

## Chapter 21 — Now You Can Kneel

The power was out.

They all knew it. You can feel a building's electricity die—the hum fades, the air loses that faint metallic tension, the world becomes heavier. Honest darkness.

And yet the CRT glowed.

Night-vision green, grainy and obscene, like the room had been dipped in radioactive soup.

Mai stared at the screen and felt something in her spine tighten—not a muscle, not a nerve.

A role.

Behind her, in the CRT feed, a tall silhouette had appeared.

Bat-eared head.

Long coat.

Posture too deliberate to be human panic, too theatrical to be human calm.

It stood in the room with them.

No door opened.

No footstep.

No breath.

Just... there.

The female voice whispered through the dead air, soft as a lover's promise:

"Now you can kneel."

Badger exhaled a sound that was half laugh, half prayer.

"Ohhh no," he whispered. "It's in-person customer support."

Heavenly didn't correct him. He couldn't. His eyes were locked on the darkness behind Mai, trying to decide if he should shoot something he couldn't properly see.

Grouse shifted, slow and quiet—rifle coming up, but not aiming yet. The kind of movement that said: If I fire, I want it to count.

Skullker's shoulders set like a door about to meet its maker.

Jello's face was pale in the CRT glow. "Power is dead," he whispered. "I cut the breaker physically. The loop should be inert."

Bright's voice was flat, and for once the humor was gone completely.

"It's not running on the loop anymore," Bright said. "It's running on us."

Shammy's eyes were storm-white, and the air pressure in the room shifted like weather trying to find a place to land.

"I can erase the screen," she murmured.

Mai didn't look away from the CRT.

"No," she said.

Because that was what it wanted.

If the screen died, the story died, the framing died, and the monster got to step out of the camera and into the room unobserved.

The format didn't just record.

It moved.

And it moved best when nobody was looking at it.

Ace's voice came low from behind Mai, close enough that her breath warmed the back of Mai's neck.

"Mai," Ace whispered.

Mai didn't answer. She didn't need to. She could feel Ace's readiness like a blade drawn inside a sheath—contained, lethal, vibrating with intent.

Mai kept her voice level.

"Everybody," she said, "eyes on the screen."

Badger whispered, "That's the first time I've ever been told to keep watching the horror movie."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger whispered, "Copy."

Bright's head tilted slightly. "You're making it uncomfortable."

Mai's eyes stayed on the CRT. "Good."

The female voice laughed softly.

"You built a throne."

Mai answered without raising her voice. "We built a trap."

The silhouette in the feed didn't move.

But the image quality sharpened by a fraction—like the camera liked conflict. Like it fed on it.

The voice purred.

"Containment review."

Bright's smile was thin and empty. "Nice of you to attend."

A pause.

Then, almost conversational:

"Where is O5?"

Mai felt the pull again—like the word "O5" was trying to latch onto her throat and use it as a leash.

Bright's phone, dead a minute ago, vibrated in his pocket like a heartbeat.

He pulled it out.

The screen was on.

One line blinked:

ANSWER

Bright stared at it, jaw tight. "It wants you to speak as the system."

Mai's voice stayed cold. "It wants me to validate its reality."

Shammy's fingers flexed. "And if you don't—"

The voice answered before Shammy could finish, soft and pleased:

"Then I take the small one."

Ace's katanas flared emerald in the darkness.

For a second the room was lit by that green, and the silhouette behind Mai became a suggestion in the corner of her eye—tall, still, coat edges hanging like cut shadow.

Mai's hand moved backward and found Ace's wrist.

Anchor touch again.

Ace's grip tightened in return, a silent promise: I'm here. I'm not moving. I'm not yours.

Mai's voice was ice.

"You don't get her."

The female voice chuckled.

"Then kneel."

Mai didn't kneel.

She did something worse.

She spoke like a bureaucrat with a knife again, but she didn't obey the format. She corrupted it.

“O5 is present,” Mai said, flat and official.

The CRT image stuttered.

Badger’s head snapped up. “Oh my God. She’s lying to the monster.”

Mai continued, steady. “O5-LOOK is under review for hostile mimicry. Your extraction attempt has been recorded and flagged.”

The voice paused.

Not anger.

Calculation.

The silhouette in the feed tilted its head slightly—like it was listening for a weakness in her syntax.

