

Chapter 11 — Extraction

Jello found the second device the way you find a landmine:

By noticing something was too tidy.

He was already moving—quiet, fast, the kind of fast that wasn't panic but pattern—when his fingertips brushed the outlet plate near the kitchen counter and felt a hairline shift that didn't belong. A fraction of give. A whisper of plastic that had been removed and reseated.

He didn't pull it off with his hands.

He used a pen.

Because pens are disposable, and fingers are not.

The plate came away.

Behind it was a puck the size of a large coin, matte-black, clinging to the wall cavity like a tick. A tiny OLED strip scrolled text in a single sterile line.

EPISODE FOUR: EXTRACTION.

Jello swallowed so hard Mai heard it.

"Uh," he said, voice tight. "Guys?"

Badger, crouched behind the couch, whispered, "If you say 'guys' like that again I'm going to start praying."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger whispered, smaller, "I'm coping."

Mai's eyes snapped to the puck. "Is it transmitting?"

Jello's fingers hovered, not touching. "It's always transmitting."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Beacon."

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright. "That means the knock isn't random. They're homing."

Ace didn't move, but the air around her shifted—an invisible line tightening. "They're here for Mai."

Mai's jaw clenched. "They're here for the badge."

Bright glanced at the table where the fake badge lay like a curse. "Which means they think the badge is real."

Or worse: they're pretending to think it's real to see what Triad does.

Mai's mind stayed cold. "Either way, if we open that door, we're on camera and in custody."

Badger whispered, "Custody sounds... unpleasant."

Grouse, from the hallway, muttered, "It sounds like paperwork."

Badger inhaled sharply like someone had threatened his family. "No."

Another polite knock.

Three taps. The same rhythm. The same "we belong here" confidence.

The voice again, calm and flat:

"Foundation. Open the door. Clearance verification."

Bright's sunglasses were still on, because Bright was allergic to looking normal. He leaned close to the peephole without using it—because peepholes are also cameras if your day hates you enough.

"We're not opening," Bright murmured.

Shammy tilted her head toward the ceiling. "Their pressure is wrong. Too controlled. Too... rehearsed."

Ace's gaze flicked to the front window, then away. "They're holding position. No flanking. They want the door."

Mai nodded. "Because the door is the shot."

Badger whispered, "Can we just... not be here."

Mai looked at him. "That's the plan."

Bright's eyes sharpened. "We vanish. Now."

He said it like a simple thing. Like disappearing from a compromised safehouse with a hostile team outside was a normal Tuesday.

Mai checked the room with a snap glance: exits, windows, back door, bathroom vent, kitchen. The safehouse had been selected for "boring." Boring meant predictable. Predictable meant exploitable—by them or against them.

Her eyes went to the back door.

Ace had already moved there without being told, silent as a thought. She looked over her shoulder once—asking with her eyes if Mai wanted quiet or violence.

Mai answered without speaking: quiet.

Ace nodded once.

Shammy hovered near the kitchen window, fingers flexing slightly as if she were holding the concept of weather by its throat and asking it to behave.

Jello held the puck device with a pen-tip like he wanted to fling it into the sun. "Do we take it?"

Bright's voice was immediate. "No."

Jello blinked. "But—"

Bright cut him off. "It's an episode marker. It wants to travel. It wants to be our new pet. We don't adopt."

Badger whispered, delighted, "We're refusing custody of the haunted Roomba."

Heavenly, deadpan: "Yes."

Badger nodded solemnly. "Growth."

Mai grabbed the hard case with Episode Three, slung it, then snapped her eyes to the printer box. "That stays?"

Bright's mouth tightened. "Not if I can help it."

Skullker moved without comment. He lifted the "printer" box with one hand, and with the other he peeled a heavy black evidence bag open like he was unwrapping a present.

He bagged it. Sealed it. No ceremony.

Skullker's voice, low: "Mine."

Badger whispered, awe: "He just adopted the printer."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger whispered, "Sorry. He just... looked happy."

Skullker did not look happy.

Skullker looked fulfilled.

Another knock, sharper this time. Less polite. Same rhythm, but with the patience running out.

The voice again:

"Open the door. This is your final warning."

