

Chapter 18 — Handle

The hum peaked.

Not as a sound, exactly—more like a pressure that made the yard feel owned for a second. The kind of ownership that isn't legal. The kind that lives in nerves.

Every SUV in the yard clicked.

Locks disengaged.

Doors unlocked by themselves.

Hazard lights began flashing in perfect synchronization—orange pulses reflecting off concrete, chain link, windshields. A metronome for panic. A countdown that didn't need numbers.

Bright's phone lit up.

One line, clean as a threat printed on stationery:

KNEEL, OR I TAKE HER.

Mai didn't move.

She felt it, though—the sensation of being grabbed by a word.

Not her arm.

Not her throat.

Her designation.

Like "O5" had become a handle bolted to her spine.

Shammy's breath hitched once—barely—and the air in the vehicle thickened like the car was being submerged in a storm cloud.

Ace's katanas flared emerald, just enough to paint the interior with sick green light. The blades didn't scream. They hummed—predatory, impatient.

Jello's hands hovered over his laptop like he was afraid to touch reality wrong.

Badger, face-down on the concrete outside, whispered into comms like a man praying under gunfire:

"Okay. I would like to formally unsubscribe."

Heavenly's voice snapped back, calm and lethal. "Stay down."

Badger: "I am down. I'm so down I'm emotionally down."

Grouse muttered, "Shut up."

Badger: "Copy."

Outside the fence, the bullhorn man barked at his unit, confused and angry now.

“Hold! Nobody fires unless I say—”

His voice cut off as one of the two black-clad figures at the gate lifted its boxy device and the hum shifted frequency.

The bullhorn man flinched. Not from fear—his body just recognized something that wasn’t a gun but wanted to be one.

Mai’s mind did the math instantly.

Those aren’t rifles.

Those are fields.

Extraction tools.

Something designed to take a target without needing a clean shot.

To make the body comply even if the mind refuses.

Bright’s voice was ice, low and controlled. “Those devices are tuned to you.”

Mai didn’t blink. “To my badge.”

Bright’s mouth tightened. “To your label.”

Ace’s voice came quiet, dangerous. “To the handle.”

Shammy’s eyes went storm-white. “They’re going to pull her out.”

Mai watched the figures at the gate.

They moved like they were running a script: two operators, mirrored positions, devices raised, hum synchronized. A controlled corridor of pressure aimed into the yard like a net.

And the hazards kept flashing—frame, frame, frame—like the world was insisting this moment had to be recorded.

Mai’s voice went flat.

“Spicy.”

Shammy’s mouth twitched—relief and hunger. “Spicy.”

Bright’s hand went up. “No chaos. Controlled spicy.”

Badger whispered, from the ground, “Controlled spicy is my favorite kind of spicy.”

Heavenly: “Badger.”

Badger: “Sorry.”

Mai’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel once—then she let go.

She didn’t need the wheel right now.

She needed the room.

“Jello,” Mai said. “Kill the hazards.”

Jello blinked. “I— those are vehicle systems—”

Bright cut in, sharp. “He doesn’t mean the lights.”

Jello swallowed. “Oh.”

Mai’s eyes stayed forward. “Kill the sync. Make it messy.”

Jello’s fingers flew. He jammed, spoofed, flooded whatever comm layer the vehicles were obeying.

The hazard lights stuttered.

Half the convoy kept pulsing, half dropped out, two went into a weird irregular blink like dying fireflies.

The yard stopped looking like a clean stage.

It looked like a malfunction.

The kind of malfunction people didn’t watch twice.

Shammy smiled, feral. “Ugly.”

Mai: “Ugly.”

The black-clad figures didn’t react emotionally, but their devices adjusted—hum pitch shifting as they recalibrated.

The “handle” on Mai’s spine tightened.

For the first time, pain blossomed behind her eyes—not physical pain, not exactly.

More like the sensation of being reassigned.

Like a form in her head was being stamped with a new owner.

Bright’s jaw clenched. “They’re pulling.”

Mai’s voice stayed cold. “Then we cut the rope.”

Ace moved.

Not out of the car door—because that was part of the trap.

She did something smarter.

She slid forward between the seats like a blade itself, small enough to move through the cramped interior without losing speed. Her hand landed on Mai’s shoulder—anchor touch again, steady, human.

Ace’s voice was a whisper in Mai’s ear. “Hold.”

Mai exhaled through her nose. "Holding."

And then Ace's other hand reached past Mai, and she opened the glovebox.

Bright blinked. "What are you—"

Ace pulled out something boring.

A roll of aluminum tape.

The kind used for HVAC repairs.

