



THE MERCY CHRONICLES

A SUPERHERO AT WAR WITH HERSELF

FIONA ZEDDE





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**THE
MERCY CHRONICLES**
A SUPERHERO AT WAR WITH HERSELF

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THE POWER OF MERCY

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CHAPTER 1

MAI STOOD ON THE ROOF of the twenty-story building, naked except for the cloak of her restlessness. Faint pain throbbed in her back—scratches from the anonymous woman she'd taken to bed barely two hours before—her thighs ached from the work she'd put into bringing them both pleasure, and the muscles in her arms still burned. The city of Atlanta, studded in starlight above and in bright lights below, hummed its particular late-night songs. A whisper of street traffic. A distant chopper. The thumping bass line from a rap song as a car cruised past.

The woman she'd gone home with still slept peacefully in her bed one flight below, but that same peace escaped Mai. Earlier that night, a familiar restlessness had pushed her into her favorite local bar, a place dark enough for private pleasures yet with a wide-open patio for fresh air and a bar well-stocked enough to drown even the deepest of sorrows. But she didn't go there for sorrow or for fresh air.

The woman she found wasn't exactly what she craved, but in that moment, with familiar demons pulling at her, the lush form with a head full of springy coils had been enough. She tasted like forgetfulness, pain subsumed, pleasure without the consequence of a tomorrow. Starved for what the stranger had offered, Mai had devoured her—the wet flesh between her thighs, her mouth gasping and plush, her breasts like summer-ripe mangoes.

But afterward, Mai was still keyed up. Tight. The big muscles in her arms and thighs jumped just under her skin, ticking away the moments toward an implosion she didn't want to happen. She rolled her shoulders and stretched her neck, spread out her senses to feel

what was going on in the city below. It all rushed up to her in a wave of sound and color:

Couples whispering intimately to each other while their bedsheets beneath them rustled to the rhythm of their lovemaking. A police car roaring down the city streets with sirens screaming and blue lights ablaze. Even young children were awake and playing in a nearby courtyard, which was odd for the early fall, when schools were in session. And it was more and more of the same, in a rolling tide of awareness of murder, sex, cruelty, and laughter. The tapestry of a large city.

Mai felt it all, the ceaseless movement of Atlanta—a wild organism in constant flux that could not be tamed. All these things unfolding below her were too far away or too late for her to change. Other things... Mai tilted her head toward the sound of screams pulsing beneath her conscious hearing.

Screams of terror.

A fire.

Mai's breath hitched, and her body unconsciously swayed toward that blast of heat barely two miles away. She narrowed her gaze toward the fire, sharpening her hearing. No sirens headed toward it. Not yet. She wasted a moment wishing for the phone she'd left in the pocket of her discarded jacket somewhere on the stranger's floor. Then she jumped.

Air rushed up to meet her, a gust over her face and bare body, both cooling and heating her as the adrenaline turned her body temperature all the way up to scalding. Everything was loud. Screams rang like church bells, and her body throbbed to the heat radiating from the out-of-control fire.

Falling, Mai grabbed for the stone façade of the next building as it surged up to meet her, bare inches from slamming into her if she miscalculated her headlong rush. She was far from invulnerable, but sometimes it was that vulnerability to death that made these risks worth it.

Closer to the fire, her body tingled, a flush of heat and excitement. She sprinted across a flat roof. Jumped to another.

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She flew past a couple pressed together on a blanket, the girl's blouse off, her pert breasts showing, her lover intent on mouthing between her spread thighs.

"Jesus! Did you see that?"

"What?" Her lover emerged, face wet, eyes only for the woman beneath her.

"A naked chick. She just ran past us."

Naked. Right. Mai shifted, felt her skin ripple, hardening and stretching in places. It was only a surface change. She still felt the wind as it brushed her bare skin. Contrary to the illusion she crafted, her hands were gloveless as she grabbed the next rooftop and slung herself over an angled flagpole. There was no sleek catsuit covering her from neck to toe. No high boots. And no mask over the top half of her face, hiding everything but the tight line of her mouth. Any potential witnesses would see what she wanted them to see, not a naked woman streaking across the Atlanta skyline, treating it like her personal sorority house.

Instead, she was Mercy.

Face masked. Body covered. No secrets exposed.

She ran on toward the fire, sliding down into back alleys and darkened side streets when she ran out of roofs, the curse of living in a city with such a jagged and unpredictable skyline. Soon she was close enough to feel the flames, like invisible tongues lapping at her skin. The building was a new construction. Tall and flammable, tempting for any pyromaniac. She could smell the deliberately set fire. Probably someone who was just curious, then shocked when it all went wrong so quickly. She smelled the accelerant and the melting plastic from a disposable lighter, their scents overlaid with panicked sweat and regret.

