

Chapter 15 — Clearance Upgraded

They left the underbelly the way you leave a crime scene when the crime is still happening somewhere else.

Quiet. Controlled. Nobody ran. Nobody looked back like a horror movie extra trying to make the audience feel something.

Badger did look back.

But only because Badger's nervous system had been wired by God as a live-commentary track.

Heavenly elbowed him lightly and Badger snapped forward again like a chastised dog.

The maintenance corridor speaker clicked once.

Static didn't follow.

No VHS hiss. No analog narrator voice.

Just a clean, almost normal human tone—female, calm, professional.

"Mai, your clearance has been upgraded."

Mai's blood went cold in a new way.

Not panic.

Violation.

Jello froze mid-step. His laptop chimed.

The sound was small, harmless—like an email notification.

It should not have made everyone in the group tense like a wire.

Jello swallowed and angled the screen toward Mai.

"Uh," he said. "It... it actually did it."

On the profile page—the fake identity they'd just created as a honeypot—fields were populating by themselves.

Name. Photo. Department. Assignment.

And then the line that made the air change:

CLEARANCE: O5

Bright's mouth tightened into something that wasn't a smile and wasn't a grimace.

It was the expression of a man watching reality break rules he personally helped write.

"Well," he said softly. "That's... ambitious."

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright. "He just crowned her."

Ace's katanas hummed, and Mai felt rather than saw the shift in Ace—rage and protectiveness tightening like a belt around her ribs.

"He's trying to make you O5," Ace said quietly.

Mai's voice came out flat. "He's trying to make systems treat me like O5."

Bright nodded once. "Which is worse."

Badger's eyes were wide. "Does this mean Mai can fire me?"

Mai didn't look at him. "Yes."

Badger's expression softened into genuine awe. "Finally."

Heavenly muttered, "You're incurable."

Grouse added, "Terminal."

Mai didn't have time to enjoy the banter. She was too busy tasting the consequences.

If the spoofed identity had been "upgraded" inside a channel with real signatures... then the copycat wasn't just piggybacking.

He was injecting.

He was altering.

He was writing in places he shouldn't be able to see.

Bright spoke low, eyes fixed on Jello's screen. "Tell me the auth logs."

Jello's fingers moved automatically, but his face was tight. "It's messy. Like someone shoved a hand into the process and smeared the fingerprints."

Bright's jaw clenched. "Find the origin."

Jello swallowed. "It came from the root node."

Shammy's voice went quiet. "Which means the root node can now sign O5-level fields."

Mai felt her stomach tighten. "So he can issue orders."

Bright nodded, voice cold. "And someone out there might obey them."

Badger whispered, "That's... that's like a fake president."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger whispered, "Sorry. It's just— that's a lot of power for a guy with a Sharpie bat."

Mai kept moving, because standing still in a place where speakers could speak your name felt like inviting it to do it again.

They climbed a service stairwell, emerged into a fluorescent-lit staff corridor that smelled like disinfectant and stale coffee, then out into the noise of the airport proper—baggage carts, rolling luggage, people who had no idea a memetic broadcast engine was trying to become god in the basement.

Shammy's eyes scanned the crowd. "Cameras everywhere."

Mai nodded. "And now he can label any one of us as 'authorized' or 'unauthorized' at will."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Which is why we stop letting him define the game."

Badger's comms crackled from the flank car, because of course he couldn't stay quiet even when he was physically present.

"So... we're doing the throne trap, right? The fake O5 room?"

Bright glanced at him. "Yes."

Badger's grin returned. "Can we make it look like a Bond villain lair."

Mai: "No."

Badger: "Can we make it look like a dentist's office."

Mai: "Also no."

Badger sighed. "You guys hate set design."

Shammy's voice was low and amused. "We hate you."

Badger smiled like that was affection. "I know."

They reached the vehicles.

Mai slid into the driver's seat again because control felt like a requirement now, not a preference.

Bright took passenger. Shammy and Ace in back. Jello wedged in with his laptop, because his spine had effectively become part of the network.

Theta-24 regrouped in the other vehicles. Heavenly's voice came over comms, tight.

"Two cars behind us. Unmarked. They've been there since the airport exit."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Surveillance."

Bright's voice was calm. "Or bait."

Shammy's tone sharpened. "Or the extraction team."

Mai's grip tightened. "We don't lead them to the next site."

Bright nodded. "Agreed."

Ace's voice from the back was quiet. "We cut them off."

Badger's comms chirped immediately. "We could brake-check them."

Heavenly: "No."

Badger: "Okay. We could... legally merge aggressively."

Grouse: "Still no."

Badger: "I'm brainstorming!"

Mai ignored them and did the thing she always did: turned the chaos into geometry.

"We run a loop," Mai said. "We see if they follow pattern or destination."

Bright nodded. "And we clean our footprint."

Jello swallowed. "We should assume the root can see our comms now."

Bright's eyes sharpened. "Which means we go dark."

Badger's comms instantly: "Oh no."

Heavenly: "Yes."

Badger: "But how will we communicate?"

Heavenly: "With silence."

Badger: "That's... evil."

Mai cut in, voice flat. "Radio discipline. Now."

A chorus of small acknowledgments. Then quiet.

Mai drove.

A loop around a service road, then onto a multi-lane artery, then off again. She made it look like the kind of movement that belonged to nobody in particular.

The two unmarked cars stayed behind them.

Always two.

Always the same distance.

Like they didn't need line-of-sight.

Like they just needed to be near enough for something else to do the watching.

Shammy stared out the rear window, eyes storm-bright. "They're too steady."

