

Chapter 14 — War Crimes

The title card on the CRT looked like it had been typed by an angry god with a typewriter.

EPISODE FOUR: WAR CRIMES

Badger stared at it, and for once—for once—he didn't immediately crack a joke.

He just whispered, like a man at a funeral trying not to laugh at the wrong thought.

"...that is so wildly unfair branding."

Heavenly didn't even glance at him. His eyes were already on the corridor behind them, where the boots had stopped. A real unit. A real voice. Real authority—aimed in exactly the wrong direction.

Shammy's fingers flexed, the air pressure in the room shifting in small, dangerous pulses. "If they push in, I'm going to break a lot of things."

Mai's voice cut through it, cold and controlled. "Not them."

Shammy's eyes flashed. "Not them. Him."

Ace's katanas hummed a fraction louder, as if they agreed with her spelling.

Skullker reached the rack and yanked a cable.

It didn't behave like a cable.

It behaved like a vein.

A thin string of static arced along his glove, and the camcorder on its tripod swivelled smoothly—too smoothly—toward him, lens tracking like a living eye.

The camcorder's tiny tally light blinked green again.

Live.

Jello's voice went tight, almost panicked. "It's prioritizing him as a subject."

Badger exhaled. "Skullker is the main character now. That's— that's bad. He's not a main character guy. He's a—"

Grouse murmured, "A door."

Badger nodded emphatically. "Yeah. He's a door. Not a protagonist."

Skullker didn't look at the camera. He didn't hesitate. He just grabbed the entire rack by the frame and pulled.

Metal protested.

Bolts screamed.

The rack shifted three inches.

The four kneeling criminals on the floor began to scream through their duct tape.

Not loud, at first.

Then wrong.

Like the sound was coming from deeper than lungs. Like something had crawled into their breath and decided to wring it out for the camera.

Mai's stomach turned.

Heavenly's voice went sharp. "They're being affected. Now."

Ace's eyes narrowed, rage flickering hard enough to be visible. "He's using them as amplifiers."

Shammy's jaw clenched. "He's pumping fear into the room."

Bright's voice was a razor. "And recording it."

The unit in the corridor behind them spoke again, closer now. Command voice. Controlled. Professional.

"Step away from the anomaly. Identify yourselves."

Mai didn't turn her head. She couldn't afford to split attention. The room was a trap, the camcorder was a mouth, the criminals were turning into a chorus, and the hallway was about to become a muzzle.

Bright raised his voice, calm as if he'd been born in bureaucracy.

"Foundation," Bright called toward the corridor. "This is Dr. Bright. Do not advance. You are being spoofed."

A beat.

Then the corridor voice replied, cool and flat:

"Dr. Bright is not authorized on this channel. Stand down."

Badger blinked hard. "Ohhhh, he's getting HR'd by a gun."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger whispered, "Sorry. That was— that was involuntary."

Mai's mind snapped into a clean conclusion.

They weren't going to talk their way out.

The other unit believed they had an O5 instruction. Even if it was forged, it was wearing enough legitimacy to make trained people obey it. And the copycat knew exactly how long it took for doubt to bloom inside trained minds.

Too long.

The criminals on the floor kept screaming into tape.

The camcorder's lens made tiny adjustments, hunting for the best frame.

And the CRT flickered again.

The image shifted from the hallway shot to a grainy close-up of the bat-costumed silhouette—head tilted, posture smug.

The voice came through, clearer now. Closer to human.

"You wanted boring."

A faint hiss, almost a laugh.

"So I made you administrative."

Badger whispered, genuinely offended. "That's evil. That's personal."

Mai didn't blink. "Jello. Kill the feed."

Jello swallowed. "If I kill the feed, it might trigger—"

Bright cut in, sharp. "Then trigger it."

Shammy nodded, teeth bared. "Trigger it."

Ace's voice was quiet, lethal. "Trigger it."

Badger added, helpfully, "Trigger it."

Heavenly said, "Stop contributing."

Badger mouthed: okay.

Jello's fingers flew. "I'm going to jam the camera at the analog layer. I can flood the signal with noise so the 'episode' becomes unwatchable."

Mai nodded. "Do it."

The CRT voice purred, suddenly delighted.

"Yes. Fight. Make it beautiful."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "He wants an aesthetic."

Bright's voice was ice. "Then we give him garbage."