The building was glorious. Yellow and amber flames swirled in its corners and crevices, holding it tight like a too-ardent lover. Mai took it in all in an instant—the shouts of panic and ringing alarm bells, people hanging out of the smoking mouths of open windows, their whispered or shouted prayers for deliverance.

She listened, dropped to the ground, and ran, her feet pounding the pavement, then leaped UP! Heat lashed her skin, and it was hard not to let it touch her and do what it wanted. The outer wall of the building was hot under her hands and feet.

“Mercy!” someone cried from below. Then a chant rose up—a sound of relief, a sigh, and praise. Just as with the flames, she had to pull herself away from the seduction of the name they had given her. The lure of their raised voices.

A child perched on a window ledge, eyes wide with terror but more afraid of falling the seven stories than of the fire eating his room, bit by relentless bit. Outside the room and screaming in terror, a woman—his mother, Mai guessed—was trying to break down the door. The woman rammed it with a wooden chair already on fire, trying to get to the boy. Smoke choked the woman and the entire apartment. Already she was weakening, nearly passed out from the smoke.

Mai jumped through a nearby window and fought her way into the apartment. She grabbed the woman.

“No! My son!” She whirled at Mai, fighting to stay in the fire, her fist slamming into Mai’s face. Mai winced but bore the pain. A whip of flame lashed against her back, and she hissed, protecting the woman from the fire even as her own skin burned. The pain of it was oddly sweet.

Mai grabbed the woman’s arms and pinned them behind her back. “I’ll get him next if you calm down.” She didn’t shout. “If you don’t stop fighting me, I won’t be able to get him.”

The woman stilled at once, and Mai threw her over her shoulder, covered her head with a wet towel she’d grabbed from the bathroom on the way in, and sprinted the way she’d come, with the woman’s weight bouncing halfway down her back.

She rushed through the fire and out the window and dropped the woman across the street among the gathered crowd.

“Ty! Get my son!” The woman stumbled back toward the building, but her neighbors grabbed her.

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Mai quickly assessed the fire, listened for the signs of life still in the building. A woman on a higher floor was in danger of suffocating in her closet. An older couple clung together even higher up and fading fast. Mai ran toward a nearby building miraculously free of the blaze, scaled its outer wall, and leapt from it to the flame-enshrouded condo complex.

She quickly found the woman in the closet, unconscious and clutching a Bible with burned hands. Up and over her shoulder. Mai did the same thing five more times, the smoke overwhelming her a little more with each rescue, the fire both weakening and strengthening her as she made her way through the building, grabbing limp bodies, resisting bodies, alive bodies. Like an assembly line, one after the other. She left the dead ones to their rest.

“Mercy! Mercy!”

“My son! You said you’d save my son!” The woman still struggled in the arms of her neighbors, her thin nightgown dark with smoke and falling off her narrow shoulders. Her teeth were sharp and fierce in her face, stripped down to the basic drive of a mother wanting to protect her child. It wasn’t something Mai was familiar with, but she’d seen it in documentaries.

A blush of shame rushed through her. Up and up, perched at the top, the boy huddled frozen in terror. All he had to do was jump, but it was not going to happen. He was too scared.

Shit. She’d gotten distracted. Firefighters were coming. But they wouldn’t get to the boy in time.

“Jump!” the woman screamed to her son. “Ty! Please, just jump!”

More people gathered below the window despite the flames spouting from the top of the building, encouraging him to jump with the outstretched protection of their arms. Not the most brilliant idea.

Mai cursed again, then ran back into the building.

Coughing.

Choking.

Her lungs were already tight and scorched from pulling in too little oxygen. Her senses swam. It was too late. She knew it when she

reached through the fire, clambering up the superheated bricks that lit up the palms of her bare hands with pain. She'd screwed up and left the boy waiting too long.

His room door was cinders now. The flames flew across the carpet of his bedroom, devouring everything it could. Bedsheets. Toys. Posters of cars. His flesh teased the fire. It, too, would easily burn. All of him would burn.

The window felt even farther than before, its ledge practically glowing with heat. How could the boy sit in a heat so intense? When she finally got to him, she knew how. He was a statue of flesh transformed by terror into a panting but otherwise frozen thing.

"It's okay." She said the words even though she barely believed them. She wrapped the boy's body with her own and jumped, a quick breath up and out the window just as a fireball exploded in the room and blasted them out into the cool air.