Bright murmured, half impressed, half horrified. “You’re using its hunger for authority against it.”

Mai didn’t blink. “Yes.”

The female voice returned, softer now.

“Show me.”

Mai’s stomach tightened.

Of course.

Authority always demanded proof.

And proof was always footage.

Which meant the monster wanted her to produce something.

To become its editor.

Mai exhaled once, slow.

“Jello,” Mai said quietly. “Feed it garbage.”

Jello swallowed. “There’s no power—”

Bright cut in, sharp. “Not electrical garbage. Narrative garbage.”

Jello blinked once, then understood with the dawning horror of a man realizing his skill set is now a weapon.

He pulled a small handheld recorder from his pocket—one of the ugly little devices Theta-24 used for field notes. It had its own battery. It wasn’t on the building’s power.

Jello hit play.

A burst of audio filled the darkness.

Not static.

Not clean.

A file they'd captured earlier—airport underbelly speaker node, but after Shammy's condensation attack.

Muffled. Wet. Distorted. Unwatchable.

The CRT image reacted immediately.

It wavered.

The night-vision green broke into blocks. The silhouette behind Mai flickered like a bad frame.

The female voice hissed, sharp.

"Stop."

Mai didn't.

Jello kept the ugly feed playing.

The sound was wrong—like a mouth trying to speak while underwater.

The CRT tried to stabilize, tried to lock the frame.

It couldn't.

The silhouette behind Mai shifted.

For the first time, it moved in the room itself—not a dramatic step, just a subtle reposition, like something trying to stay out of a camera's blind spot.

Mai felt the movement behind her, cold on her skin.

Ace's posture changed—tiny, lethal.

Mai didn't turn.

She kept her eyes on the CRT.

Because the only safe place to look at it was the place it already wanted to be seen.

Bright's voice was low. "It hates noise."

Shammy's grin was feral. "Because noise makes it ordinary."

Badger whispered, reverent. "Noise is the holy water of bureaucracy."

Heavenly's voice was murder. "Badger."

Badger: "Sorry."

The female voice returned, strained now, angry in a way that sounded almost human.

“You can’t make me boring.”

Mai’s reply was immediate.

“We already did.”

The CRT image flickered.

The silhouette behind Mai jerked, like the words had landed physically.

Then the voice changed.

It dropped the female tone entirely.

Dropped the performance.

For half a second, the voice on the speaker was male.

Ragged.

Close.

Human.

“Kneel.”

Mai’s blood turned cold, because that wasn’t a narrator.

That was someone in the room, using the system as a megaphone.

Bright’s eyes sharpened. “There’s a person.”

Ace’s voice was a whisper, lethal. “There’s always a person.”

Shammy’s storm tightened like a fist.

Mai spoke without turning.

“Show yourself,” Mai said.

The CRT stuttered.

The silhouette behind her stopped moving.

Then, from the darkness beside the CRT, a second shape emerged—smaller than the bat silhouette, more human, hunched like a man trying to be less visible than his own obsession.

He wore a mask. Not a good one. Cheap rubber, black paint, bat ears slapped on like an insult to the symbol.

But his eyes—

His eyes were real.

Wide.

Bright with fanatic intensity.

He held something in his hands: a camcorder. Old. Heavy. VHS.

He was filming them.

And the moment Mai saw the camcorder, she understood the real core of it.

It wasn't the loop.

It wasn't the city.

It wasn't even the "O5" handle.

It was the man with the camera.

The format had a body.

Ace moved.

Not in a sprint.

In a blink.

Emerald blades flashed, cutting the camcorder strap clean off his neck before the man could react.

The camcorder dropped—

Shammy exhaled.

A pressure spike, precise and brutal, smashed the camcorder into the concrete floor like a fist from the sky.

Plastic shattered.

Tape spilled out like guts.

The man screamed—not from pain, but from loss.

A raw, childish wail.

"No—no—NO—"

Bright's voice was ice. "There's your copycat."

Mai's gaze stayed hard. "There's your root anchor."

The man stumbled back toward the CRT, desperate, reaching as if to hug the screen.

The CRT flickered wildly.

The female voice returned, frantic now.

"PROTECT THE ASSET."

Mai's skin crawled.

Because the system was trying to protect him.

Trying to keep the format alive by keeping its human cameraman intact.

