

Chapter 13 — Green Light

The badge reader chirped like it was happy to see them.

Mai hadn't shown a badge.

Bright hadn't waved anything.

Nobody had even pretended to play along.

And yet the airport maintenance door gave them a clean, legitimate beep-beep, the latch clicked, and the slab of metal swung inward like a polite host letting guests into a basement.

The corridor beyond was pure underbelly: poured concrete, low ceiling, pipes sweating in the dim, and that constant industrial hum that makes you feel like you're inside a machine's throat.

A ceiling-mounted CCTV camera rotated toward them.

Its red status light blinked once.

Then turned green.

A speaker somewhere above them whispered, intimate as a secret in an elevator:

"Welcome, Walking War Crimes."

Badger stopped so hard he almost tripped over his own shoes.

"...okay," he said softly. "That was targeted."

Heavenly didn't even look at him. "No chatter."

Badger nodded once with exaggerated solemnity. "No chatter. I will silently internalize my fear."

Grouse muttered, "You don't have that feature."

Badger's mouth opened—

Heavenly's hand rose like a stop sign.

Badger closed his mouth like a man obeying a natural law.

Mai's eyes flicked up to the green light. "That's not a camera status."

Jello's laptop was already out, the screen angled so the glow didn't paint his face like a confession. "Green is... 'authorized stream.'"

Bright's jaw tightened. "He's flipped the system from 'security' to 'broadcast.'"

Shammy's voice was low, offended. "He's proud."

Ace stepped forward first, because Ace always stepped forward first when a place tried to speak. Small silhouette. Quiet confidence. Two emerald edges barely humming, like the swords were breathing through their teeth.

Mai stayed half a step behind her. Anchor position. Habit. Love disguised as discipline.

“Camera,” Mai said quietly. “Jello. Can you kill it.”

Jello swallowed. “I can cut the feed—” his fingers flew, then hesitated, “—but if this is airport infrastructure, there’s a chance cutting it triggers alarms that drag real security into this. Or worse... auto-lockdowns.”

Bright’s tone turned clinical. “So don’t cut it.”

Badger’s eyes widened. “Wait, what?”

Bright didn’t look at him. “We don’t want a lockdown. We want flow.”

Badger nodded like that made perfect sense, then whispered anyway: “I do not like being observed by a ceiling.”

Heavenly hissed, “Badger.”

Badger whispered, smaller: “Sorry. I’ll fear quieter.”

Mai’s gaze tracked the corridor geometry. Service doors. Side tunnels. Overhead panels. A perfect place for a man who loved staging, because it was already a stage: every corridor felt like a “back of house” where nobody asked questions until the worst moment.

A second speaker clicked on, slightly down the hall.

This one wasn’t whispering.

It was doing its best imitation of a VHS documentary narrator. Too calm. Too sure of itself.

“Episode Four: Extraction.”

A soft, modulated tone followed—like a tracking adjustment, like the system was clearing its throat.

“Objective: isolate Theta-24.”

Badger’s head tilted. “He said the quiet part out loud.”

Grouse replied, flat: “That’s because he thinks he controls the room.”

Shammy’s eyes went storm-bright. “Do we?”

Bright’s mouth tightened. “Not yet.”

Ace looked up at the camera. Just once. A direct glance. Not fear, not defiance—something colder.

Recognition.

Then she looked away as if the camera had failed an unspoken test.

Mai felt it like a small wave: the format wanted Ace’s eyes. Wanted the “small one” to acknowledge the lens.

Ace refused it.

Good.

Mai breathed out, slow. "We do boring."

Shammy frowned. "How do we do boring underground?"

Mai's eyes flicked to the pipes. "Fog."

Shammy's smile sharpened. "Oh."

She lifted a hand slightly—not dramatic, no lightning, no wind—just a subtle pressure shift. Humidity climbed in a narrow column, the air cooling enough for the camera dome to bead.

Condensation kissed the plastic.

The green status light blinked twice, like irritation.

Badger watched, impressed despite himself. "She's bullying the lens."

Heavenly muttered, "Good."

Jello murmured, eyes on his screen, "Feed quality just dropped. He's still live, but he's losing detail."

Bright's voice was thin. "Make it worse."

Shammy's grin went feral. "With pleasure."

A soft mist bloomed near the ceiling, invisible at first, then just enough to make the overhead fluorescents smear and halo. The corridor didn't look cinematic anymore.

It looked cheap.

Unclear.

Boring.

The speaker clicked again. The voice sounded... annoyed.

"Interference detected."