Mai clutched the boy, whimpering now, as they flew through the air. She heard a rising tide of gasps below and controlled her own exhalation, used the momentum of the blast, and turned them in the air, keeping as much of her own body as possible wrapped around him. Something hard slammed into her back, drove the breath from her lungs. The side of the nearby building. She held on to enough presence of mind to roll down and cushion their fall with her body, leaving the boy untouched.

Mai felt rather than heard the people flooding toward them in concern. She stood, cursing her own stupidity, and lifted the boy, barely any weight at all, as she looked through the crush of people for his mother.

"Thank God!" The woman screamed her son's name and reached for him, the tendons of her neck etched in stark relief. Her nails scraped Mai's hands as she clutched her son.

Mai stood still long enough to make sure the woman easily bore the burden of the boy, then she spun away, ignoring the cries of the crowd shouting her name to finally pay attention to her body's aches and wounds. One alley, then two. Her arms stretched and burned as she reached up to lever herself higher and higher. By the time

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she reached a tenth-story rooftop, she felt better. The boy was alive. Traumatized, but she'd blame that on the fire instead of her own carelessness.

Before long, she was back where she started. A rooftop downtown.

In the aftermath of the fire, her breath heaved and her muscles were loose and warm. Pleasure sang through her veins. This was what she had needed. This combination of usefulness and danger. Accelerated heartbeat and eased fears.

Going home to her own bed would be another pleasure. But only after she shared a different kind of pleasure with the stranger downstairs. She imagined waking to the softness of the woman's body, a moaning greeting, and then an explosive climax in the heat of her lover's embrace. A perfect bookend to the night.

Mai quickly descended to the woman's room. As quietly as she could, she showered the stink of adrenaline and smoke from her skin and slipped between the sheets, curling the length of her body around the resting woman. Sleep came as easily as the next breath.

CHAPTER 2

“AND THAT’S ALL THERE IS to know about incest in royal European families, ladies and everyone else. See you next week.” Mai took off the glasses she didn’t need—the equivalent of closing her instructor’s copy of the textbook—and waved her students away with them.

The group of mostly sophomores quickly gathered their books and rushed toward the door, obviously glad for the Friday evening seminar to be over. Two or three stragglers hung back, talking with each other, and a few more made a beeline for Mai’s desk, naked worship and hope in their faces.

She kept her expression professional yet casual, not filled with the seductive invitation a few of her colleagues regularly practiced on the impressionable group of students.

“Can I come see you during your office hours, Professor Redstone?” Beatrice Aarondale, one of her more intelligent students and coincidentally one of Mai’s ardent pursuers, cocked her hip and gave her a honeyed smile. Blue lipstick and smoky eye makeup highlighted her already-pretty face. A white off-the-shoulder dress hugged her thick breasts and hips. “There are a few points from the class I’m not clear on.”

Mai resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Of course. Check for the availability of office hours with my TA.” She tipped her chin toward Carol, who sat in the back of the room, already looking over the papers she’d collected from the students at the beginning of class.

“Okay, thanks.” But Beatrice still stood there, aggressively sexy, until one of her friends nudged her in the back and fought his way in front of her to hand Mai a book he’d borrowed the previous class.

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Mai accepted the book with a smile and slid it into her slim leather briefcase. As she looked up from putting the book away, a figure passing the open door of her classroom caught her eye. Her stomach dipped.

Xóchitl Bentley. A suitably complex name for the seemingly complex woman who'd come to the campus a semester before from one of Atlanta's biggest and best private universities. Mai had heard through the grapevine that she spent the first class of each semester teaching her students how to say her name.

Xóchitl. *Show cheel.*

The day Mai stumbled into Xóchitl Bentley, she'd literally lost her breath, left quietly panting by the fist of desire in her belly that had been both powerful and unexpected.

In the hallway outside Mai's classroom, the woman swept through the wave of students like they weren't even there, graceful and cool like an iceberg sitting in winter waters and careless of the ships or high waves or anything else nearby. Mai grew weak just at the sight of her.

Tonight, Xóchitl wore a dress—loose-fitting cotton in all white, but with an incongruous Guatemalan print satchel over her shoulder. On her feet, bright yellow high heels tapped an insistent rhythm that echoed in the pit of Mai's stomach.

Xóchitl was graceful, delicate, and gorgeous. And she wasn't the least bit interested in Mai.

