

Chapter 10 — Approved

The safehouse door opened like it always did.

No resistance. No scrape. No “something’s wrong” warning from a lock that had been forced.

Which, in Mai’s experience, was the most violent kind of wrong.

They flowed in fast—Bright first, because of course he did, coat flaring like he’d rehearsed being dramatic in mirrors. Ace second, quiet as a thought, blades low and ready. Shammy third, tall enough that the room felt smaller just to accommodate her. Theta-24 fanned out behind in practiced chaos pretending it was discipline.

Badger took one step inside and immediately said, “Oh, this place has murder vibes.”

Heavenly’s hand touched Badger’s shoulder.

Badger corrected instantly. “—new murder vibes.”

Mai didn’t answer. She moved straight to the cabinet.

It was open.

Not pried. Not cracked. Not broken.

Opened.

Like someone with the correct code had simply decided to be polite.

Mai’s stomach tightened into a hard knot and stayed there.

The tape was still inside.

Untouched.

“Episode Three” remained sealed in its evidence bag, exactly where she’d left it. The older materials—Bright’s packets, the offline laptop case, the Faraday bags—were all aligned with an eerie neatness, like someone had come through and staged “order” as a message.

And next to the tape, laid flat like an offering on the shelf:

A badge.

Not a joke badge. Not a prop.

Foundation staff badge stock, matte finish, crisp print, the kind that looked official because it had been made by a system that had never once asked permission to exist.

Mai picked it up with gloved fingers and turned it over.

Front:

MAI [REDACTED] Photo: her face, neutral, captured from an angle that suggested a hallway camera she never remembered walking past. Clearance: a number and letter combo that made her skin crawl.

Back:

Small text. Clinical. Printed like policy.

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Mai's throat went dry.

Badger leaned in from behind her shoulder, eyes wide. "Yo. They made you an employee."

Mai didn't look at him. "They made me a tool."

Bright's voice went quiet in the way it only did when something stopped being funny. "That's not a real badge."

Jello, pale, said, "It's printed on real stock."

Heavenly muttered, "That's worse."

Shammy stared at the badge like it had insulted her family. "So he can make paperwork. He can make tags. He can make... legitimacy."

Ace didn't speak. She just looked at Mai—at the badge in her hand—then at the cabinet's interior, scanning for the real message behind the staged neatness.

Ace's gaze sharpened. "He didn't take anything."

Mai's fingers tightened on the badge. "No."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Because he wanted you to see what he could take."

Badger, unable to resist, whispered, "That's like leaving a note that says 'nice kidneys.'"

Heavenly sighed through his nose. "Badger."

Badger held up both hands. "I'm coping."

Grouse, deadpan: "Poorly."

Mai forced herself to breathe.

Not because she was panicking.

Because if she didn't breathe, the room would start breathing for her, and she didn't like being outvoted by walls.

She set the badge on the table. Carefully. Like it might decide to bite.

"Jello," Mai said, voice flat. "Tell me we didn't just get issued a clearance level by a ghost."

Jello swallowed, fingers already moving on his laptop. "I can tell you the badge is real stock, real laminate, real microprint." He paused. "I can't tell you who printed it."

Bright's jaw clenched. "It's not a ghost. It's an operator."

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright. "It's a parasite."

Ace's voice came low and precise. "He wanted us to come back."

Mai nodded once. "He wanted us to feel safe enough to return."

Bright's smile was thin. "And he wanted to prove the seam is inside our perimeter."

Badger looked around the safehouse like he was waiting for the couch to start talking. "Okay. So our home base is compromised. Easy fix: we move."

Bright's head tilted. "We are moving."

Badger blinked. "Oh."

Bright's eyes flicked to Mai. "We can't stay here. Not now. Not after this."

Mai didn't argue. She was already scanning, already parsing every angle. The cabinet. The table. The wall outlets. The air vent. The cheap lamp.

She hated that she had to suspect lamps.

"Where's the printer," Mai said suddenly.

Everyone looked at her.

Badger blinked. "We have a printer?"

Mai didn't smile. "We have a 'printer.' The relay. The one it disguised itself as."

Jello's eyes widened. "I didn't see a device here when we set up."

Mai's gaze stayed hard. "That's the point."

Skullker drifted past them without a word and went straight to the hallway closet like doors owed him money.

He opened it.

Inside: cleaning supplies, folded blankets, an old mop.

And a small, innocent-looking white box tucked behind the mop bucket.

An "HP OfficeJet."

Badger's eyebrows shot up. "Oh my God. The printer is real."

Heavenly stared. "It's not real."

Skullker lifted it with one hand like it weighed nothing and carried it into the main room.

The device had no paper tray. No ink port. No normal printer nonsense.

It did, however, have a single RJ45 jack and a tiny blinking LED that pulsed like a heartbeat.

Jello exhaled, tight. "Found the seam anchor."

Bright's expression hardened. "Don't touch the ports."

Badger raised a hand, excited. "Can I touch it with a stick?"

Heavenly said, flatly, "No."

Badger deflated. "You guys hate joy."

Shammy leaned over the box, eyes narrowing. "It's... warm."

Mai's stomach tightened. "It's been active."

Ace's gaze flicked to the badge again. "He was here recently."

Bright's voice was cold. "Or he's still here."

The room went still.

Not silent. Still.

Mai felt it—the sensation that the air had become attentive. Like the safehouse was listening, not as a building, but as a participant.

Shammy's fingers flexed, the pressure in the room shifting. Not lightning yet. Just the weather tasting the room.

