

Chapter 12 — Stand Down

Bright stared at the ping like it had insulted his mother.

Not because it said “Stand down.”

Foundation messages said that all the time. Sometimes deserved. Often weaponized.

He stared because the signature was real.

Real encryption. Real handshakes. Real timing. The kind of digital posture you only got from systems that had been paranoid since before most people knew what a firewall was.

And yet the sender field read:

O5-LOOK

Bright’s sunglasses hid his eyes, but not the change in his mouth. The grin didn’t die. It sharpened.

“Well,” he said softly, “that’s new.”

Mai kept driving. Her voice was flat and immediate. “Read it.”

Bright didn’t. Not yet. He let it sit on his screen like a poisonous frog.

Shammy leaned forward from the back seat, tall enough that her shadow touched the dashboard. “If you don’t read it, I’m going to read it with lightning.”

Bright finally tapped the screen. “Threatening me with weather is not the flex you think it is.”

“It is,” Shammy said pleasantly. “I’m weather.”

Badger’s voice crackled over comms from the other SUV, already vibrating with unhelpful enthusiasm. “Hey, if it’s a real O5 message, does that mean we’re like... officially in trouble? Because I’ve always wanted to be officially in trouble.”

Heavenly cut in instantly. “Badger.”

Badger corrected. “I have always wanted to be... officially acknowledged.”

Grouse: “That’s still stupid.”

Badger: “It’s honest.”

Bright read aloud, calm as a man reading a grocery list:

“Stand down. O5 request. Maintain current position and surrender anomalous materials for reassignment. Do not engage. Further action constitutes insubordination.”

A beat.

Then Bright added, almost as an afterthought: “And it’s addressed to me. By name.”

Mai’s knuckles tightened on the wheel. “He got into an actual channel.”

Jello, in the back of the lead vehicle with them now—because Bright had decided the convoy needed “brains in the same car as the mouth,” which had not sounded like a compliment—was already pale.

“It’s not just a fake label anymore,” Jello said. “It’s... it’s wearing real signatures. That means he either—”

Bright finished for him, voice quiet. “—stole keys, or found a machine that shouldn’t exist, or he’s sitting on a seam that reaches into a place that nobody admits has seams.”

Shammy’s eyes went storm-bright. “So... he’s in the bones.”

Mai hated how right that sounded.

Ace sat behind Mai, silent, a small gravity well with katanas. When she finally spoke, it was low and precise.

“Does anyone here believe an O5 would send ‘surrender anomalous materials’ as plain text with no secondary authentication?”

Bright’s mouth twitched. “No.”

Mai’s voice was cold. “So it’s bait.”

Bright nodded once. “It’s bait.”

Badger’s comms chirped again. “So we ignore it?”

Bright’s voice went sharp. “We do not ignore it.”

Badger blinked—audibly. “What.”

Bright’s jaw tightened. “We don’t ignore it, because the moment it exists, someone else might obey it.”

Heavenly cut in, calm and grim. “He’s creating a compliance cascade.”

Bright: “Exactly.”

Mai’s pulse went colder. “So even if we don’t stand down, someone else will expect us to.”

Bright’s smile went thin. “And if they show up expecting us to stand down and we don’t, we look like the anomaly. Which makes containment teams think they’re doing their jobs.”

Badger, softly: “Oh.”

Grouse: “Yeah.”

Badger: “That’s... actually smart evil.”

Shammy murmured, delighted in the worst way. “He’s not just killing people. He’s killing trust.”

Mai glanced at the rearview mirror.

Ace’s eyes met hers. Violet, steady, unreadable.

“He asked for Theta-24 next,” Mai said.

Badger’s comms went quiet for a second, like even Badger’s mouth had encountered a speed bump.

Then: “Okay. That’s rude.”

Heavenly: “We’re not dying for content.”

Badger: “Speak for yourself.”

Heavenly: “Badger.”

Badger: “I mean— we’re not dying for his content.”

Mai sighed, not because it was funny, but because it almost was, and she hated that this was how you stayed sane.

Bright leaned forward and pointed at Jello’s laptop. “Show me the root node status.”

Jello flipped the screen around. The map looked uglier now—like a diagram that had learned to smirk.

Two branches. One dark, one bright.

O5-LOOK / ROOT — ACTIVE

And under it, a smaller line that hadn’t been there ten minutes ago:

HANDOFF WINDOW: 00:27:11

Mai’s stomach tightened. “Countdown again.”

Ace’s voice was quiet. “He’s scheduling.”

Bright’s tone went clinical. “He’s coordinating. He’s trying to make a moment where Theta-24 gets isolated, identified, and... harvested.”

Badger’s comms crackled. “Harvested? Bro, I don’t like that word.”

Shammy’s smile was sharp. “You shouldn’t.”

Mai made a fast decision.

“Bright,” she said. “We need air. Not another building. Not a site. A moving dead zone.”

Bright blinked. “You want to operate out of—”

Mai cut him off. “A vehicle.”

Badger’s comms chirped, delighted. “A battle bus!”

Heavenly: “Badger.”

Badger, immediately smaller: “A tactical mobile command platform.”

Grouse: “Still stupid.”

Mai ignored the peanut gallery. "If every fixed location becomes a set, then we stop having a fixed location."

Ace nodded once, like it was obvious. "No doors."

Bright's mouth twitched. "Skullker is going to be heartbroken."

Skullker's voice came over comms from the flank vehicle, flat as a tombstone. "I heard that."

Bright: "Good."

Badger: "Skullker, buddy, you can open vehicle doors."

Skullker: "Don't."

Badger: "Okay!"