Once her own interest was established and nothing overtly reciprocal came from Xóchitl, Mai thought the other professor wasn't into women. But an illicit night on Facebook had yielded evidence to the contrary. The very next moment, Mai had thoughts of trickery, sudden and innate, of shifting some small thing about herself, her face, her figure, downplaying the femininity of her walk to change and become something more like the AG, or butch, women she'd seen on Xóchitl's arm online. This was something she could easily accomplish as a Meta human, a minor bit of manipulation compared to what she'd seen others do.

But the thought both disgusted and terrified Mai. She didn't want to be like most of the Metas she knew, ruthlessly exploitive and remorseless. So she avoided Xóchitl from that day on. It didn't stop her from looking, though.

Mai blinked away from the tempting vision in the hallway when someone touched her arm, then abruptly let go.

"Your skin is so warm!" Beatrice looked down at her own hand as if she expected it to be burned. "Do you have a fever or something?"

Mai was still distracted by Xóchitl. That was the only reason she slipped and said, "I'm just a little hot-blooded, that's all."

"I bet."

She pursed her lips, annoyed at herself for giving shameless Beatrice such an obvious opening. She met her student's gaze with a slight reprimanding shake of her head. "If there isn't anything else, I'll see you in my office."

Before Beatrice could say a word either way, Mai's phone chirped, a burst of sound only she could hear.

"Excuse me," she said to the small group of students and swept up her briefcase while deftly fishing the cell phone, her car keys, and a protein bar from her desk drawer. "I'll see you all next time. If you need anything before then, call my office or send an e-mail."

She arranged her belongings in various pockets of the briefcase, her keys jingling in her hand as she headed out of the building toward the parking lot, already suspecting what the person on the other end of the phone line had to say. The call came at a good time, though. She needed the distraction. "Yes?" she said into the phone.

"Can you drop by the station on Monday?" A familiar voice asked the question in lieu of a hello.

"Yes."

"Six in the evening?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Stepping out into the warm embrace of the September evening, she put away the phone, heels like silenced gunshots against the still sun-heated concrete of the parking deck. Her car beeped when

she disarmed the alarm, and the relief of being away from so many eyes and in a private space made her sigh with quiet pleasure. She dropped her bag in the passenger seat.

“You’d have much more fun if you worked at your mother’s company.”

It was only an intense act of will that prevented her from lashing out to protect herself. Mai tightened her fist around the car key. She felt more than heard the minute sigh of her leather stilettos as her toes flexed and spread wide, her body readying itself to spring into action. Her fighting instinct had never learned to relax around family.

“What do you want, Ethan?”

Her cousin sat in her back seat, smug in his Tom Ford three-piece suit and shark’s grin. “You, as always.”

He sat in her car, looking for all the world like he belonged there. A muscle throbbed in Mai’s jaw as she waited for him to get to the point of his visit.

“Nice car,” he said, grinding down her patience even more. He shifted obscenely behind her, hands caressing the leather seat on either side of his sprawled thighs.

Just because her mother gave him the power to do whatever he wanted in pursuit of her orders, he felt free to be an asshole, which included flirting with Mai when he knew damn well she didn’t date men. He made no secret that he thought he would one day be the permanent exception to Mai’s “no men allowed” rule. But despite how things stood between Mai and her powerful mother, Mandaia Redstone would never approve a marriage between Mai and Ethan.

So she waited him out while he felt up the napa leather of her well-loved Mercedes. Mai started the car and cued up Nicki Minaj on the Bluetooth connection to her phone. When “Anaconda” began to play, her cousin started talking, but Mai didn’t turn down the music. Neither of them needed silence to hear each other.

“Your mother wants me to remind you about the Conclave of Families tomorrow afternoon.”

Mai rolled her eyes. As if she could forget. On every single day last week, her mother had made a point of texting her various details of the Conclave—what time it started, where she would sit when the official announcements were made, what to wear.

Ever since Mai had neglected to go to the last Conclave, which was nothing more than a glorified birthday party for a child too spoiled to appreciate the small island her cash-rich but power-poor family had bought for her, Mandaia's messages to her daughter had been rife with even more disappointment than usual. Mai liked to pretend that it didn't matter.

"Okay," Mai said with a dismissive glance at her cousin. "You've reminded me. Now go."

His face flashed spite in her rearview mirror, his shark teeth on full display. "Formal dress," he hissed at her. "Something showing off that hot body of yours."

Ethan gave the nut-brown leather another suggestive caress as he stared past the driver's seat at her body. It was as if he were seeing through to her naked skin. Mai wouldn't put it past him to do just that.

Annoyed, she put the car in gear and drove off. Caught off guard, her cousin abruptly melted through the leather upholstery, his body going completely transparent before slipping through the leather, then out of her car. She didn't need to look back to see him standing on the moonlit parking deck, hands in the pockets of his gray suit, his figure solid once more.