Mai stared at it for half a beat and then understood.

A crude Faraday patch.

A disgusting, low-tech insult.

Ace tore a strip with her teeth—because of course she did—and slapped it over the center console seam where Jello's earlier diagnostics had shown the vehicle's comm module.

Then another strip.

Then another.

Mai watched her do it with the kind of tight affection you only feel when someone is competent in a way that saves you from being afraid.

Badger's whisper floated in, reverent: "She's duct-taping the internet."

Heavenly's voice was murder. "Badger."

Badger: "Sorry. It's beautiful."

The "handle" sensation eased by a fraction.

Not gone.

But slipping.

Because the rope wasn't just in Mai.

It was in the convoy.

In the synced lights. The unlocked doors. The obedient systems trying to turn them into props.

Ace was cutting their compliance with aluminum and spite.

Bright's smile turned razor-thin. "I love you, but I hate how much that works."

Ace didn't look at him. "Boring works."

Shammy's fingers flexed. The air in the vehicle thickened again, but she didn't push outward.

Not yet.

She was waiting for the exact moment when “spicy” did the most damage.

Mai looked out the windshield.

Badger was still flat on the concrete like a tactical pancake.

Heavenly’s SUV angled slightly—subtle repositioning to put steel between Badger and the gate.

Good.

Grouse’s vehicle did the same.

Theta-24, for all their chaos, moved like professionals when the joke died.

The bullhorn man outside the fence barked again, trying to assert control.

“Whatever you are doing inside that yard—stop! Identify yourselves!”

Bright leaned toward the window, voice calm but loud enough to carry.

“This is Doctor Bright,” he called. “You are being manipulated by hostile infrastructure. Do not enter the yard. Do not engage the black operators at the gate.”

The bullhorn man hesitated.

Then his response came, sharper: “Prove it.”

Bright’s smile sharpened. “With pleasure.”

He pointed at the black-clad figures, not with a finger, but with his voice.

“Those aren’t your people,” Bright called. “Those are extraction tools. If you step through that gate, you become part of a recording.”

The bullhorn man’s posture shifted.

He didn’t believe Bright fully.

But he believed one thing:

Something was wrong.

Because his instincts were screaming under the hum.

The black-clad figures raised their devices higher.

The hum deepened.

Mai’s vision blurred at the edges.

The “handle” tightened again, ripping at her name like it wanted to peel it off her bones.

Bright’s phone flashed, impatient:

KNEEL

Mai didn't kneel.

She did something that made her stomach turn with how wrong it felt.

She spoke like an O5.

Not in tone.

In format.

Mai leaned forward slightly, eyes on the gate operators, and said clearly:

"O5 directive."

The speakers in the yard did not repeat her.

But the black devices paused—just a fraction, like the frequency had to reconcile a conflicting authority signal.

It was the smallest hitch in the script.

And Mai exploited it.

"O5 directive," Mai repeated, colder. "Abort extraction."

The hum wavered.

Bright's eyebrows rose behind his sunglasses. "Oh, that's nasty."

Shammy's grin sharpened. "That's delicious."

Ace's hand tightened on Mai's shoulder. "Again."

Mai did.

"Abort extraction."

For half a second, the hum stuttered.

And in that stutter, the two black-clad figures reacted—not emotionally, but mechanically. Their heads tilted slightly, like systems receiving a packet they didn't expect.

Jello's fingers flew. "They're— they're listening to the label. They're parsing your voice as auth."

Bright's voice went sharp. "Then break their parser."

Mai's blood was cold now. Focused.

She glanced at Shammy.

Shammy knew without being told.

She exhaled.

The air in the yard shifted—not as wind, not as lightning—just a sudden, localized pressure spike that

made every loose object in the yard rattle: pallet straps, chain link, a coffee cup on a trailer step.

The black devices' hum spiked.

Their frequency bands collided.

The operators—if they were operators—staggered half a step.

Badger, still face-down, whispered, awed: "She just punched the air."

Heavenly: "Shut up."

Badger: "Copy."

Ace moved.

This time she did exit—because the moment was right.

She didn't open the door like a person.

She pushed it with a controlled snap, stepping out low and fast, using the open door as cover, silhouette minimized. Emerald blades flared brighter, but she kept them close—no cinematic arcs.

Boring violence.

Efficient.

She sprinted—not at the operators.

At the ground between them.

A thin line on the concrete: a conduit trench, a cable run, the kind of place infrastructure hid its veins.

Ace's eyes tracked it instantly.

She struck once.

The katana edge bit through concrete like it was stale bread, green light flaring as the blade clipped something beneath.