Shammy's smile flashed briefly, feral. "Final warnings are my favorite genre."

Mai pointed a finger at her without looking. "No genre."

Shammy pouted. "Boring."

Mai nodded. "Boring."

Bright leaned in toward the door and called out, voice loud enough to carry.

"Wrong address," he said.

There was a pause.

Then the voice outside responded, just as loud, calm as a receipt:

"Doctor Bright. Open the door."

Mai felt the hairs rise on her arms.

They didn't just know Mai.

They knew Bright.

Bright's smile turned thin. "Okay. That's new."

Ace's voice was quiet. "He's feeding them lines."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "Or they're not them."

Mai didn't like that. She liked it even less because it sounded correct.

Jello whispered, "Their comms were too clean. No chatter. No confusion."

Heavenly's gaze hardened. "MTF behavior."

Badger whispered, "But like... off-brand."

Grouse muttered, "Temu Task Force."

Badger choked back a laugh at the worst possible time.

Mai looked at Bright. "Back exit. Now."

Bright nodded once. "Go."

They moved.

No rush. No clatter. No frantic footsteps that would make a camera's auto-focus feel important.

Just clean, controlled motion—boring.

Ace eased the back door open a fraction, checked the alley line, then slid out. Mai followed, then Shammy, then Bright. Theta-24 flowed after, each in their lane: Heavenly last to make sure no one forgot something dumb, Jello clutching his laptop like a heart, Skullker carrying the bagged "printer" like it was a trophy, Badger whispering, "This is so cool," like he couldn't help himself.

They stepped into the narrow alley behind the safehouse.

Quiet. Sunlight. Trash bins. A stray cat that looked at them like absolutely not my business.

Mai loved the cat.

They moved fast now—still controlled, but speed mattered once they were outside the "shot."

Then—

A loud crack from the front of the building.

Not a gunshot. Not an explosion.

A breach tool popping the front door.

Badger's eyes widened. "Ohhh they're coming in."

Heavenly's voice was tight. "Move."

They rounded the alley corner toward the parked vehicles.

Mai's stomach dropped.

Two of the SUVs—Theta-24's flank cars—were idling with doors open.

Empty.

And above them, fixed to a streetlight like it had always belonged there:

A camcorder.

Old-school. Big. Obvious.

Pointed at the cars.

Pointed at the alley mouth.

Pointed at where Ace would emerge first.

Ace stopped dead—just half a step, just enough to change the angle. Her eyes narrowed to slits.

The camcorder's lens twitched.

Tracking.

"Decoy," Ace said quietly. "It's not recording the cars. It's recording us."

Shammy's voice went low. "He put a lens on our exit."

Mai's blood went cold. "He anticipated the vanish."

Bright's jaw clenched. "Of course he did. That's why it's called Episode Four."

Jello's voice cracked, "It's live. It's streaming to the root node."

Badger whispered, reverent, "He's doing the director thing again."

Heavenly growled, "Badger."

Badger whispered, "Shutting up."

Mai's mind snapped into place: the "Foundation" team at the front wasn't just a threat.

They were a push.

To force Triad out the back.

To force them into the shot.

To make the extraction the episode.

Mai's voice went ice-cold. "We are not giving him a clean frame."

Ace's katanas hummed softly. Not fully lit. Just awake.

Shammy's eyes burned with a storm she was barely holding on a leash. "Say the word."

Mai said, "Boring."

Shammy blinked. "Boring."

Mai nodded. "Make the camera boring."

Shammy took a slow breath, lifted her hand, and the air around the camcorder thickened—not into lightning, not into drama.

Into humidity.

A soft, invisible film.

Condensation kissed the lens like someone fogging a mirror with a sigh.

The camcorder image would be useless now: a smeared, milky blur of light and shadow with no crisp silhouette to fetishize.

Jello's laptop pinged.

"Feed degraded," he said, almost giddy with relief. "He's losing the shot."

Bright's smile was sharp. "Good."

Then the camcorder's side panel flipped open by itself.

A small screen on its body lit up with blocky text.

NICE TRY.

Badger whispered, "It has subtitles."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Mai didn't blink. "He's adapting."

