

Chapter 19 — Small One

The maintenance yard felt suddenly too quiet.

Not safe-quiet.

The kind of quiet you get when something has stopped shouting because it has moved closer.

Jello's laptop chimed again—soft this time, like the system was trying not to spook the prey.

Then his screen filled with an audio waveform.

No video.

No green lights.

Just a live feed label that should not exist anymore.

AIRPORT UNDERBELLY — SPEAKER NODE / AUDIO ONLY

Bright's head snapped toward it. "That's impossible. We cut the segment."

Jello's voice cracked. "We cut the segment. The root... isn't the segment."

Shammy's eyes went storm-white. "He left a mouth behind."

Ace didn't move. She didn't speak.

But the hum of her katanas deepened. The emerald glow bled along the blades like a pulse.

Mai felt it in her chest first—an instinctive, protective recoil. Her hand reached back without looking, finding Ace's knee in the cramped back seat.

Anchor.

A small touch that said I'm here.

Ace's gaze met hers in the mirror. Violet and unblinking.

Then the speaker feed hissed.

A familiar female voice whispered through Jello's laptop speaker—soft, intimate, weaponized.

"Small one... come forward."

Mai's throat tightened.

Not fear.

Rage.

Because that voice wasn't just calling Ace. It was trying to place her. Trying to push her into the same slot it had tried to force Mai into.

A handle.

A frame.

A narrative role.

Ace's jaw tightened. She spoke once, voice low, lethal.

"No."

The laptop speaker hissed, almost amused.

"O5 doesn't control you."

Mai's hand clenched on Ace's knee. "He thinks he can split us."

Shammy's smile was gone now. What was left was weather before impact. "He's testing the bond."

Bright's mouth tightened. "He's testing which of you breaks first."

Mai's voice was ice. "Wrong test."

Badger's comms crackled, and for once he sounded more angry than scared. "Okay, I hate this guy. I hate him personally."

Heavenly replied, tight: "Good. Use it later."

Grouse muttered, "We're not doing therapy right now."

Badger: "I'm not doing therapy. I'm doing murder-prep."

Mai almost smiled. Almost.

Then the speaker voice shifted, becoming smoother, more confident.

Less whisper.

More announcement.

"Episode Four: War Crimes."

A pause.

"New target acquired."

Ace's katanas flared brighter, emerald light spilling across the SUV interior like a warning.

Mai felt her pulse spike.

Because the voice wasn't just talking to Ace.

It was talking about Ace.

To an audience.

That meant the root still had eyes somewhere.

Bright's voice went cold. "Jello. Track the feed."

Jello's fingers flew. "It's... it's not routing like normal audio. It's bouncing through... municipal nodes, airport nodes, cellular towers—like it's using the entire city as a speaker line."

Bright's jaw clenched. "So we can't shut it off."

Jello swallowed. "Not cleanly."

Shammy's fingers flexed. "Then we shut him off."

Mai stared at Jello's screen.

At the waveform.

At the time stamp.

The location marker that said "airport underbelly" even though they were miles away.

A thought clicked in Mai's mind, cold and sharp.

"He's not talking from the airport," Mai said.

Bright glanced at her. "Explain."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "He's using the airport node as a mask. It's a familiar mouth. It's a brand. He's anchoring the voice in a place we've already been so we think he's there."

Bright's smile turned razor-thin. "So he's not where the voice says."

Mai nodded. "He's where the change happened. Where the root migrated."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "Our decoy."

Jello's face went pale. "The DMV spoof signature."

Bright's voice was ice. "We gave him a clean bridge."

Ace's voice, low: "Then we burn the bridge."

Mai's mind built the next move like a trap diagram.

They needed a throne. A fake O5 chamber. A place that looked like what the root wanted to become: authority, control, compliance.

But now it wasn't just about luring him.

It was about severing his ability to label people.

To turn Ace into a target with a word.

Mai's chest tightened, protective anger sharpening into clarity.

"Bright," Mai said. "We do the throne now."

Bright nodded once. "Agreed."

Badger's comms crackled. "Wait, are we actually building a fake O5 room in Los Angeles?"