The hum screamed.

One of the black devices fizzled.

The operator's posture dipped, as if a puppeteer had lost a string.

Jello shouted, "You cut their feed line!"

Bright's mouth tightened. "Good."

The second operator swung its device toward Ace.

The hum shifted again—targeting.

Trying to slap a label onto Ace instead.

Trying to make her “the small one” become the handle.

Mai’s throat tightened.

Shammy’s eyes went storm-white, and for the first time, her “spicy” stopped being polite.

A bolt of lightning didn’t crack.

Instead, the air snapped.

A hard, sudden pressure collapse right in front of the operator—like the atmosphere had been yanked away for half a second.

The operator’s device whined, then sputtered.

Its hum turned into a cough.

Ace didn’t waste the opening.

She moved in close and cut the device in half at the grip.

Not the operator’s hands.

The device.

It split cleanly, cable guts and copper spilling like organs.

The operator froze.

And then—finally—something human happened.

It flinched.

Mai’s stomach dropped. “That’s not fully autonomous.”

Bright’s voice was sharp. “There’s a person in there.”

The operator stumbled back toward the gate like it had just remembered self-preservation.

Badger’s head lifted slightly from the ground, eyes wide. “Are we allowed to chase it.”

Heavenly snapped. “No.”

Badger: “Okay.”

Outside the fence, the bullhorn man shouted, confused and furious now.

“What the hell is that!”

Bright called back, loud and clear.

“That is the anomaly,” Bright said. “Not the people in the yard.”

The bullhorn man hesitated again—then made a decision.

His unit did not breach.

They pivoted.

Weapons trained on the gate line.

On the black-clad figure trying to retreat.

On the second unmarked car still idling like a script that had lost its director.

The bullhorn man barked, "Freeze! Hands up!"

The black-clad figure didn't comply.

It lunged.

Not like a person.

Like something trying to get out of a frame before it could be identified.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "It's going to run."

Bright's voice went cold. "Let it."

Mai blinked. "What."

Bright's smile was thin. "If it runs, it leads us to its real node."

Shammy's voice was low. "And if it escapes."

Bright's smile sharpened. "Then we follow harder."

The figure slammed into the gate line—found a gap, slipped through like it knew the yard's geometry too well.

The bullhorn man shouted, "Stop!"

Weapons raised—

Mai's heart clenched.

Because if they fired, this became a shooting.

This became a story.

This became a clip.

Mai snapped, voice hard, O5-flat.

"Hold fire."

The bullhorn man's head snapped toward the yard.

He shouldn't have listened.

But the yard's loudspeaker—dead and silent—didn't contradict her.

The moment felt authoritative.

And trained men were trained to obey moments.

The bullhorn man hesitated.

Then shouted to his unit, "Hold!"

The black-clad figure vanished into the service road darkness beyond the gate like a bad memory.

Silence fell.

The hazard lights in the yard flickered irregularly, then stopped altogether as Ace's aluminum-tape vandalism and Jello's jamming finally made the convoy stop behaving like props.

Mai exhaled slowly.

The "handle" sensation loosened.

Not gone.

But not choking her anymore.

Badger rolled onto his side like a man emerging from a war.

He spoke into comms, voice faintly offended:

"So... we didn't kneel."

Heavenly replied, dry: "Correct."

Badger: "Okay. Good. Because I was not prepared to kneel. My knees are not emotionally available."

Grouse muttered, "Nobody asked."

Badger: "The sign asked."

Shammy, still glowing with storm, said softly, "The sign can go to hell."

Bright's phone buzzed again.

One last message appeared, no longer a command.

A correction.

A punishment.

O5-LOOK: EXTRACTION FAILED. REASSIGNMENT INITIATED.

Jello's face went pale. "Oh no."

Mai's voice was immediate. "What."

Jello swallowed. "He just reassigned... the target."

Bright's jaw tightened. "To who."

Jello turned the laptop, hands shaking.

A new line blinked on the root node readout:

Ace didn't move.

But the hum of her blades changed—deeper, angrier, like an animal recognizing its name in a threat.

Mai's chest went tight.

Shammy's eyes went storm-white again, instantly protective. "No."

Bright's smile vanished. "He's not done."

Badger's voice, small and genuinely worried now: "Uh... guys?"

Mai stared at the gate, at the dark service roads, at the place the figure had fled.

Then she spoke, cold and clean.

"Good," Mai said. "Let him try."

Because now the copycat had made the only mistake that mattered.

He'd stopped trying to control the room.

And started trying to touch someone Mai wouldn't let go of.

darn... go ahead!—

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