

Chapter 17 — Kneel

The gate arm lifted like an obedient limb.

Mai didn't touch a button.

Nobody swiped a badge.

It just rose, slow and welcoming, and the maintenance yard beyond lit up in a clean sequence—white floodlights snapping on one after another like a runway preparing for a landing.

Then the arm dropped behind them with a heavy mechanical clunk that felt like a verdict.

Badger's SUV cleared the gate a second before it fell, tires squealing slightly.

His voice came over comms, high with adrenaline and offense. "OH GREAT. WE'RE IN A COMPOUND."

Heavenly snapped, "Quiet."

Badger whispered, "Sorry. I'm quiet-compounding."

Mai's SUV rolled deeper into the yard.

Concrete. Chain link. Stacks of pallets. Tool sheds. An office trailer. Maintenance vehicles sleeping in neat lines.

It was the kind of place nobody cared about until they needed it.

Which made it perfect for someone who cared about it too much.

A loudspeaker mounted on a pole crackled once.

Then a calm female voice—clean, professional, almost soothing—filled the yard.

"O5 arrival confirmed. Commence extraction."

Mai's stomach turned.

Not because she believed it.

Because she could already feel how easily someone else would.

Jello's laptop chimed a violent tone. "He's pushing it into municipal. If any responding units are close, they'll see the alert. They'll think—"

Bright finished, cold. "They'll think O5 is here, and they're late."

Shammy's eyes went storm-white. "He's calling the dogs."

Ace's voice was quiet, lethal. "Then we don't let the dogs bite."

Mai's gaze snapped to the perimeter.

Chain link fences with razor wire. A single gate they'd just entered. Another smaller service exit across the yard... closed, padlocked.

A yard designed to keep people out.

Now keeping them in.

Bright's phone screen lit again.

KNEEL

Mai's jaw tightened. "He wants a ritual."

Bright's voice was thin. "He wants a frame where the mighty obey."

Badger's voice whispered over comms, almost sincerely terrified: "I am not kneeling to a freeway sign, I just want that on record."

Heavenly didn't answer. He didn't have to.

Grouse muttered, "Nobody's kneeling."

Shammy's fingers flexed. The air pressure inside the vehicle rose like a storm trying to stand up in a chair. "Let me blow the gate."

Mai's voice cut through it. "Not yet."

Shammy's jaw clenched. "Why not now."

Mai's eyes stayed forward. "Because he wants violence in a closed yard. He wants fireworks. He wants the clip."

Shammy exhaled, frustrated. "Boring."

Mai nodded once. "Boring."

Bright's voice dropped. "He's going to escalate if we don't obey."

Mai didn't blink. "Let him."

They rolled to a slow stop near the centerline of the yard, far from cover on purpose.

Bright glanced at her. "That's bold."

Mai replied without looking at him. "It's bait."

Ace shifted behind her, small and contained, but the hum of her katanas deepened like a predator's breath.

Jello's voice went tight. "I'm seeing... I'm seeing something on the cameras."

Mai's eyes flicked up.

Poles around the yard had old CCTV units—industrial, boring, municipal. Most were fixed, ignored.

Now every one of them was turning.

Slowly.

Synchronizing.

Like sunflowers tracking a sun that had decided to be malevolent.

The red LEDs blinked.

Then turned green.

Badger whispered, "We are being filmed by a forest."

Heavenly hissed, "Stop."

Badger whispered, "Sorry."

The loudspeaker clicked again.

"O5, please exit the vehicle."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Oh, it's polite now."

Ace's voice was soft, sharp. "It wants Mai outside. In the open."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "It wants an extraction shot."

Shammy murmured, angry. "I want to bite it."

Bright's tone turned clinical. "If you do, it wins. It becomes 'O5 attacked municipal infrastructure.' It becomes 'containment justified.'"

Mai's pulse stayed cold. "We don't give it justification. We give it humiliation."

Bright's mouth twitched. "I like that."

Jello swallowed. "He can't physically pull us out."

Mai looked at the yard. "He doesn't need to."

Bright's jaw tightened. "He just needs to bring someone who will."

As if on cue, the far end of the yard echoed with approaching engines.

Not the unmarked cars this time.

Bigger.

Heavier.

A pair of black SUVs with government plates rolled up outside the fence line, stopping beyond the gate they'd entered.

Lights off. No sirens.

Procedure.

A man stepped out of the lead SUV. Tall. Helmet. Tactical vest. The silhouette of someone trained to

look like authority.

He raised a bullhorn.

The voice that came out was real, human, irritated.

“This is a restricted facility,” the man barked. “Identify yourself and exit the vehicle.”

Mai’s blood went colder.

Real units.

Not municipal cops.

Not airport security.

Foundation-adjacent or federal black bag—hard to tell at distance, but the posture screamed I have permission to be here.

Bright’s mouth tightened. “He got someone.”

Shammy’s eyes narrowed. “Or he got them to come.”

Ace’s voice was quiet. “This is the collision.”

Badger’s comms crackled, barely restrained panic. “Those guys look like they eat paperwork and shoot people.”

Heavenly’s voice came sharp. “Eyes up. No panic.”

Badger whispered, “That was not a panic. That was an observation.”

The bullhorn voice continued. “Exit the vehicle. Now.”

The yard loudspeaker chimed in over him like a second narrator.

“O5, comply.”