"See that you're there. You don't want to disappoint her." A pocket of sound burst near her ear, the last remnant of his unwanted visit.

She turned up the stereo and rolled down all the windows. But the reminder of his presence still lingered like a bad stench.

CHAPTER 3

MAI NEVER FELT LIKE SHE belonged in her family. Well, maybe not quite never, but close enough. The last time she'd felt as if she belonged, she was a naïve twelve-year-old. Twenty years of betrayal and pain separated that child from who she was now.

She drew in a deep and steadying breath and slowly released it.

With her tiny purse tucked under her arm, she stood at the top of the main staircase of her mother's Alpharetta mansion, watching the annual Conclave from a distance. A meeting of all the Families in North America to discuss pertinent Meta business, the Conclave was nearly over. Mai had planned it that way.

This was the last place she wanted to be. Her stomach twisted with discomfort, and she could barely get her legs to move forward. Other than to attend official gatherings, she hadn't been in her family home since she moved out nearly seventeen years before for boarding school. It was seventeen years of peace she'd desperately claimed for herself after the horror of living in a house where she couldn't be safe.

Okay. Enough. Mai shook herself and took a deliberate step forward. She couldn't stand there stewing in her resentment all afternoon. *Shit or get off the pot.* But she couldn't push herself to go any further.

A hand curled around the dark wooden railing, while the other tightened into a fist in her pocket. She drew in another deep breath, this one too deep, and almost choked on the sickly sweet scent of tropical flowers that hung thick and cloudlike throughout the entire mansion. Her spine stiffened.

In defiance of what her mother expected, Mai wore slacks. Slim-fitting tuxedo pants the color of old blood, a white blouse sheer enough to show off the shape of her braless breasts underneath, and the unapologetic opacity of her nipples that wilted in the warm room. She wore the brief outfit like armor, a visual reminder to everyone that she knew she didn't fit in among them and would never try.

Below the landing where she stood, two sweeping parallel staircases led down to the main ballroom where over five dozen people gathered, members of the sixteen Meta Families living in the North American territory. Above them, the ceiling soared two stories high, terminating in a wide and round stained glass feature that poured brilliant sunlight down on everyone gathered for the biannual event.

Their combined voices rose and fell through the massive room, weaving with the music from the string quartet tucked away on the smaller of two stages in the ballroom.

Everyone looked beautiful. Powerful. Even the members of the Families with little Meta power exuded influence because of the financial sway they held in the human world. Energy in the room rolled, warm and electric, over Mai's skin like an unwanted caress, stirring up her self-protective instincts.

She didn't belong among these Metas. But she didn't fully belong in the human world either. The only time she felt truly like herself was when she dressed in the skin of her own choosing and blended into the night on rooftops and alleys all over the city. *That* felt right.

With her family, she just felt like prey.

Below her, the high afternoon Conclave continued on, despite her lack of direct involvement, and Mai was glad for it. She knew, though, that she couldn't stay above it for long. Just then, a gong sounded, deep and overly dramatic, a signal for everyone to stop what they were doing and move toward the raised dais in front of the massive ballroom.

"So you actually decided to grace us with your presence today."

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Mai turned to look over her shoulder, keeping her hand on the balustrade for balance. A very distant cousin, Caressa, came up slowly behind her. Even Caressa's approach, friend though she was, was a cautious one, as if approaching some rabid and untamed animal. Everyone knew that although Mai was nearly powerless, she was vicious when cornered and wore her body like a naked blade. This reputation was her only defense among other Metas, and she was proud of it.

"Mother just about threatened me, so I couldn't say no this time." Caressa knew Mandaia well enough to know Mai wasn't joking.

Caressa, being only a low-level empath, had as little power as Mai. But Caressa had taken the path recommended by her own mother and gone into politics, easily charming every human she met and parlaying that into a seat in the Senate. One of the youngest senators in the country at the age of forty, she was well on her way to more and better. It was a strategic position to be in if the future clash between humans and Metas that her brother and his radical friends were always talking about ever became a reality.

"Threats must look good on you, then." Caressa leveled a flirtatious look at Mai, who was used to this sort of behavior from her. She seemed to think Mai wanted this sort of thing.

That was absolutely *not* what Mai was projecting. Here of all places, she held her emotions tightly locked in a cage. But Caressa was ridiculously beautiful and thought everyone wanted to fuck her.

She teased Mai again with a dip of her emerald eyes, scanning her from Mai's high crown of hair to the black stilettos that were like daggers on her feet. "Come down with me and stop lurking up here like a ghoul." She slipped her arm through Mai's without waiting for agreement and tugged her down the steps.

