

Chapter 39: Afterpower

The fissure Mai pointed at wasn't an exit so much as an argument with stone.

A jagged tear in the right wall, half-choked by rubble. Air moved through it—faint, cold, real, not a draft from an authored corridor. A leak.

Ace grabbed Mai's wrist and they squeezed in together, shoulders scraping rock, boots sliding on loose grit. Behind them the chamber groaned again, the ceiling deciding what it wanted to be now that the root was dead.

It chose collapse. A dull roar rolled through the rock, and dust slammed into their backs like a shove.

Mai coughed, eyes watering. "Move—"

Ace didn't let her finish. "I am."

They crawled on hands and knees through the fissure, rock biting at elbows, gravel under nails. Ugly motion, perfect for survival.

Then the fissure widened just enough to stand.

And the air hit them—cold, clean.

Mai sucked it in like it was medicine.

Ace didn't relax. "Dead feed" didn't mean "dead valley."

It meant something else: a system without distribution lines, without relays—broken, cornered.

Cornered systems still had afterpower. Residual energy in capacitors. Stored pressure in pipes.

They still spasmed.

Mai felt it first.

A faint flicker behind her eyes—not an overlay, not a stamp.

A ghost pressure, like static.

Ace saw Mai's face tighten. "What?"

Mai swallowed hard. "Afterpower."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Residual procedures."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

They moved forward into a narrow tunnel that sloped upward. The rock here looked less wet, more porous. Above, faintly, they could hear wind—real wind, not authored.

Mai's heart hammered. "Surface."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Maybe."

They climbed in silence for several minutes, boots scraping, hands bracing against walls. The tunnel bent, then bent again, then opened into a small cavity where the ceiling was low and cracked.

A fissure above—a thin line of daylight. Real.

Mai exhaled, almost laughing. “That’s—”

Ace held up a hand. “Don’t.”

Mai swallowed the word.

Because the air in the cavity... shifted.

A soft, sudden pressure, like someone opened a door behind them.

Mai turned her head slowly.

Ace turned too.

The tunnel behind them darkened—not naturally, but thickened, like shadow with intent.

And inside that thickening dark, something moved.

Not strips. Not bands. Not a form.

A figure.

Tall, narrow, made of layered pale material that didn’t flutter. It stood at the tunnel mouth like a cutout that had learned to stand upright.

Its head was featureless except for one faint symbol where a face should be—the trisected circle, ghosted like a watermark.

Mai’s blood went cold. “It still has a body.”

Ace’s eyes went prismatic violet instantly. “Afterpower.”

The figure didn’t rush them.

It didn’t need to.

It took one step forward—and the air tightened around them, not like a stamp, like an administrative hold. A presence saying stop.

Mai’s muscles tensed involuntarily.

Ace’s shadow surged.

The figure’s chest—if it could be called that—shifted, and a line of text crawled across it like stitching forming itself in real time:

RETURN

Mai’s teeth clenched. “No.”

Ace's voice went low and lethal. "No."

The figure took another step.

The text changed:

SUBJECTS OUT OF FILE

Mai's stomach turned. "It's trying to reassert."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Without feed."

Mai whispered, tight, "So this is... stored."

Ace nodded. "Residual executor."

The valley had lost its hands, so it was sending what it had already manufactured—a body with limited script. A last bureaucratic enforcement unit running on leftover charge.

The executor raised one arm.

Not a weapon.

A stamp-pad gesture.

The air in front of it shimmered, and a rectangle began to appear between it and them—like a portable filing surface.

Mai's heart hammered. "It's rebuilding a frame."

Ace's eyes burned violet. "Not today."

Mai whispered, "Ugly."

Ace nodded once. "Ugly."

Ace did not draw the blade to slice.

She drew both katanas—

and used them like crowbars.

She stepped forward fast, shadow armor tight, and slammed the flats of both blades into the forming rectangle from either side, crushing it mid-appearance.

The rectangle didn't shatter like glass. It wrinkled like laminated paper trying to hold shape.

Ace shoved harder, twisting, forcing it to fold in on itself until it became a crumpled, unusable plane.

Mai didn't stay back. She grabbed a rock and hurled it into the executor's torso.

The rock hit with a dull thud and tore a ragged dent in the layered pale material.

No blood.

Just frayed edges.

The executor didn't flinch like a person—it adjusted.

