



Chapter 20: Anchor Theft

For a heartbeat, the room held its breath.

Mai lay still.

The medical monitor blinked like it was bored of human drama.

Bright's hand clamped Ace's wrist hard enough to bruise—grounding through force, because there wasn't time for gentle.

Ace's shadow-pressure aura trembled at the edge of eruption. Not outward violence, not murder-lust—something colder: an absolute refusal that wanted to make the environment pay attention.

The ceiling speaker clicked again, same woman's voice, calm and clinical.

"Reduce stimulus. Do not escalate."

Bright's eyes went to the speaker like he could shoot it with anger. "Who is this."

The voice didn't answer the question. "Dr. Bright, you are interfering with calibration."

Bright's jaw tightened. "You are drugging an injured agent without medical authorization."

A pause. Then: "Medical authorization exists."

Bright barked a short laugh, humorless. "From who? Your imaginary committee?"

Ace's fingers tightened around her own sternum as if her body was the only lock left in the world that couldn't be overridden.

Mai's breathing stayed deep. Too deep. Heavy as ocean sleep.

Ace's voice came out low, controlled, frighteningly calm. "Wake her."

Bright didn't hesitate. He moved to the IV, pinched the line, and shut the valve with a sharp twist.

The monitor beeped once, registering the change.

The ceiling speaker snapped, sharper now. "Do not—"

Bright cut it off. "Watch me."

Ace felt the three-beat pulse in her ribs spike—one strong beat, then the familiar pattern tried to reassert itself.

Violet behind the lock pressed forward, delighted.

Alone, Violet whispered. They want you alone. You could be so much more without the leash—

Ace clenched her jaw. "Shut up."

Bright didn't hear Violet, but he heard Ace's voice. He looked at her sharply. "Talk to me."

Ace's eyes stayed on Mai. "I'm holding."

Bright nodded once. "Good."

The door opened hard.

The medic rushed in, eyes wide, half a second from asking a question—

—and stopped when they saw Bright's expression.

Bright spoke in a voice that made people obey even if they hated him. "Antagonist. Now."

The medic blinked. "What—"

Bright: "Reverse the sedation. Now."

The medic swallowed, looked at Mai's monitor, then at the IV line that Bright had shut. "Who authorized—"

Bright snapped, "Not you. Not me. Not her. So you can either fix it, or you can be the person who watched it happen."

The medic's face went tight.

They moved.

Syringe. Ampoule. Injection into the port. Quick, practiced, angry hands.

Ace stood at Mai's bedside like a guardian statue carved from hostility.

The ceiling speaker clicked again.

The woman's voice was colder now, and there was something almost satisfied in it.

"Subject A emotional response escalating," it said. "Noted."

Bright's head snapped toward the speaker. "Stop recording her like she's a lab rat."

The voice replied, unbothered. "She is a lab rat. She is also a bomb. The distinction is irrelevant."

Ace's aura surged.

Bright's hand shot out again—this time to Ace's shoulder, firm, grounding. "Ace."

Ace inhaled, forced air in and out like sandpaper. Not their rhythm.

Her rhythm.

The medic spoke quickly, voice tight. "Reversal agent administered. It'll take—thirty seconds, maybe a minute."

Ace leaned down, close to Mai's face, voice low and fierce. "Mai. Wake up."

Mai didn't move.

The room felt wrong.

Not supernatural wrong.

Operational wrong.

Like someone had turned the platform into a stage and was waiting for the actors to deliver the right line.

Bright's eyes flicked to the door, then to the corridor beyond it, then back to the ceiling speaker.

He spoke softly to Ace, barely moving his lips. "They're pushing you."

Ace's eyes didn't leave Mai. "I know."

Bright continued, quieter. "They want you to crack. They want to see what happens when the anchor is suppressed."

Ace's voice was low. "They're about to see what happens when they touch her."

Bright's jaw tightened. "That's the line. Don't cross it blindly."

Ace's gaze flicked to him—one sharp glance. "Then give me another move."

Bright didn't have an immediate answer.

Because there wasn't a clean one.

The platform belonged to the Foundation.

The guards belonged to the Foundation.

The memetics cell belonged to the Foundation.

And the moment Ace and Bright turned this into open violence, they'd be contained "for their own safety" so fast the lights would blur.

They were trapped inside the body of the organization, and the body was having an autoimmune reaction.

Mai's fingers twitched.

Ace's heart jumped.

The monitor's waveforms shifted—faster, lighter.

Mai's eyelids fluttered.

Ace leaned closer. "Mai."

Mai's eyes opened.

For half a second, they were unfocused, drug-heavy, trying to remember where the world was.

Then they locked onto Ace's face.

And the fog in Mai's eyes burned away like it had never existed.

Mai's voice came out rough. "What—did—"

She inhaled, sharp, then winced as ribs screamed.