Badger's whisper slipped out before Heavenly could strangle it: "Good."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "He's not alone in this."

Bright glanced at her. "Because of the real signatures?"

Mai nodded. "And because the building let us in."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Airports don't do favors."

Ace's voice was quiet. "Someone inside opened the door."

Shammy's eyes flicked along the ceiling. "Or something inside."

Skullker drifted to the first service door on the right like it owed him money. He tested the handle.

Locked.

He didn't sigh. He didn't comment.

He simply looked at Bright.

Bright pointed with his chin. "Not yet."

Skullker froze, visibly unhappy at being denied his natural calling.

Badger watched him with pity. "This is cruelty."

Heavenly said, "Yes."

Mai moved forward, slow and deliberate. She didn't want to sprint into a set-piece. She wanted to step into it like she'd already read the script and found the typos.

Jello's voice went tight. "I'm seeing a local node up ahead. Not 'printer.' Something bigger."

Bright's eyes sharpened. "Define bigger."

Jello swallowed. "A rack. Like a network cabinet. It's broadcasting like a heartbeat."

Badger whispered, "So the airport has a spooky server room."

Grouse muttered, "Every airport has a spooky server room."

Badger nodded solemnly. "Fair."

They advanced.

The corridor widened slightly, then forked—one path curving left into deeper service tunnels, the other ending at a heavy steel door with a small window.

The steel door had a sign bolted to it:

RESTRICTED — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

Under the sign, someone had drawn a crude bat-like symbol in black marker.

Not elegant. Not stylized.

Like a child tracing a nightmare.

Mai's stomach tightened.

There it was. The "copycat" signature. The analog-horror ego. The myth being stapled to infrastructure with a Sharpie.

Bright's voice went low. "He's mixing brands."

Shammy's mouth curled. "He's hungry."

Ace's gaze hardened. "He's close."

Skullker's hand hovered near the door handle like a dog on a leash smelling meat.

Bright looked at Jello. "Is the rack behind that door."

Jello nodded. "Yes. That's the pulse."

Mai stared at the bat symbol. "And that's the bait."

Badger leaned in, unable to help himself. "Can I—"

Heavenly said, "No."

Badger sighed. "I wasn't even finished."

Heavenly's tone didn't change. "Still no."

Mai took a breath. "We don't open with drama. We open with control."

Bright's eyes flicked to Skullker. "Door."

Skullker's posture changed—subtle, almost invisible, but it was the closest thing he had to joy.

He reached for the handle.

Mai's voice cut in. "Wait."

Skullker stopped mid-motion. The world held its breath with him.

Mai looked at Ace. "You stay behind me. No silhouette first."

Ace's eyes narrowed, offended on principle. "Mai—"

Mai didn't blink. "He wants you framed."

Ace's jaw tightened.

Then, reluctantly, she nodded.

Shammy leaned in, voice low and protective. "If the room tries to take you, I'm ripping the ceiling out."

Mai replied, "Boring."

Shammy huffed. "Boring ripping."

Mai almost smiled. Almost.

Bright raised his phone—not connected, not functional, but symbolic—and spoke casually toward the ceiling speaker like he was addressing a producer.

"You want an extraction?" Bright said.

A pause.

The speaker clicked.

“Yes.”

Bright smiled thinly. “Then extract this.”

He nodded at Skullker.

Skullker opened the door.

Not with a kick. Not with a slam.

With the calm inevitability of a man who believed doors existed to be corrected.

The lock gave with a sharp metallic snap.

The door swung inward.

And the room beyond was... staged.

Not like a movie set with props.

Like a ritual room built by someone who had watched too many analog horror tapes and decided reality should look like them.

A single CRT monitor on a table.

A camcorder on a tripod, pointed at the doorway.

A VCR deck humming softly.

And on the floor, in the center of the room, four men on their knees—hands zip-tied, faces bruised, gagged with duct tape.

Real criminals. Real fear in their eyes. The kind of terror you can't fake because it sits too deep.

Above them, painted on the concrete wall in thick black strokes:

THE BAT SAVES THE CITY

Under that, a second line, smaller, cleaner:

COPYCATS GET TERMINATED.

Mai felt the irony hit like cold water.

O5 wanted termination to prevent copycats.

And the copycat had written the policy on the wall like scripture.

Badger's voice came out soft, involuntary. “Oh... this is so messed up.”

Heavenly's jaw tightened. “Those are civilians.”

Grouse corrected automatically. “Those are criminals.”

Heavenly didn't look at him. “They're still people.”