The ballroom was large, just one of the many showplaces in the massive house. Even among their powerful and mostly rich race of Meta humans, Mandaia Redstone was extremely wealthy. Instead of going into politics like most Metas, she'd opted to go into media and business. She had an extremely successful talk show for nearly thirty years before she gave it all up to become a business mogul and

focus full-time on amassing even more money and working behind the scenes to pull the strings of America's conscience and its political institutions. Mandaia Redstone was very good at pulling strings.

This house of hers was one few humans knew about. According to paperwork available to any enterprising hacker or diligent googler, Mandaia lived on a twenty-acre ranch somewhere in California and owned over a dozen homes in other parts of the world. But this mansion was her primary home where she, as matriarch of the Redstone Family, lived, hosted Conclaves, and showed fledgling Metas what to aspire to. Her benevolent mask was a beautiful and believable one. Mai sometimes wished she'd never seen what was behind it.

The gong sounded again, a thirty-second warning.

"You really waited until the last minute to get here, didn't you?" Caressa tilted her head down at Mai, who was a full three inches shorter.

They flowed down the stairs and into the crowd with the rest of the stragglers.

"You say it often enough yourself," Mai said. "Why waste valuable time on the things you don't want to do?"

She wasn't telling Caressa anything new. Just about everyone knew how much Mai hated these events, the pomposity of it all. The unnecessary expense of the parties. The hypocrisy at the idea of family, when any of them were willing to sacrifice their young for... anything.

As she approached the gathered crowd, Mai felt her mother's gaze on her and turned to meet it—amber eyes the same shade as hers, loosened curls tumbling around her silk-clad shoulders, and a face so beautiful it seemed unreal. It *was* unreal. Mai blinked and looked away.

On the dais behind her mother like a royal retinue sat members of Mai's immediate family: her younger sister, Abi, who could influence living and dying things; their father, Quinn, whose power was invulnerability to everything except old age and his wife's machinations; and Mai's younger brother, Cayman, who could break anything on earth with his mind alone.

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From behind their mother's back, her sister fluttered long fingers at Mai in greeting, risking a small smile. Mai wondered if their mother had noticed. Mai's own smile died before it could be born when she noticed Ethan had taken her place on the dais. He was a mid-level teleporter, avid sycophant, and local mobster with growing influence on the East Coast. Beside him was his father—and Mai's uncle—Stephen, a level-ten telekinetic. She quickly skimmed her gaze over her uncle, not wanting to have him in her sight any longer than necessary.

Looking at them reminded Mai again how much of an anomaly she was among her Power-rich family. She was only a chameleon, able to change surface parts of herself to alter her appearance. Her hearing, sight, and speed were superhuman. But that was ordinary among Metas.

When she was a child, her mother had thought she could be more and tried to force that perceived potential into becoming a reality. That force had yielded nothing but Mai's fear and Mandaia's disappointment. Mai remained as she was.

It was that powerlessness which had left Mai vulnerable as a child.

Even with her Redstone Family weakness, Mai was still more powerful than many members of the other Families who'd bred out their Meta power over the centuries by having children with humans. Only in the last twenty years had Metas begun to pay attention to what Mandaia Redstone had been saying all along, that the Families needed to create fertile marriages between Metas and secure power in the blood. It helped that the Redstones were unique, in that all their members had some sort of power.

Which was why Mandaia Redstone was the matriarch and current head of all Families in North America.

Her mother began speaking from the stage. "Greetings and continued prosperity for doing me the honor of attending this most humble event."

Caressa tried to tug her toward the stage, but Mai dug in her heels. She was close enough. Very gently, she unwound her arm from

her cousin's and put a few inches of distance between them, ignoring Caressa's slightly hurt look. Her skin was tingling with the need to morph into something that would protect her from the danger she sensed on the stage. But there was no mask she could put on, no new chin, no hunched back, no artificially heightened frame that would protect her from what she knew her mother was capable of.

Still, Mai straightened her spine and widened her stance, hands in her pockets, where she felt the small, rectangular, card-sized case where she carried her ID, a few folded bills, and the single key to her car. Her apartment was electronically locked with her fingerprint and a scrambled code, so she didn't need to carry those keys.

"Today, we have come together to announce and celebrate the engagement of Audrina Page and Rafael Hernandez," her mother continued.