Mai kept driving while her brain built the next shape.

"We do two things," she said. "One: we quarantine Theta-24's public footprint. No posting. No chatter. No 'Walking War Crimes' energy spilling into the air."

Badger's comms went offended. "That's literally my blood type."

Heavenly: "Then donate it."

Badger: "Cruel."

Mai continued. "Two: we bait the bait."

Jello frowned. "What does that mean."

Mai's eyes stayed on the road. "He wants Theta-24. That means he's tracking them via something. Devices, comms, pattern recognition, whatever. We give him a clean, controlled, fake Theta-24 signature."

Bright's smile returned, thin. "A decoy team."

Mai nodded. "A decoy presence. A decoy move. A decoy 'episode.'"

Badger's comms chirped. "Ohhh. We make Episode Four and it sucks."

Mai's lips twitched. "Yes."

Ace's voice was quiet. "We make it boring."

Shammy: "Boring kills myths."

Bright: "Boring kills cameras."

Badger: "Boring kills my soul."

Heavenly: "Accept it."

Jello's fingers moved. "I can spoof their device IDs. I can generate a radio shadow that looks like

Theta-24 is doing something loud somewhere else.”

Bright’s tone sharpened. “Not loud. Loud gives him joy.”

Jello corrected instantly. “Fine. Something... administrative.”

Badger: “Can we make it look like we’re stuck in a DMV.”

Grouse: “That’s too cruel.”

Mai nodded once. “Do it.”

Badger’s comms burst into delighted laughter. “We’re going to weaponize bureaucracy again!”

Bright: “It worked once.”

Mai glanced at the evidence case. “But we have a bigger problem.”

Bright’s eyes flicked to the case too. “Episode Three.”

Mai’s voice went cold. “We still haven’t watched it.”

Shammy’s tone sharpened. “We don’t watch it.”

Ace’s katanas hummed faintly, like they agreed.

Bright exhaled. “We dissect it. Offline. In a controlled sandbox. No speakers. No screens that can talk back.”

Badger: “So... no fun.”

Heavenly: “Correct.”

Jello swallowed. “There’s a risk it’s memetic. Or worse—interactive.”

Bright nodded. “And we’re going to treat it like it wants to breed.”

Mai said, “Good.”

Then Bright’s phone pinged again.

Not a ring. A clean notification.

Another message from the same channel.

Bright looked at it.

His mouth tightened.

Mai didn’t ask. “Read it.”

Bright did.

“Final warning. O5 request. Failure to comply will result in immediate reassignment of Theta-24 via containment authority.”

Badger's comms went silent again.

Then, softly: "Wait. Reassignment of me?"

Heavenly: "Of the unit."

Badger: "Yeah but also... me."

Mai's blood went cold. "He's threatening to mobilize a real containment team."

Bright's voice was flat. "Or a fake one wearing real clothes."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "Either way, he's forcing contact."

Shammy's voice was low. "He wants a collision."

Mai felt the car's interior shrink around that word.

Collision.

That's what this was becoming: not just a hunt, but a staged intersection between Triad, Theta-24, and something pretending to be O5 authority long enough to get people killed.

Mai's voice went razor-sharp. "Then we choose where the collision happens."

Bright's eyes flicked to her. "You have a place."

Mai nodded once. "A place where cameras are worthless. Where signals are noisy. Where paperwork dies."

Badger's comms chimed in, hopeful. "Is it a swamp?"

Mai's lips twitched. "No."

Badger: "Is it a sewer?"

Mai: "No."

Badger: "Is it Costco?"

Heavenly: "Badger."

Mai almost smiled. Almost.

Bright leaned closer. "Where."

Mai said it, and the convoy seemed to tense as if the city itself had heard.

"Under the airport," Mai said. "The service underbelly. The maintenance corridors. The places that are all concrete and hum and restricted access and blind corners."

Shammy's grin sharpened. "Oh, that's deliciously ugly."

Ace nodded. "No windows."

Bright's mouth twitched. "And lots of interference."

Jello's eyes widened. "And lots of institutional infrastructure... which means he might already have seeds there."

Mai: "Good."

Bright: "Good?"

Mai's voice went cold. "If he has seeds there, we burn them. If he doesn't, we plant ours."

Badger's comms crackled, excited again. "So we're doing an underground airport episode."

Heavenly: "Stop calling it an episode."

Badger: "Sorry. Underground airport operation."

Grouse: "Still sounds like an episode."

Badger: "Everything is an episode if you have depression."

Heavenly: "Badger."

Badger: "I'm coping!"

Mai's eyes stayed forward, but her mind was already building the next hour like a blueprint.

They had a countdown.

They had a threat.

They had a fake O5 signal wearing real clothes.

And now the killer had made the critical mistake of trying to move Theta-24 like chess pieces.

Mai didn't move chess pieces.

Mai moved traps.

Bright's voice dropped, almost fond in the worst way. "Alright. Under the airport it is."

Ace's voice was quiet. "He won't like it."

Shammy: "Good."

Badger's comms: "I love when we do things people don't like."

Heavenly: "I don't like you."

Badger: "Aw."

The convoy turned.

And as they approached the airport's service access—past fences, past anonymous doors, past the kind of signage nobody read unless they were trained to—the sterile node on Jello's screen pulsed.

The label updated again, as if the system itself was smiling.

O5-LOOK / CONFIRMED EPISODE FOUR: EXTRACTION — MOVING TARGET LOCK: THETA-24 — ACQUIRED

Jello's voice went tight. "He thinks he has them."

Bright's voice was calm. "Let him."

Mai's hands tightened on the wheel.

"Let him come," she said.—

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