"Bright," Mai said quietly. "If he can print a badge... he can print orders."

Bright didn't blink. "Yes."

Mai's jaw clenched. "He can redirect response teams."

Bright's eyes sharpened. "Yes."

Mai felt the worst piece click into place. "He can make a Foundation unit show up here and think we are the anomaly."

Badger's grin vanished. "Okay. That's... actually horrifying."

Heavenly nodded once. "That's the point."

Bright stared at the printer box like it was a snake coiled in a child's toy. "This isn't about the killer anymore."

Shammy's voice was soft, angry. "It's about the system he's growing."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "He's trying to become an O5... without being one."

Mai's mouth tasted like metal. "He's building a fake eye that the real body might obey."

Bright's voice dropped. "Exactly."

Jello swallowed. "So... what's the move."

Mai didn't answer immediately. Because the move wasn't tactical. It was psychological.

They couldn't just kill a man. They had to kill a format and a channel and a pretend authority.

They had to deny the myth its oxygen.

Mai looked at Bright. "He wants us reactive."

Bright nodded. "Yes."

Mai's eyes hardened. "Then we go proactive."

Bright's eyebrows rose slightly. "You have a plan."

Mai didn't smile. "I have a shape."

Badger perked up, hopeful. "Is the shape 'set him on fire.'"

Mai stared at him. "No."

Badger's shoulders slumped. "Cruel."

Mai pointed at the badge. "He issued me a clearance. That means he's trying to authenticate me to systems."

Jello nodded slowly. "So he can route things through you. Spoof your identity."

Mai nodded. "Right. So we give him what he wants."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Meaning."

Mai's voice went ice-cold. "We make the badge real."

Badger's eyes widened. "Wait, what."

Heavenly stared. "That sounds like insanity."

Shammy's grin began to form—slow, dangerous. "It's beautiful."

Ace's gaze locked on Mai. "Explain."

Mai took a breath.

"We don't fight the fact that he's using bureaucracy as a weapon," Mai said. "We weaponize it back. If he can forge my credentials, we turn that into a honeypot identity."

Bright's expression sharpened with interest despite himself. "A false clearance that leads to a trap."

Mai nodded. "We feed him a path. A controlled segment. A fake 'internal' channel that only exists to catch whatever is riding this seam."

Jello's eyes went wide. "That's... actually doable. If we can spin up a sandbox network with believable Foundation signatures—"

Bright cut in. "We can."

Everyone looked at him.

Bright's smile turned thin. "Don't look surprised. I'm annoying, not useless."

Badger whispered, awed, "He has a lair."

Heavenly muttered, "Of course he has a lair."

Shammy leaned closer to the printer box, eyes bright. "So we let him think he's inside... while we build a room that eats him."

Ace's voice was quiet. "And then we terminate."

Bright nodded. "Yes."

Mai's pulse steadied. "But there's a catch."

Badger lifted a finger. "There's always a catch."

Mai looked at Ace.

"He asked for the small one," Mai said softly.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

Mai's throat tightened. "He's fixated on you. If we build a trap without you in the bait, he might not bite."

Ace didn't hesitate. "Then I'm bait."

Mai's hand tightened into a fist. "Ace—"

Ace stepped closer. Her voice softened, just enough to be human. "Mai. He's already aiming at me. Whether I agree or not."

Shammy's expression darkened. "I don't like you being bait."

Ace glanced at her, a tiny flicker of warmth. "I know."

Bright exhaled. "Alright. Then we do it with layers."

He pointed at the printer box. "We bag this. We don't kill it yet."

Jello blinked. "We don't kill it?"

Bright's eyes hardened. "No. We use it to find its parent."

Badger frowned. "Is that... like letting a spider live to find the nest?"

Bright smiled. "Exactly."

Badger nodded solemnly. "I respect the spider strategy."

Heavenly muttered, "You would."

Mai grabbed the evidence bag with Episode Three and slid it into a hard case. "We relocate. Now. No more sitting in a compromised house."

Shammy glanced around, then leaned toward Badger with sudden seriousness. "If you say something stupid at the new site, I will put you in a cloud."

Badger blinked. "A— a cloud?"

Shammy smiled sweetly. "Yes. A boring cloud."

Badger swallowed. "Understood."

Ace stepped to the door, scanning the street through the blinds. "We have company?"

Mai listened.

At first: nothing.

Then, faintly, a distant engine that slowed too deliberately.

A car door closing.

Footsteps—not rushing, not sneaking. Walking like the person believed they belonged on the sidewalk.

Bright's eyes sharpened. "Someone's approaching."

Skullker drifted to the side of the doorway like he'd been born there.

Heavenly's hand touched his comm. Badger's grin tried to appear and got murdered by the mood.

Mai's heart went cold for a simple reason:

If a Foundation unit had been redirected here under a forged order, they wouldn't kick the door.

They'd knock.

And a knock, right now, would be the most dangerous sound in the world.

Then it came.

Three taps. Polite. Official.

The kind of knock that said: open up, or we open you.

Bright didn't move.

Mai didn't breathe.

And from the other side of the door, a calm voice called out:

"Foundation. We're here for Mai. Clearance verification."

Mai stared at the badge on the table.

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Shammy's eyes went storm-bright.

Ace's katanas hummed softly.

Badger whispered, barely audible, "Oh hell."

Bright's voice dropped to a razor-thin calm. "Nobody opens that door."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "We don't open."

Bright nodded. "We vanish."

And somewhere in the safehouse—quiet, hidden, patient—the little "printer" box's LED pulsed once, like a wink.—

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