Theta-24 moved.

Skullker closed the distance like a door slamming shut.

He didn't punch the man.

He didn't shoot him.

The man's feet left the ground.

He hit the concrete hard.

He screamed again.

Badger whispered, half horrified, half admiring. "That was... efficient kidnapping."

Heavenly replied, cold. "Detainment."

Badger: "Kidnapping with paperwork."

Grouse covered the man with his rifle, eyes hard. "Don't move."

The man sobbed, eyes darting wildly, looking for cameras that weren't there.

"Where's—where's the feed—where's—"

Mai stepped forward.

One step.

And for the first time, she looked away from the CRT and down at him.

Her voice was flat.

"Your episode is over."

The man's eyes snapped to hers. "No," he whispered. "No, it can't be. It has to— it has to—"

Bright crouched beside him, smile thin and cruel.

"It doesn't have to," Bright said. "You chose this. You chose the mask. You chose the camera."

The CRT flickered.

Night-vision green still showed the room.

Still tried to frame Mai.

But without the camcorder, the image was unstable, jittering, fighting for focus.

The female voice hissed through the dead air, angry and small now.

“KNEEL.”

Mai stared at the CRT.

Then she did the simplest, most disrespectful thing possible.

She reached over, grabbed the CRT by its sides, and yanked it forward.

It was heavier than it looked. Old glass and metal.

She didn't care.

She dragged it off the shelf—

—and smashed it face-down onto the concrete.

The glass cracked with a wet, ugly sound.

The image died.

The glow vanished.

Darkness swallowed the room properly.

Real, honest darkness.

Silence fell.

Not the silence of a monster preparing its next line.

The silence of something being deprived of its audience.

Badger exhaled, shaky. “Did... did we just kill it.”

Jello's voice was thin. “The feed is gone.”

Bright's tone stayed cold. “The anchor is in custody.”

Shammy's storm eased slightly, but her eyes stayed bright. “And the format...?”

Mai looked down at the man on the floor, sobbing into concrete.

Then she spoke, voice colder than steel.

“We terminate,” Mai said. “As ordered.”

The man's head snapped up, terror and disbelief colliding.

“You can't,” he whispered. “You can't, you can't, you can't—”

Bright's smile sharpened. “Watch us.”

Ace's voice came quiet, lethal, close to Mai's ear.

“Mai.”

Mai didn't look at her. “I know.”

Ace's hand touched Mai's wrist—anchor touch, reversed. You're not alone in this.

Mai exhaled once.

Then she looked at Heavenly.

Heavenly's jaw tightened. “O5 said terminate.”

Mai's voice stayed flat. “Yes.”

Heavenly nodded once, controlled, and lifted his sidearm.

Badger's eyes widened. “Oh— wow. Okay. We're actually doing it.”

Grouse didn't blink. Skullker didn't blink.

Shammy's fingers flexed once, like she wanted to do it herself.

Ace's gaze stayed hard, but there was a flicker of something—an old mercy instinct that had been burned down and rebuilt into a stricter kind of compassion.

The man on the floor started babbling, desperate.

“I can stop it—I can— I can tell you where— it's not just me— it's not—”

Bright's voice cut through it, sharp.

“Too late.”

Heavenly's trigger took up slack.

And then—

A sound from the darkness.

Not a speaker.

Not a CRT.

A phone.

Somewhere in the room, a device they hadn't touched pinged once.

Jello froze. “What.”

Bright's eyes narrowed. “No.”

Another ping.

Then another.

A screen glowed in the darkness—lying on the floor near the man’s hand.

His personal phone.

It lit up with a new notification.

One line.

Blocky text like the CRT had used, now migrating into something newer.

UPLOAD COMPLETE.

Mai’s blood turned to ice.

Because the format didn’t need the CRT.

It didn’t need the loop.

It didn’t even need the man anymore.

It just needed the footage.

Badger whispered, horrified. “Oh no.”

Bright’s voice went cold. “He already published.”

Shammy’s storm surged back, furious. “Then copycats will come.”

Ace’s katanas hummed, angry.

Mai stared at the glowing phone.

At the words UPLOAD COMPLETE.

And she understood the true nightmare:

They hadn’t been stopping a killer.

They’d been stopping a template.

ja vielä kerran ETEENPÄIN!—

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