Ace's hand moved instantly, gentle but firm on Mai's shoulder, keeping her from jerking upright too fast. "Stay."

Mai's eyes narrowed, scanning the room. Bright. Medic. The closed door. The tension like a wire.

Then her gaze snapped to the ceiling speaker.

Mai's voice went deadly calm. "Who's talking."

Bright answered quickly, controlled. "Memetics cell. Calibration. They adjusted your sedation without authorization."

Mai didn't move for a beat.

Then something changed in her face.

Not anger.

Not shock.

A kind of quiet, precise violence—the tactical mind deciding the rules had broken, and therefore the rules no longer applied.

Mai's eyes shifted to Bright. "Repeat."

Bright did. "They drugged you deeper. To suppress you as an anchor. To observe Ace."

Mai's gaze returned to the ceiling speaker.

Mai's voice was soft enough to be terrifying. "Turn it off."

The voice in the speaker replied, calm. "Agent Mai, your emotional state is—"

Mai cut it off. "Turn. It. Off."

The medic took a half-step back, instinctively.

Ace watched Mai like she was watching a blade being drawn—beautiful, dangerous, controlled.

Bright's jaw clenched. "Mai, we need—"

Mai lifted a hand, palm outward—stop. Not to Bright. To everyone.

Mai's eyes stayed on the speaker. "Ace."

Ace's head turned slightly. "Yeah."

Mai's voice was low and clean. "How bad."

Ace swallowed. "They entered my dream. Called me 'vessel.' Ran a stimulus test. Simulated you."

Mai's eyes narrowed, like a sniper finding the center mass of a problem. "And you held."

Ace nodded once. "I held."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Good."

The ceiling speaker clicked again, the voice more urgent now. "Agents. You are escalating. Stand down."

Mai smiled.

Not warm.

Not friendly.

A smile you gave when someone had just admitted they didn't understand what they'd provoked.

"You escalated first," Mai said softly. "By touching my bloodstream."

The speaker voice paused, then resumed with new calm. "Your sedation was within safe parameters."

Mai's smile didn't change. "That's not the parameter you should be measuring."

Mai turned her head slowly to Bright. "Do we have a comms uplink they can't piggyback."

Bright hesitated half a second—then nodded. "Yes. Hardline in the service spine. Limited access. No platform-wide routing."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "Good. We're making a report."

Bright blinked. "Report?"

Mai's smile sharpened. "Oh yes."

Ace's heart rate rose—not the three-beat hook, but a flicker of relief. Because Mai wasn't going to start a hallway war.

Mai was going to do something worse.

Mai was going to make it official.

Mai looked at Ace. "We're documenting every violation. Every time stamp. Every override. And then we're sending it to people who don't like memetics playing God."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "You have someone in mind."

Mai's gaze went cold. "Several."

The ceiling speaker crackled, the woman's voice smoother now, almost coaxing. "Agent Mai, please remain calm. Your cooperation improves outcomes."

Mai turned back to the speaker. Her voice dropped to a whisper that carried anyway.

"You want cooperation?" Mai said. "Here's cooperation."

She reached for her disruptor—not aiming it at the speaker, not firing.

She simply placed it on the bed beside her, visible.

A gesture of deliberate restraint.

Then she reached up and slowly, carefully, pulled the IV line out of her arm.

The medic flinched. "Mai—"

Mai held up a finger. "Don't."

Blood beaded, small and bright.

Mai pressed gauze to it without looking.

Then she looked at the ceiling speaker and said, with absolute calm:

"You drugged me without consent. That makes you an adversary. Offshore rules change when there's an adversary inside the hull."

Ace's chest tightened.

Bright's gaze sharpened.

Because Mai had just invoked the same logic they used against external threats.

She'd shifted memetics from "internal department" to hostile actor.

The speaker's voice went very quiet.

"You are making a mistake," it said.

Mai's smile faded completely.

"No," Mai said softly. "You made it first."

Mai swung her legs off the bed despite pain, stood slowly, and faced the door like she owned the corridor beyond it.

Ace moved to her side without thinking—close enough to be a shield, close enough to be seen.

Bright looked between them, then nodded once.

"Service spine," Bright said.

Mai's voice was calm. "And Bright?"

"Yes."

Mai's eyes were ice. "If anyone tries to sedate me again, I'll treat it as an assault."

Bright didn't argue.

He simply said, "Understood."

The ceiling speaker clicked again, and the woman's voice returned—still calm, but now edged.

"You are not authorized to leave your quarters."

Mai looked up at the speaker like it was a bug on the ceiling.

Then she said, almost conversationally:

"Watch us."

Ace felt Violet behind the lock purr in delight—not because Mai was in danger.

Because Mai was awake.

And awake Mai meant the game had changed.

The anchor had been stolen.

They'd tried to take it.

Instead, they'd sharpened it.

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Last update: **17/03/2026 17:02**

