

Chapter 35: The Wound

They stayed on the ground for a while after that—not sleeping, not resting in any kind of comfort, just existing in the aftermath like two survivors in the smoke-line of a blast.

Mai's hands were locked in Ace's jacket for longer than her pride wanted to admit. Her breathing came in uneven bursts. No overlay flickers. No stamped prompts. Just raw sensory data: cold stone under knees, damp in hair, Ace's heartbeat too fast but steady.

Ace kept one arm around Mai and the other braced on the ground like she was ready to fight gravity itself if it tried to pull Mai away.

The cavity ahead of them sat open in the rock like a torn seam—an absence that felt wrong in the way a missing tooth feels wrong. Not an entrance, not a tunnel—a gap in the valley's logic.

Mai stared at it and whispered, hoarse, "That's... not supposed to exist."

Ace's voice was low. "No."

Mai swallowed hard. "It's a wound."

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

The cavity pulsed faintly, not with light, but with tension. Like the world was trying to decide what that space should be and failing.

Mai eased her grip on Ace's jacket and sat back on her heels. Her eyes looked normal again—silver focus, human micro-shakes. No partitioned cadence.

Ace watched her like a guard dog who'd just bitten through a leash.

Mai's voice was raw. "Do you feel anything?"

Ace didn't answer immediately. She closed her eyes for a heartbeat, listening inward.

Violet was still there—coiled, angry, but not surging. The resonance had snapped into definition and then receded, like an animal that had lunged and now sat back with teeth bared.

Ace opened her eyes. "No pull."

Mai exhaled shakily. "No stamp."

Ace nodded. "It's gone."

Mai's shoulders trembled once—relief, then anger.

"Good," Mai whispered, and it sounded like she meant it as a threat.

Ace's mouth twitched, grim approval.

They looked at the cavity again.

The edges weren't whitened—no paper fibers, no stitched text, just torn rock, raw darkness, and an uneasy shimmer that made the air look slightly wrong, as if the valley's rendering engine had

dropped frames.

Mai whispered, "If we go in..."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It could be core."

Mai nodded. "Or a trap."

Ace: "Yes."

Mai's eyes hardened. "But it's open because we broke it."

Ace's gaze stayed fixed. "So we decide."

Mai swallowed. "We decide."

Ace's hand found Mai's wrist again. Firm contact. Anchor without needing a rope.

"Together," Ace said quietly.

Mai answered, equally quiet. "Together."

They moved toward the cavity.

Not stepping into it yet—hovering at the edge like you hover near a cliff, feeling the air change. The temperature dropped by a degree or two. The sound of dripping water became distant, muffled, like the cavity didn't want to carry ordinary acoustics.

Mai lifted a hand toward the edge, then stopped.

Ace watched her. "No hands?"

Mai's mouth tightened. "Hands are fine. Clean meaning is not."

Ace nodded.

Mai picked up a loose pebble and tossed it into the cavity.

It didn't hit anything.

No clack.

No bounce.

Just... vanished into a silence that wasn't empty, just unresponsive.

Mai's stomach tightened. "No floor."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Or it's deep."

Mai swallowed and tossed another pebble.

Same result.

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's not a normal space."

Mai nodded. "It's a null."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "A hole in the paperwork."

Mai gave a short, cracked laugh. "Yes."

The cavity pulsed faintly, and for a split second Mai's skin crawled as if something on the other side noticed they were looking.

Ace felt it too—Violet stirring, not in anger this time, but in alertness.

Mai whispered, "Something is still alive in there."

Ace's voice went low. "The part that failed."

Mai nodded slowly. "The exception."

Ace's mouth tightened. "Uncaught."

Mai exhaled. "We can use that."

Ace glanced at her. "How."

Mai's eyes stayed on the cavity. "A wound is unstable. It leaks."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "So we bleed it."

Mai nodded once. "Yes."

Ace didn't like metaphors today, but this one fit too well to refuse.

Mai reached into her pack and pulled out the torn, taped envelope—Marquez's notes. She didn't open it or read it.

She held it up, fingers tight. "This is a record. A failed record. It's poison to clean filing."