Ace's gaze locked on the camcorder. "So do we."

And then the camcorder moved.

Not falling.

Not swinging.

It rotated on the mount like someone turned it with an invisible hand—slow, deliberate, re-aiming despite the fogged lens. Searching for an angle it could salvage.

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "It's not a person. It's the device."

Mai's stomach tightened. "An anomalous camera."

Bright's voice went cold. "A memetic lens."

Ace stepped forward one pace, and the world seemed to tighten around her like it had been waiting.

She lifted one katana—just enough that the emerald glow licked along the edge.

Badger's eyes widened. "Ohhhh she's gonna—"

Mai cut him off. "No cheering."

Badger mouthed silently: sorry.

Ace didn't swing at the camera.

She swung at the mount.

A clean, surgical cut.

Metal parted without drama. The camcorder slipped free—

—and for a heartbeat, it looked like it would fall and smash like any normal object.

Then it stopped midair.

Hanging.

Held.

Like something was refusing to let its "eye" die.

Mai's breath caught.

Shammy's voice was low. "It doesn't want to blink."

Bright's jaw tightened. "Then we make it."

Ace's second blade rose.

Mai understood the move before it happened: if the camera was being held by the seam, then cutting it wasn't about steel—it was about denying the system a stable anchor point.

Ace struck again.

Not at the camera.

At the air behind it, where nothing should be.

The emerald edge flared, slicing through something that wasn't visible but was real—a tension line, a thread, a held breath.

The camcorder dropped instantly.

It hit the pavement and shattered like a normal machine.

The side screen blinked once more, trying to be smug—

Then went dark.

Jello exhaled hard. “Root feed just... hiccuped.”

Mai’s pulse steadied. “Good.”

From inside the building, the front door slammed fully open.

Boots. Voices. A command tone.

They were entering. Searching. Calling names.

Not panicked. Not angry.

Procedural.

Extraction.

Bright looked at Mai. “Vehicles. Now.”

They moved—fast, clean. Everyone in. Doors shut. Engines on.

Badger slid into the back seat and immediately whispered, “We just killed a camera.”

Heavenly replied, “Yes.”

Badger whispered, “That was sick.”

Heavenly replied, “Yes. Stop talking.”

Mai pulled out, tires humming, the convoy re-forming like a school of fish avoiding a shark.

In the rearview mirror, the safehouse looked ordinary again.

Just a building.

Just walls.

Just a place that had tried to become a stage.

Mai didn’t let herself relax.

Because she knew what Episode Four meant.

It wasn’t the killer coming for them with a knife.

It was the system he’d grown trying to take them into custody.

And if he could make a fake Foundation unit knock on a door with confidence—

Then he could make the real Foundation move next.

Bright’s voice was quiet in the passenger seat. “We need a new base.”

Mai nodded. "Secondary site."

Bright's smile was thin. "Not anymore."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "What."

Bright glanced at his phone—still dead-screen, still wrong in his pocket—and exhaled.

"Because if he's 'root' now," Bright said softly, "there's no such thing as secondary."

Shammy's voice from the back was darker. "He's inside the idea of our perimeter."

Ace's gaze stayed fixed on the road ahead. "Then we stop having a perimeter."

Mai's hands tightened on the wheel.

Bright's mouth twitched. "That's the most terrifying sentence I've heard today."

Badger whispered, almost admiring, "I love you guys."

Heavenly whispered, "Please don't."

Jello's laptop pinged again.

He looked down.

Went pale.

"Guys," he said quietly.

Mai's voice was instant. "What."

Jello swallowed.

"The root node," he said. "It just posted a new label."

Mai's stomach dropped. "What label."

Jello's voice cracked, just slightly.

"O5-LOOK / CONFIRMED."

And under it, like a subtitle in a horror episode that had learned to smile:

"NEXT: THETA-24."

Badger's grin vanished so fast it was almost impressive.

Heavenly stared straight ahead. "No."

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright. "Oh."

Ace's katanas hummed softly in the back seat.

Mai's voice went ice-cold.

“Now,” she said, “it’s personal.”

ja eteenpäin!—

© 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace21:chapter11>

Last update: **31/03/2026 16:21**