As she spoke, two people approached her from opposite sides of the stage—a pretty teenager and a man who looked about Mai's age. Despite her makeup, it was obvious the girl was young, maybe sixteen years old, and that was being generous. She looked Instagram-ready in her floor-length gilded gown that brought out the gold in her own skin. Her hair was a tall and impressive wave of brown silk studded with diamond pins.

Mai wouldn't have been surprised to see a photo of the girl on social media later, pouting toward the audience with her skillfully applied makeup and diamond nose ring. She looked proud to have the Hernandez Family claim on her. But her too-wide eyes and flickering smile betrayed that she wasn't quite sure what she was doing. She was so damn young.

Mai couldn't imagine the amount of money the Hernandez Family had pledged for Mandaia to agree to this.

"Audrina." Mandaia held out her hand, and the girl stepped forward, the skirts of her gold gown brushing the floor and swirling around her long legs. Audrina put her right hand in Mandaia's, and a flare of electricity burned through the room. For the first time, the girl looked frightened. But she kept her hand in Mandaia's even

though the contact with her mother's tremendous power must have hurt. "Rafael." Her mother called over the fiancé-to-be.

Rafael Hernandez stepped forward, looking more confident and capable, as befitting a man at least ten years older than Audrina. He put his hand in Mandaia's left palm, and electricity licked through the room again. On the dais, Rafael flinched but kept his hand where it needed to be, probably not wanting to be outdone by his child-fiancée.

"Unless any Family has some reason why this arrangement should not come to pass..." And Mandaia paused in the traditional manner, something obviously taken from human ceremonies, waiting to see if there were any objections. When all that came was silence, she continued. "Audrina Page and Rafael Hernandez are hereby pledged to each other. The wedding will occur in three years' time, when Audrina comes of age."

Mandaia brought up her open palms, burdened with the hands of the two people who had pledged to join their lives together. The room sparked with the smell of ozone and a flash of blue light as the rings on the pinky fingers of the couple caught both the light and the power in the room.

"Long life and power to you." The entire ballroom rumbled with the combined voices of the hundreds of Metas gathered as they said the traditional words.

Electric heat raced through the air, heating Mai's skin and everyone else's, a source of comfort and a connection to a distant power her mother always speculated was tied into the origin of all Metas. Mai's skin tingled and flushed. As the closest female relative to her mother and the one who in theory would inherit her position should Mandaia see fit to leave the earth to less deserving mortals, she felt an echo of the power surge that her mother experienced during the pledge.

The rising tide of applause pulled her attention from her mother and to the rest of the gathered crowd. Beside her, Caressa was clapping along with the rest of them to ceremonially serenade the

couple's walk down the stairs and into the crowd. Mai's hands stayed at her sides.

Despite the distance between them, she caught her mother's eyes. The darkly golden gaze held Mai's with a ferocity she'd grown used to over the years but had never learned to properly protect herself from. Mandaia was pissed Mai had waited so long to arrive at the ceremony.

Tough shit.

She broke eye contact with her mother and turned from the dais, stepping away from Caressa at the same time with the excuse of reaching for a glass of champagne from a nearby waiter. She didn't want the alcohol, but the glass felt cool in her palm. Grounding. She sipped the champagne, her nose twitching from the bubbles.

At the edge of her awareness, she noticed her uncle drift away from the rest of the family and migrate into the crowd. In his bespoke iron-gray suit and smile meant to charm, he should have been reeling men and women alike into his orbit; after all, he was attractive enough, in the way that everyone in Mai's family was. But people only came close enough to him to be polite, perhaps even to pretend to like him, their distaste apparent in the stiff way they held their bodies, in the way they didn't look at him for too long.

Mai breathed out her own dislike, trying but failing to wrench her gaze from her uncle and to will away the sudden tightness in her chest the sight of him caused. He turned, and Mai froze in the snare of his smile, ice coating her spine.

A shoulder bumped into hers from behind, jostling the champagne glass in her hands and threatening to push her off the stilts of her shoes. She flinched. Only her quick reflexes saved her from drenching her shirt with the wine or stumbling into someone standing nearby. Mai had never been more grateful for rudeness in her life.

"Cayman."

Her brother grinned at her, showing his perfect teeth. His square-jawed good looks and friendly smile were identical to their father's. The only thing he'd inherited from Mandaia were her piercing wolf

eyes. That was enough to make Mai glance away from him for a moment. She refused to look where she'd just seen her uncle.

"Mandaia-Pili." His grin widened as he called her by her full name. *Mandaia the Second*. She winced as if the name hurt. "Nice outfit," he said, flicking a gaze over her sheer blouse and tuxedo pants. "I bet Mother loves it."

"Good thing I didn't wear it for her."