Jello hit enter.

For half a second, nothing happened.

Then the CRT screen filled with crawling static—thick, ugly, inconsistent. Not cinematic snow, but the kind of interference that makes people click away. Audio popped and warbled like a dying speaker.

Shammy whispered, viciously pleased. "That's disgusting."

Badger whispered, "It's perfect."

The bat-silhouette on the CRT stuttered.

The voice cracked, losing composure.

"STOP."

Mai's mouth tightened. "He's losing the frame."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "Good."

But the criminals on the floor didn't stop screaming.

Their duct tape strained. Their bodies convulsed in place, eyes wide, tears streaming, as if the room itself was forcing panic into their ribs to keep the episode alive even without a clean video feed.

Heavenly swore under his breath. "They're going to suffocate."

Mai's pulse spiked. "Ace—"

Ace was already moving.

Mai caught her wrist again—just a touch—then let go, because she knew what Ace would do: the precise violence that saved, not the violence that satisfied.

Ace slid in low, fast, and cut the duct tape from the first man's mouth in a single clean stroke. No blood. Just freedom.

The man gasped, but the gasp turned into a wet sob.

Ace moved to the second, then the third, then the fourth—cutting, cutting, cutting.

"Breathe," Mai ordered, voice hard. "Breathe. In. Out."

The criminals tried.

But the panic stayed.

It wasn't theirs anymore.

It was in them.

The bat-voice returned, strained now, angry.

"They're criminals."

Mai's eyes flashed. "They're props. And you're using them wrong."

A pause.

Then, almost petulant:

"They deserve it."

Ace's head snapped up, eyes cold enough to frost glass.

"No," Ace said softly. "They don't."

The room felt like it leaned toward her at that.

Like the format wanted her anger.

Wanted the "small one" to become the shot.

Mai stepped in front of Ace again, shoulder-to-shoulder this time, not shielding her—aligning with her.

Ace's gaze flicked to Mai, just for a second.

A tiny, private spark.

The kind that said: I know what you're doing. I'm with you.

Then the corridor unit moved.

Boots advanced.

Not rushing. Not panicking. Procedure.

A flashlight beam cut across the doorway behind them.

"Hands visible," the corridor voice commanded. "Step away from the anomalous device."

Bright's jaw tightened. "They're about to breach."

Shammy's eyes went storm-white. "If they breach, they die or we do."

Mai's mind snapped again: they needed a third option.

Not talk.

Not fight.

A misdirection that would make trained people hesitate long enough to see the truth.

Mai looked at the wall.

At the painted slogan:

THE BAT SAVES THE CITY

And under it:

COPYCATS GET TERMINATED.

She made the ugliest, most effective choice.

"Badger," Mai said.

Badger's head whipped toward her like she'd just offered him candy in a warzone. "Yes?"

Mai's eyes were dead serious. "You're going to do something stupid."

Badger brightened. "Oh my God. Permission."

Heavenly's face tightened. "No."

Mai ignored Heavenly. "Badger. You're going to walk into that doorway, hands up, and you're going to tell them we're here on O5 orders."

Bright blinked. "Mai—"

Mai cut him off. "He's already using O5 as a leash. We're going to tug the leash."

Badger raised a hand. "I am amazing at tugging leashes."

Heavenly muttered, "You are a leash."

Grouse added, "A noisy one."

Badger nodded, fully unbothered. "Correct."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "If they shoot him—"

Mai's voice stayed cold. "They won't. He'll be boring. Polite. Administrative. The one thing this room hates."

Badger took a breath and immediately adjusted his posture into what could only be described as "government employee with caffeine."

He stepped toward the doorway, hands raised, voice calm, loud, and painfully official.

"Hi! Hello. Foundation. Great to see you. This is MTF Theta—"

He paused, as if remembering his own name was a tax form.

"—Theta-24. We are operating under O5 authorization."

The corridor voice snapped back instantly. "O5 authorization from whom."

Badger didn't miss a beat.

"From O5," he said, as if that explained everything.

Even Mai felt her soul itch.

Heavenly whispered, "I'm going to kill him."

Bright whispered, "Later."

Badger continued, still painfully calm. "There has been a channel spoof. You are being redirected into a staged containment event. Please hold your position and confirm via secondary authentication."

A beat.

Then, quieter, the corridor voice said, "Secondary authentication is not available."