Bright’s laugh was short and vicious. “Two narrators. Great. It’s a duet.”

Mai’s mind snapped into place: the man with the bullhorn thought he was responding to a legitimate alert. If Mai stepped out, it became a custody event. If she didn’t, it became a standoff. Either way, cameras saw “O5 refusal.”

And if the man decided she was a threat—

Someone would fire.

And the copycat would get exactly what he wanted: violence that looked justified.

Mai glanced at Bright.

Bright understood. His head dipped once.

Mai looked at Ace in the rearview mirror.

Ace's gaze met hers.

A silent conversation in a fraction of a second:

If this goes wrong, I cut everything.

Mai's chest tightened.

She didn't let the emotion show. She couldn't. Not here.

"Badger," Mai said into comms.

Badger perked up instantly. "Yes?"

Mai's voice was flat. "You're up."

Heavenly's voice snapped. "No."

Mai ignored him. "Badger. You're going to step out. Hands up. Calm. Friendly. Boring."

Badger's voice wobbled. "Wait, me?"

Mai: "Yes."

Badger: "Why me?"

Mai's voice didn't change. "Because you look like an idiot."

Badger paused.

Then, with profound dignity: "Correct."

Heavenly's voice was pure murder. "I hate this."

Badger whispered, "Love you too."

Mai continued. "You're going to tell them there is no O5 here. Tell them the alert is compromised. Tell them to verify through secondary channels."

Badger inhaled. "And if they shoot me."

Mai's voice went cold. "They won't. You will be boring."

Badger's breath came out in a nervous laugh. "That's... that's the nicest insult I've ever gotten."

Bright murmured, "Don't die. It'll ruin the bit."

Badger replied, deadpan, "Wow. Comforting."

Heavenly's voice came sharp. "Badger. If anything goes wrong, you drop."

Badger swallowed. "Copy."

The Theta-24 SUV door opened.

Badger stepped out into the floodlit yard like a man walking onto a stage he'd never asked for.

Hands up. Slow. Calm.

He looked toward the bullhorn man outside the fence.

"Hi!" Badger called, voice weirdly cheerful. "Hello! Great to see you! There is no O5 here!"

The bullhorn man stiffened. "Who the hell are you?"

Badger nodded sympathetically. "Completely fair question. I am with a special unit that is currently in an administrative dispute with... everything."

Heavenly whispered into comms, "Oh my God."

Badger continued, hands still up. "You received a compromised alert. It's a hostile spoof. Please verify through secondary channels before you do anything that becomes a headline."

The bullhorn man hesitated.

Just a fraction.

Mai felt it: doubt.

Then the yard loudspeaker snapped, sharper now, less polite.

"SHOOT HIM."

Badger froze.

The bullhorn man froze too.

Because the command didn't come from him.

It came from the yard.

From infrastructure.

And trained men noticed when orders came from the ceiling.

The bullhorn man barked, furious, "Who said that."

The yard speaker answered instantly, smug:

"O5."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Oh you piece of—"

Mai's eyes narrowed.

The bullhorn man's posture shifted. His free hand moved toward his radio.

He was about to call it in.

About to escalate.

Badger's voice cracked slightly, still hands up. "That's not O5. That's... a speaker."

The bullhorn man's gaze flicked toward the yard poles, the green CCTV lights, the too-perfect sequencing.

He hesitated again.

Then his voice came through the bullhorn, lower, more cautious.

"Unit, hold. Verify the source."

Mai felt a tiny, dangerous breath of relief.

They'd bought seconds.

Now they had to use them.

"Jello," Mai said quietly. "Can you kill the green lights?"

Jello's hands shook. "I can jam the cameras, but—"

Bright cut in. "Do it."

Jello swallowed and hit a key combination like he was detonating something.

Static surged in the air—not audible, but visible in the way the CCTV lights flickered. Green blinked to red, then to dead. One by one, cameras stuttered like they were losing the will to exist.

The yard loudspeaker screamed—actual digital distortion this time, the voice tearing.

"NO—"

Shammy smiled, feral. "He hates it."

Mai's eyes stayed hard. "Good."

But the scream cut off.

And in the sudden quiet, the unmarked cars appeared at the gate.

One on each side.

Like they had teleported.

Their engines idled. Doors opened.

And from each vehicle stepped a figure in tactical black—faces obscured, posture too smooth.

They moved like the earlier "Foundation" knock team.

Not human.

Not fully.

They raised weapons—not guns, not quite—devices with boxy shapes and cables.

And the yard speaker, now silent, was replaced by a new sound.

A low-frequency hum.

Like air itself being compressed into a weapon.

Bright's voice went ice. "That's not law enforcement."

Shammy's eyes went storm-white. "That's extraction."

Ace's katanas flared emerald in the back seat—quiet, contained, but ready.

Mai's voice went razor-cold.

"Everyone," she said. "This is the point where we stop being boring."

Badger, still outside, whispered into comms, terrified but trying to be brave: "Are we allowed to be spicy now?"

Heavenly's voice was sharp. "Get down."

Badger dropped flat on the concrete like he'd been unplugged.

And the two black-clad figures at the gate raised their devices.

The hum intensified.

The air in the yard bent.

And Mai felt, for the first time, the sensation of something trying to lift her name out of her body.

Like "O5" was being used as a handle.

Hm... eteenpäin siis!—

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