trisected symbol projection flickered.

Then the chamber responded with brute force.

The ceiling groaned.

Rock dust rained down.

The tunnel behind them—where they'd entered—began to crack, collapsing inward.

Mai's breath hitched. "It's sealing us in."

Ace's voice went low, savage calm. "Good."

Mai blinked. "Good?"

Ace's eyes flared violet. "No retreat. No filing. Only break."

Mai's stomach tightened, then a grim, fierce clarity settled in.

"Yes," Mai whispered. "Only break."

Ace struck the column again—harder—this time with the blade's spine and her whole body weight.

The column cracked—faintly—like a thick cable sheath splitting.

A thin line of pale fiber showed inside.

Not paper fiber.

Something more like nerve tissue made of thread.

Mai's skin crawled. "Disgusting."

Ace's mouth twitched, humorless. "Perfect."

Mai grabbed a jagged rock and slammed it into the crack, widening it. Ugly prying, no clean incision.

The column pulsed wildly now, reacting like a threatened organism.

The embedded veins in the walls brightened, and the chamber filled with a low vibration that made Mai's teeth ache.

Then the root fought back.

From the column's surface, thin pale strips erupted—not sliding out carefully, but snapping outward like exposed tendons.

Dozens.

They whipped through the air, aiming for wrists, throats, eyes.

Ace snarled, shadow surging.

Mai ducked and grabbed one strip mid-snap, wrapping it around her forearm with her sleeve and yanking it down, grinding it against rock to fray it.

Ace did the same—grabbing strips with fabric, smashing them into the column, jamming them into the growing crack. No clean cuts, just destruction by friction and force.

The strips thrashed.

The column's crack widened.

Mai slammed the rock in again and pried, widening the opening.

Inside the crack, the pale thread-nerve material pulsed in frantic rhythm.

Mai felt nausea, then anger.

"You wanted a handle?" she hissed under her breath. "Here."

She shoved her rock lever deeper and twisted hard.

The column tore—wet, fibrous, ripping.

The chamber shuddered.

The embedded veins in the walls flickered erratically like a power grid failing.

Ace's eyes went prismatic for a split second as Violet reacted to the system destabilizing—then she forced it down, controlled.

Ace shouted, low and fierce, "Break!"

Mai shoved again.

The column split further, and a surge of cold air burst out of it—like a pressure release from an internal chamber.

The trisected symbol projection shattered into static.

The strips convulsed.

For a heartbeat, the whole chamber went quiet—as if the valley’s breath caught.

Then the root pulsed one last time—violent—

and the embedded veins across the walls went dark.

Dead.

The strips dropped limp like cut tendons.

The column sagged slightly, its pulse slowing, then stuttering.

Mai’s breath caught. “It’s failing.”

Ace’s jaw clenched. “Finish it.”

Ace raised her blade and slammed it down again and again—crushing the split column, tearing the fibrous interior into pulp, turning structure into ruin.

Mai joined, smashing, prying, grinding.

Ugly, relentless.

No clean verbs.

Only break.

Finally, the column’s pulse stopped.

The embedded veins remained dark.

The chamber felt... quieter.

Not safe.

But less authored.

Less watched.

Mai sagged back, panting, hands shaking.

Ace stood over the wrecked root, breathing hard, eyes still violet but less fractured.

Mai whispered, hoarse, “We killed the feed.”

Ace nodded. “Yes.”

Mai swallowed. “So the valley can’t—”

She stopped. No assumptions. She corrected. “It loses reach.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “It loses hands.”

Mai exhaled, shaking. “Good.”

Then the chamber ceiling groaned again—rock shifting, collapse continuing. The root might be dead, but the mountain still had gravity and consequences.

Ace grabbed Mai's wrist. "Now we get out."

Mai nodded, forcing herself upright. "Yes."

They turned toward the exit tunnel—

and froze.

Because the tunnel they came through had collapsed almost completely, leaving only a narrow gap and a shower of falling debris.

Mai's heart hammered. "No exit."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Find another."

Mai scanned the chamber frantically. With the embedded veins dead, faint outlines of other passages became visible—cracks and breaks that had been hidden by the system's shaping.

A jagged fissure on the far right wall, half-covered by rubble.

Mai pointed. "There."

Ace didn't hesitate.

They ran toward it, leaving the wrecked root behind like a severed nerve.

And behind them, in whatever remained of the valley's ability to record, there was no neat log entry this time.

Just silence.

The kind of silence you get when a machine loses power mid-sentence.

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