Badger nodded sympathetically, like a helpdesk rep. "Totally understand. Happens all the time. So here's what we do: you take one step back, you call your supervisor on a non-standard channel, and you wait. Because if you step forward, you're going to become someone else's footage."

Silence.

Mai felt it: the smallest crack in procedure. The moment a trained mind decides whether to obey the script or listen to the human in front of them.

The bat-voice on the CRT hissed, suddenly furious.

"SHOOT HIM."

Badger froze.

Even he heard the wrongness in that.

The corridor unit heard it too.

Because that command didn't come from their team lead.

It came from the ceiling.

A second of hesitation—just one.

But one was enough.

Mai snapped, "Skullker. Now."

Skullker didn't need clarification. He didn't need permission anymore.

He drove his hand into the rack and ripped out the core module like he was tearing a heart from a body.

The room screamed.

Not the criminals.

The electronics.

A feedback howl erupted as the camcorder's green light blinked wildly, then went red, then went green again like it couldn't decide what reality was.

Jello shouted, "Root feed is destabilizing!"

Bright's eyes flashed. "Keep ripping!"

Skullker yanked again.

A sparking cascade ran along the rack into the VCR.

The VCR whined like an animal.

Then the CRT image collapsed into pure static.

The bat-voice returned for a final second, distorted, angry—

“YOU CAN’T—”

—and then it cut out.

Silence.

Real silence.

The kind you only get when something that loved attention suddenly can’t speak.

The criminals on the floor collapsed into sobbing, gasping breaths like the pressure had been sucked out of their lungs.

Mai exhaled, slow.

Shammy’s hands unclenched. The air pressure eased.

Ace’s katanas dimmed slightly, still awake but not shouting.

Badger lowered his hands, very slowly, and turned his head just enough to look back at them.

He whispered, barely audible:

“...did we win?”

Bright’s smile was thin and joyless. “We won the room.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed at the corridor.

Because “winning the room” didn’t mean winning the war.

The corridor unit didn’t shoot.

They didn’t rush.

They did something worse.

They began to retreat—not out of fear, but out of doubt.

Their voice came again, quieter now. Human again.

“Identify the anomaly,” the team lead said. “Now.”

Bright answered immediately. “The room. The network rack. The camcorder. The entire staging environment. It’s a hostile memetic broadcast node.”

Silence.

Then: “Copy.”

Mai felt a fraction of relief—tiny, dangerous.

Then Jello's laptop pinged.

Once.

Twice.

Then a steady, awful tone.

His face drained of color. "Uh... guys."

Mai's stomach sank. "What."

Jello swallowed. "Root node didn't die."

Bright's jaw clenched. "Of course it didn't."

Jello turned the screen so they could all see.

The map had changed again.

The airport node they'd just ripped out was now marked:

O5-LOOK / SEGMENT — TERMINATED

But above it, like a crown:

O5-LOOK / ROOT — MIGRATED

Mai's blood went cold. "Where."

Jello's voice cracked, just slightly.

"It migrated... into our decoy."

Badger blinked. "Our DMV episode?"

Jello nodded, horrified. "It jumped into the spoofed Theta-24 signature we created."

Bright stared at the screen.

Then he laughed once—short, sharp, mean.

"He used our trap as a bridge," Bright said.

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright again. "So we built him a door."

Skullker's head tilted slightly, offended on a spiritual level.

Ace's voice was low. "He extracted the War Crimes."

Badger whispered, deeply wounded, "That's not what extraction is supposed to mean."

Mai's mind went ice-cold and clean.

"Then we do the next thing," she said.

Bright looked at her. "Which is."

Mai lifted the sealed evidence case with Episode Three, steady in her hands.

"We stop playing defense," Mai said. "We play our own episode."

Ace's gaze locked on her, a flicker of fierce approval.

Shammy's grin sharpened. "Oh."

Badger perked up, despite everything. "Can it be a musical."

Heavenly sighed. "No."

Badger nodded solemnly. "Okay."

Mai's eyes stayed hard.

"We build a false O5 room," she said. "A fake authority chamber. A trap that looks like the thing he wants to become."

Bright's smile returned, razor-thin. "A throne."

Mai nodded. "A throne."

Ace's voice was quiet. "And when he sits..."

Mai finished it, cold.

"...we terminate."—

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