Ace understood instantly.

Mai continued, voice low. "If we throw it in—"

Ace's jaw clenched. "We lose evidence."

Mai nodded. "Yes."

Ace's eyes hardened. "But we might gain collapse."

Mai swallowed. "Exactly."

Ace stared at the envelope.

Mai could see the conflict flicker in her eyes. Evidence meant control. Evidence meant future. But the valley wanted them to become evidence. It wanted them documented.

Throwing the envelope in was an insult.

A refusal of archiving.

Ace's voice came low. "We keep the map."

Mai blinked.

Ace pointed with two fingers. "Your torn page. The relay map. We can rebuild it in memory. But the envelope—"

Mai understood. "The envelope is the valley's language."

Ace nodded. "So we poison the wound with it."

Mai's throat tightened. "Okay."

Ace's hand tightened briefly on Mai's wrist—consent, not permission.

Mai raised the envelope and whispered, not to the valley, but to herself:

"Not yours."

Then she threw it into the cavity.

The envelope slid in without resistance and vanished into the wrong darkness.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the cavity pulsed—hard.

The edges shimmered violently, like the null space had been disrupted by foreign metadata.

A faint whispering sound rose—paper-thread friction, distant and angry.

Ace's eyes went prismatic violet.

Mai's stomach clenched.

The cavity reacted.

Not by spitting the envelope back out.

By trying to process it.

The shimmer intensified.

And for the first time since internal closure failed, a line of text appeared—faint, unstable—hovering in the cavity's darkness like a broken subtitle:

INVALID RECORD

Mai's breath caught.

Ace's voice was low. "Good."

The text flickered, then changed:

CANNOT FILE

Mai's mouth twitched, grim satisfaction. "Yes."

The cavity pulsed again, more violent. The rock edges trembled slightly.

The glitch-text stuttered, breaking into fragments:

ERROR... ERROR...

Ace's shadow surged, not outward, but tight around her legs—ready to brace if the cave collapsed.

Mai's heart hammered. "It's destabilizing."

Ace's jaw clenched. "We keep going."

Mai blinked. "Into it?"

Ace nodded once. "Before it heals."

Mai swallowed hard. No stamp. No pull. But the cavity was still wrong, still hungry.

Mai stepped closer, extending her foot cautiously over the threshold.

No resistance.

No floor.

Just air that felt too cold.

She pulled back instantly, shaking.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It's like stepping into a missing line."

Mai nodded, breath ragged. "Yes."

Ace's voice went low. "Then we don't step. We climb."

Mai blinked.

Ace pointed to the cavity edge—jagged rock. "Anchor points. We go down the edges. We keep contact with real stone."

Mai exhaled shakily. "Okay."

Ace sheathed one blade, kept the other strapped, and moved first—hands on rock, feet finding purchase. She began to descend along the cavity's jagged rim like climbing into a broken well.

Mai followed, careful, breath controlled, fingers scraping rock, refusing to look into the center.

The cavity's shimmer kept pulsing, glitch-text flickering in the darkness below:

INVALID... CANNOT... ERROR...

It felt like the valley was choking on the envelope—trying to treat it like data and failing because it

wasn't clean.

Good.

They descended until the rock rim grew steeper, then reached a ledge where the cavity widened.

Down here, the air was colder. The sound of dripping water was gone completely. Only that faint paper-thread whisper remained, like distant teeth.

Mai looked at Ace, eyes hard. "We're inside the wound."

Ace nodded, voice low. "Yes."

Mai swallowed. "If it collapses—"

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "We climb."

Mai nodded. "Together."

Ace's hand found Mai's wrist again, a brief squeeze. "Together."

Below them, the darkness shimmered more violently, and for a moment the cavity's glitch-text flashed one last line, clearer than the others:

RECORD REJECTED

Mai's breath caught. "It rejected."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Good."

Then the line shattered into static and vanished.

And the cavity pulsed once—huge—

as if the valley, finally forced to admit it couldn't file the record, switched strategies again.

Not filing.

Not stamping.

Not retaining.

Something older.

Something blunt.

A purge.

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