Shammy's eyes burned. "He's using them as props."

Ace's katanas hummed louder—still in control, but awake in a way that made the air feel thinner.

Mai stepped in just far enough to see the room fully, keeping her body between Ace and the camcorder's line.

Jello's voice went tight behind her. "The rack is in the corner. It's hooked to the VCR. He's feeding signal through... analog."

Bright's smile died. "He's using VHS as an air gap."

Badger whispered, almost admiring despite himself, "That's... actually smart."

Heavenly hissed. "Badger."

Badger whispered, "Sorry. It's smart evil."

The CRT flickered.

Static rolled.

Then the screen stabilized, showing a grainy black-and-white hallway shot.

Not this room.

A different corridor.

And in that corridor, a figure stood in silhouette—bat-like ears, long coat, posture deliberately theatrical.

The copycat's costume wasn't good. It was trying too hard. Like someone cosplaying menace.

But the voice that came through the CRT—distorted, calm, dead—was not cosplay.

It had intent.

"Welcome," the voice said.

Mai's skin crawled.

"You brought the War Crimes."

Badger's head tilted. "I do not consent to being narrated."

The voice continued, ignoring him.

"Extraction begins now."

Mai's eyes snapped to the four kneeling men.

The camcorder's red light blinked.

Then turned green.

Jello whispered, horrified, "He just went live again."

Shammy's fingers flexed. The air pressure in the room began to shift, dangerous. "Mai—"

Mai's voice was ice. "Boring."

Shammy's jaw clenched hard enough to crack teeth. "Boring."

Bright stepped forward, calm as a man walking into a gun barrel. "If you start the extraction," he said loudly, "you lose your audience."

The CRT voice paused.

Almost... curious.

"Explain."

Bright smiled thinly. "Because you're about to show them what you really are."

The voice hummed, amused. "And what am I?"

Bright's eyes went cold. "A copycat."

Silence.

The air in the room tightened. Even the criminals on the floor seemed to hold their breath behind duct tape.

Then the CRT hissed.

The voice returned—still calm, but with a hairline crack in it now. A little pride wounded.

"No."

Bright's smile sharpened. "Yes."

A beat.

Then the CRT image flickered and changed—just for a second—to a close-up of Ace's face, captured from somewhere else. A camera angle Mai hadn't seen. A shot that said: I've had eyes on you longer than you think.

And the voice whispered, almost tender:

"Bring the small one forward."

Mai's blood turned to ice.

Ace moved—one step, instinctive, furious.

Mai's hand shot back and caught her wrist.

Not hard.

Just enough to anchor.

Ace's eyes burned into Mai's for half a second.

Mai didn't plead. Didn't soften.

Just one sentence, low:

"Don't give him the frame."

Ace's breath came out sharp.

Then she nodded once.

The CRT voice shifted, losing patience.

"Extraction begins."

And behind them—down the corridor they'd come from—boots sounded.

Many boots.

Disciplined.

Not airport staff. Not cops. Not tourists.

A unit moving with purpose.

Heavenly's head turned slightly. "We're being boxed."

Grouse murmured, "Front door team."

Badger whispered, "Ohhhh... collision."

Bright's face hardened. "That message... 'stand down'... it wasn't for us."

Mai's spine went cold. "It was for them."

Jello's voice cracked. "He's pulling a real response into a fake authority channel."

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright. "He's about to make us shoot Foundation."

Mai's mind snapped into a clean, brutal line:

If they fought the unit coming down the hall, the copycat won. If they obeyed, the copycat won. If they hesitated—someone innocent died on camera, and the copycat won.

Ace's voice was quiet, lethal. "So we break the episode."

Mai stared at the camcorder.

At the criminals.

At the rack feeding the seam through analog.

And she made the only decision that killed formats.

“Skullker,” Mai said.

Skullker turned instantly.

Mai pointed at the rack.

“Erase it,” she said.

Skullker’s eyes narrowed—because for him, “erase” meant doors, and this was equipment. But he nodded anyway like it was a door in disguise.

He moved.

Fast.

The CRT voice rose, sharp now—finally emotional.

“NO.”

Skullker didn’t slow.

And in the corridor outside, the approaching boots stopped.

A voice called out, clean and official:

“Foundation. Stand down and step away from the anomaly.”

Bright’s smile vanished.

Mai’s blood went cold.

Because the voice was real.

Not VHS.

Not theater.

A real team, real protocol, real guns.

And they had no idea the “anomaly” wasn’t Triad.

It was the room itself.—

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