"Or did you?" Cayman amped up his grin. "Whatever the end goal, you definitely got her attention." He slid his hands into the pockets of his tuxedo slacks and tossed a casual glance around them. Although he would never inherit what their mother had—Families relied on female heirs—he took in the massive ballroom, with its endless crowd of beautiful people and the gold, silver, and marble fixtures, as if he owned it and Mai didn't.

Thanks to years of practice, she didn't react. She deliberately trailed her eyes away from her brother to the sight of Caressa making her way through the thick crowd of Metas and their spouses, smiling and making small talk while heading for Mandaia, the real object of her attention. Caressa had always been ambitious in a way that Mai was not, stroking opportunities until she felt the perfect moment to strike. She was a brilliant strategist, something Mandaia had always admired. And respected.

In their world, it was eat or be eaten, take or be taken, and Caressa had balanced her life perfectly on the knife's edge of taking care of herself and making sure no one else took her. Her politics were brilliant, and even Mai, who hated the necessary Family machinations with every bone in her body, had to admire her.

Mai's own solution to survival was to stay away from the family and other Metas as much as she was able. It didn't always quite work out.

Beside her, Cayman plucked his ringing phone from the inside pocket of his jacket and spoke softly into it for a few seconds before putting it away. He looked more intentionally around the room then. After apparently not finding what he was looking for, he gave

a faint shrug. He grabbed his phone again and fired off a quick text in a flurry of thumbs.

“Mother was looking for you earlier.” He tucked his phone back into his pocket and turned back to Mai.

“She always knows where to find me.”

Her brother nodded. “True enough.” Then he gave up his pose of nonchalance and draped himself over the railing, elbows propped up on the swirled marble, grinning like the unpretentious, carefree boy he used to be before...everything happened.

Something down below made his smile turn into a laugh, and he turned to Mai as if he was going to share the joke, then seemed to remember what they’d become to each other. Nearly enemies. His mouth thinned, and he looked back down at the moving crowd. “The only person she can’t find right now is Uncle Stephen. She’s calling for him with no luck.”

“I’m sure he’s taking care of his own business. He’ll come back later to give her a perfectly acceptable excuse for his absence.”

Mai didn’t care where Stephen Redstone had disappeared to. Her uncle was a state senator, hunting enthusiast, and raging asshole. He was also the favorite of her mother’s three siblings. This wasn’t his first sudden disappearance from an event her mother thought was important, and it wouldn’t be the last.

“That guy is a dick.” Cayman sounded jealous. He was nowhere near the favored anything. The only advantage he had in the family, aside from his Meta power, was that he wasn’t Mai. “He could’ve at least waited until this whole bullshit was over before skipping out. Mandaia is pissed.”

“I am no such thing.”

Mai briefly closed her eyes and relaxed her hand around the champagne glass until she felt that it would simply fall from her hand and shatter on the floor. Her mother touched a palm to the center of Mai’s back, a warm and heavy weight.

Anyone watching would probably think it was a touch of affection. But Mai felt the rake of her mother’s Power checking on her state of mind and making sure she functioned as she always

had. A quick look that bypassed Mai's deeper thoughts was the only courtesy her mother gave her. Mai clenched her teeth and bore the assault in silence.

"I'm happy you were able to find your way here despite your prior obligations, Mai." She took her hand away, allowing Mai a quiet breath of relief.

"I told you I would come, Mother." She took a healthy sip of her champagne, although she wished it were whiskey instead.

"You just didn't say what time you would come." Her mother clicked her teeth around the last word. "I know. Always the trickster, Mandaia-Pili."

On unsteady legs, Mai moved away from her mother. One step and then two. "You don't want me around any more than I want to be here, Mother. I was doing us both a favor by showing up as late as I did." Mandaia released a harsh breath, and Mai frowned when she realized it was a habit she'd also picked up over the years. Her annoyance at it made her feel foolish. "I thought Stephen would occupy your attentions, and you'd forget all about your defect daughter."

Her mother hissed and struck, fast as a cobra, fingers digging into Mai's elbow. "That's unnecessary, Mai."

Mai nodded and pulled her elbow away despite the added pain of scraping her skin against her mother's sharp fingernails. "This is my cue to leave, I think." She stepped back another foot. "Give Father and Abi my regards. I'll see everyone at the next family dinner." She said the last words loud enough for anyone listening to hear. Mai had no intention of eating with her family ever again.

Although Mandaia could have done any number of things to keep Mai at her side, she let her go, and Mai left the ballroom with her typical slow and swaying walk. Her heart thundered like the hooves of wild horses.

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