Ace's voice was quiet. "They're not driving like people."

Bright's jaw tightened. "They're driving like a script."

Mai's mind clicked. "He's running them as devices."

Bright nodded. "A mobile lens."

Badger's voice—despite radio discipline—slipped out in a whisper on the internal car channel. "So... the cars are haunted."

Heavenly's response came sharp. "Badger."

Badger whispered, "Sorry. It was accurate."

Mai didn't correct him, because he wasn't wrong.

Jello's laptop pinged again.

Mai's stomach tightened. "No."

Jello's face drained. "It... it posted a new instruction."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Read it."

Jello hesitated, then turned the screen toward them.

A single line, clean and sterile:

O5 DIRECTIVE: TRANSFER THETA-24 TO CUSTODY.

Under it, a time stamp.

Under it, a location.

Mai's blood went cold because she recognized the place.

A real Foundation rendezvous point. An actual drop site that existed in their world. A location with the kind of quiet infrastructure that made operations disappear.

Bright's voice was ice. "He just issued an O5 directive to a real site."

Shammy's fingers flexed. The air pressure in the car tightened. "So someone might show up."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "To take Theta-24."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Or to take us."

Badger's voice from the other vehicle came through, too loud for comfort. "Hey. Guys. My phone just got a text."

Heavenly snapped, "Badger!"

Badger's voice lowered. "It's from... it says 'O5.' It says to go to a meeting point. It has a map."

Silence.

Mai felt the world tilt.

Because if Badger's personal phone was receiving directives, then the root node wasn't just inside Foundation channels.

It was reaching into civilian infrastructure too.

Bright's voice went low. "That's not a spoof anymore."

Jello swallowed. "It's a mass notification system."

Shammy's eyes went storm-white. "He's building a cult of compliance."

Ace's voice was quiet, lethal. "He's building an army."

Mai's mind stayed cold. "Then we cut the army at the mouth."

Bright looked at her. "We don't have root access."

Mai nodded. "No. But we have something better."

Bright's smile was thin. "Your new clearance."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "He upgraded me to O5."

Bright nodded once. "So you can issue orders back."

Mai felt the shape of it: the parasite had given her a crown because it wanted to wear her like a mask.

So she would use the crown like a hook.

Mai spoke carefully, because words were now ammunition.

"Jello," Mai said. "Can we send a directive from my profile?"

Jello's hands hovered. "Maybe. But if we do, he'll see it. He might... he might respond."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Good. Let him respond."

Ace's voice was soft. "We bait the bait."

Shammy's grin sharpened. "We build the throne."

Badger's comms crackled, excited again despite the danger. "Is this where we become the villainous bureaucracy?"

Heavenly: "Stop talking."

Badger: "Okay!"

Mai took a breath.

Then she did something she hated.

She embraced the mask.

"Jello," Mai said. "Draft it."

Jello swallowed. "What do you want it to say."

Mai's voice was flat, lethal, and utterly administrative.

"O5 DIRECTIVE: ALL UNITS DISREGARD O5-LOOK. O5-LOOK IS A HOSTILE MEMETIC VECTOR. DO NOT COMPLY. REPORT ALL CONTACT."

Bright's eyebrows lifted behind his sunglasses. "That's... bold."

Mai didn't blink. "We need bold."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "It will make him angry."

Mai nodded. "Good."

Shammy's smile was feral. "Let him rage."

Badger's comms chirped, unable to help himself. "Mai just fired the fake O5."

Heavenly: "Badger."

Badger: "Sorry."

Jello's fingers moved. He hesitated once, then hit send.

For half a second, nothing happened.

Then his screen flickered.

The text line appeared in the channel.

Signed.

Stamped.

O5

Mai's stomach tightened.

Bright exhaled once, sharp. "We just spoke as the system."

Shammy whispered, delighted, "Ohhh."

Ace's voice was quiet. "Now he answers."

And he did.

Immediately.

Every screen in the vehicles—Jello's laptop, Bright's phone, Badger's phone in the other car—lit at the same time with one word.

A word that wasn't bureaucratic.

A word that was personal.

TRAITOR

Mai's blood went cold.

Bright's smile died.

Shammy's eyes went storm-white.

Ace's voice was low and lethal. "He's escalating."

Jello swallowed. "He just... changed the label on you."

Mai's eyes snapped to Jello. "What."

Jello's face was pale. "Your clearance. He didn't just upgrade it. He... he modified the profile status."

Mai stared at the screen.

Under her name, where "ACTIVE" should have been, a new status blinked in red:

O5 — COMPROMISED

Bright's voice was ice. "He's making you the scapegoat."

Mai's jaw clenched. "He's setting me up as the anomaly O5."

Ace's gaze locked on Mai, fierce. "Then we don't let him isolate you."

Mai didn't answer, because her throat had gone tight. Not fear. Not sadness.

A clean, ugly anger.

Because the copycat had just done the one thing Mai hated more than violence:

It had tried to rewrite her identity into a label.

Bright's voice was quiet now. "Okay. Throne trap just became mandatory."

Shammy's grin sharpened. "We build it fast."

Badger's comms crackled, excited and terrified. "Do we... do we get to decorate."

Mai: "No."

Badger: "Okay."

Mai's eyes stayed forward.

"Next move," she said. "We cut the tail. Then we vanish."

Bright nodded. "Then we build the throne."

Ace's katanas hummed softly behind her, like a promise.

And in the rearview mirror, the two unmarked cars stayed perfectly aligned.

Always two.

Always the same distance.

Like they were waiting for the moment the script told them to move.—

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