It stepped forward again, the stitched word on its chest updating:

COMPLY

Mai's jaw clenched. "No."

Ace's eyes went colder. "No."

The executor raised its arm again.

The air shimmered—

and this time, it didn't try a rectangle.

It tried a seal.

A circular stamp impression forming in the air—faint outline of the trisected circle.

Mai's stomach lurched. "It's trying to brand us directly."

Ace snarled. "Then we break the stamp."

Ace lunged—not to cut the executor cleanly, but to smash its stamping arm at the joint with the flat of her blade.

Impact.

The arm bent wrong, layers creasing, threads snapping.

The forming stamp impression flickered and destabilized.

Mai surged forward and slammed her rock into the executor's shoulder seam, widening the damage, tearing layers.

The executor staggered a half step—not from pain, but from structural failure.

It tried to step again.

Ace hit it again—flat strike, brutal, hammering its torso.

Mai grabbed the executor's bent arm with her sleeve and yanked, dragging it against the cave wall, abrading it until the stitched letters on its chest began to blur.

The executor's head turned slightly toward Mai.

The symbol-face flickered.

Ace saw that and moved instantly between them.

"No," Ace growled, voice low and dangerous.

The executor paused—like it had to process that.

Then it changed tactics.

Its torso split at a seam, and thin strips erupted outward again—tendons trying to wrap, restrain, retain.

But the strips were weaker now—afterpower, not full power. Ace and Mai were faster.

Ace caught two strips with her blade flats and slammed them into the floor, grinding grit into them.

Mai grabbed one strip and wrapped it around a rock, then smashed the rock into the wall repeatedly until the strip shredded into pulp.

The executor's movements became jerky. Its stitched chest text stuttered:

CO...MP...LY

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "It's glitching."

Mai panted. "Finish."

Ace nodded once.

She stepped close and slammed both blade flats into the executor's torso from either side, crushing inward.

Not slicing, crushing.

The layered material folded, buckled, caved.

Mai grabbed a rock and hammered at the folded mass, driving it down, breaking seams, turning the executor into a heap of frayed layers.

The symbol-face flickered wildly.

The stitched text spasmed:

RET...UR...N

Then broke into unreadable thread.

The heap twitched once and went still.

Silence.

Real silence.

Mai stood over it, shaking, breath ragged. "Is it—"

Ace answered immediately. "Dead."

Mai swallowed hard. "Afterpower executor down."

Ace nodded, eyes still violet but steady.

Mai glanced up at the fissure line above—the daylight crack.

Ace followed her gaze.

Ace’s jaw clenched. “We leave now.”

Mai nodded, still shaking. “Yes.”

They climbed—hands and feet finding purchase in rough stone, hauling themselves up toward the thin line of daylight.

Above, the wind sounded real.

Below, the heap of pale layers lay inert—an enforcement unit that had run out of charge.

As they climbed, Mai dared one quick look back.

The tunnel behind them remained dark, but it didn’t thicken.

No new figure.

No stitched words.

Just stone.

Mai exhaled hard. “We did it.”

Ace didn’t celebrate. She didn’t let the sentence become a trophy.

She just said, low, grounded:

“Out.”

They reached the fissure opening and pulled themselves through.

Cold air hit them in the face—open, wild, honest. The sky above was overcast, but it was sky, not a ceiling.

They were back on the island’s surface—higher up now, near a slope of black rock and sparse scrub.

Mai stood, shaking, and for the first time in a long time she felt no overlay behind her eyes. No pull. No stamp.

Ace stood beside her, two blades on her back, violet eyes scanning the horizon.

Behind them, the fissure opening looked like an ordinary crack in rock—not a door, not a form, just geology.

Mai whispered, voice hoarse, “The valley still exists.”

Ace nodded. “Yes.”

Mai swallowed. “But it’s... crippled.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “Wounded.”

Mai's mouth twitched grimly. "And angry."

Ace's shadow tightened slightly. "Good."

Mai blinked at her. "Good?"

Ace's voice was low and absolute. "Angry makes mistakes."

Mai exhaled, a tired, fierce little laugh. "Yes."

They didn't linger.

They began moving across the slope, away from the fissure, away from any place the valley could plausibly claim as a mouth.

And behind them, deep in the rock, whatever remained of the system was quiet.

Not gone.

But forced—finally—to live with damage it couldn't file away.

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