Heavenly replied, deadpan: "Yes."

Badger: "That's insane."

Grouse: "Correct."

Badger: "I love it."

Mai ignored the comedy and laid it out.

"We need three elements," Mai said. "One: a location with real infrastructure we can control. Two: a fake authority channel seeded enough to look convincing to the root. Three: a kill-switch—something that terminates the memetic vector without letting it jump again."

Bright's mouth tightened. "We can't guarantee it won't jump."

Jello's voice was thin. "Unless we trap it in a closed loop."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "A bottle."

Ace's voice was quiet. "A cage."

Mai nodded. "A cage."

Bright glanced at Jello. "Can you build a loop?"

Jello swallowed. "If I can get access to a comm rack—something like a telecom cabinet—and isolate it physically, yes. I can create a sandbox network that looks like authority but doesn't connect out."

Bright's smile sharpened. "A fake O5 throne room with fake pipes."

Badger's comms chirped. "We're building a haunted bureaucracy trap. That's... actually my kink."

Heavenly snapped. "Badger."

Badger: "Sorry."

Mai continued. "We need a place where we can control the physical comms."

Bright's voice was immediate. "We can requisition a black site."

Mai shook her head. "Too clean. Too 'Foundation.' He's already inside those assumptions."

Shammy's eyes flicked. "We need something civilian that smells like power."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "A courthouse. City hall. Police HQ."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Those have cameras we don't control."

Mai's eyes narrowed further. "A telecom hub. A data center. A switching facility. Something boring, secured, and loud with RF noise."

Bright smiled. "Ah."

Badger's comms chimed. "Oh my God. A server farm."

Grouse muttered. "He's going to say 'farm' again."

Badger: "Farm farm farm."

Heavenly: "Badger."

Mai: "Yes. A switching facility. But not one that will involve civilians."

Jello's eyes widened. "I know a place. A retired relay station. It's technically city-owned but decommissioned. Still has a live backbone line for redundancy."

Bright blinked. "How do you—"

Jello spread his hands helplessly. "I'm a nerd."

Badger whispered, reverent. "Blessed."

Mai nodded. "Good. That's our throne room."

Ace's voice was quiet. "And the bait."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "We use my compromised O5 profile to issue a directive to O5-LOOK. We invite it to a 'containment review'—something it can't resist."

Bright's smile turned razor-thin. "We lure the parasite with the promise of legitimacy."

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright. "And when it sits on the throne—"

Ace's katanas hummed, louder. "We cut its head off."

Badger's comms crackled. "Finally. Beheading. My favorite administrative procedure."

Heavenly sighed. "I hate you."

Badger: "I know."

But the speaker feed on Jello's laptop hissed again.

The female voice returned, softer now, almost kind.

"Ace."

Mai's blood went cold.

Not because the voice knew her.

Because it said Ace's name like it had permission.

"You don't have to listen to Mai."

Mai's jaw clenched so hard it hurt.

Shammy's eyes flashed. "Oh, I'm going to—"

Bright cut in sharply. "Ignore it."

Ace didn't move.

She didn't flinch.

She just spoke once, voice quiet, lethal, and oddly intimate—like she was speaking to Mai as much as to the speaker.

"I listen because I choose to."

Mai's chest tightened.

The speaker feed paused.

Then the voice returned, slightly strained.

"She will get you killed."

Ace's reply was immediate.

"Try."

Mai felt heat flare behind her eyes—emotion she did not allow herself often, and never in front of enemies.

She kept her voice cold.

"We're done with your whispers," Mai said. "See you at the throne."

The speaker feed crackled.

A sound like static laughter.

"Bring her."

And then the feed cut.

Silence.

Real silence.

Not because the root was gone.

Because it had heard them.

And it liked what it heard.

Bright exhaled once, sharp. "Okay. He's hooked."

Shammy's grin returned, feral. "He's coming."

Ace's eyes stayed hard. "Let him."

Mai's voice went ice-cold.

"Now," she said, "we build the room that kills gods."

D'oh ... loppusuora hämmöttää, eteenpäin siis!—

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