

Chapter 22 — Upload Complete

The words UPLOAD COMPLETE glowed like a curse.

Not because they were dramatic.

Because they were final.

Mai stared at the phone on the concrete, night swallowing the edges of the room, and for a moment she felt the whole operation tilt on a single grotesque truth:

They had won the room.

They had lost the distribution.

Badger's voice came out thin, like someone trying not to wake a sleeping bear.

"...so the episode posted while we were... doing the thing."

Heavenly didn't look at him. "Yes."

Badger swallowed. "Cool. Cool cool cool. Hate it."

Bright's face didn't move, but his voice sharpened. "Jello. Where did it upload."

Jello was already on it. Laptop open, screen dimmed to a dull glow, fingers moving like they were trying to outrun regret.

"It's not YouTube," Jello muttered. "Not a normal platform. It's... a dump. A chained mirror network. Like an onion of cheap hosts."

Bright's mouth tightened. "A hydra."

Shammy's storm-white eyes flashed. "So when you cut one head—"

"—the others keep biting," Mai finished, voice flat.

Ace stood close enough to feel like a second heartbeat. Her katanas were quiet now, not flaring, but the hum was still there—low and hungry, like the blades were offended on a conceptual level.

Grouse kept the copycat covered. Skullker had him pinned in the most basic way possible: mass and inevitability. The man's mask was half-torn, and without a camera in his hands he looked less like a monster and more like a fragile addict whose drug had been taken away mid-hit.

He was still babbling, frantic.

"You don't understand— it's bigger— it's not just me— it wants— it needs—"

Bright didn't even glance at him.

He looked at the phone instead, like the phone was the real person in the room.

"Can you pull it back?" Bright asked.

Jello's throat bobbed. "No."

One word. Clean. Honest.

Badger winced. "That's... the worst word."

Mai's voice stayed cold. "Can we poison it."

Jello froze for half a beat, then his eyes sharpened with the kind of ugly inspiration that makes geniuses dangerous.

"Maybe," he said.

Bright leaned in. "Talk."

Jello swallowed. "If the format replicates, it relies on the clip being... watchable. It needs coherence. Clean frames. Clean audio. A hook. A legend."

Shammy's lips curled. "So we give it garbage."

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

Mai nodded once. "We flood the mirrors with a corrupted version."

Bright's smile returned, razor-thin. "We drown the myth in noise."

Badger blinked. "So we... ratio it."

Heavenly's eyes cut toward him.

Badger immediately corrected, hands up. "—In a professional sense."

Grouse muttered, "He's learning."

He wasn't. But it was cute that he tried.

Jello's fingers flew again. "I can inject a payload. Not a virus—too obvious. But a 'replacement' upload: same thumbnail, same title, but the actual file is crushed. Audio scrambled. Frames smeared. A boring, unwatchable mess."

Bright nodded. "And if a copycat tries to use it as a template—"

"They get nothing," Mai finished. "No pattern. No ritual. No clean '05 kneels' narrative."

Shammy's grin sharpened. "We turn their bible into a fax."

Badger whispered, awed. "That's... evil. I love it."

Heavenly sighed. "We are not saying 'fax' like it's a weapon."

Bright said, completely serious, "It is a weapon."

Mai kept her eyes on the glowing phone. "Do it."

Jello's hands moved fast, but his voice shook slightly. "I need thirty seconds."

Bright's voice was flat. "You have ten."

Jello stared at him, offended. "That's not how time works."

Bright: "Make it."

Badger whispered, "Doctor Bright is bullying time again."

Heavenly: "Badger."

Badger: "Sorry."

While Jello fought the internet hydra, the copycat on the floor finally managed to get one coherent sentence out.

"It's already inside you," he croaked, eyes too wide. "You can't kill it because it's— it's watching through you."

Mai crouched, slow, controlled, so he could see her face in the dim glow.

Her voice was calm.

"No," Mai said. "It watched through you."

His lips trembled. "I was chosen."

Mai's expression didn't change. "You were used."

That landed.

You could see it in his eyes: the collapse of a self-made myth, the sudden realization that he wasn't the prophet of a symbol, he was a disposable tripod.

He began to laugh—small, cracked, hysterical.

Bright looked down at him like he was an insect that had just spoken.

"Any last useful information," Bright said, "or do we end this quickly?"

The man's laugh turned into a cough. "You think... it ends with me?"

Mai didn't blink. "No."

Shammy leaned in slightly, voice soft and poisonous. "But you do."

The man's laughter faltered. He stared at Shammy like he'd just noticed a storm had a face.

Jello's fingers slammed a final key.

"Injected," he said, breathless. "It's propagating. It'll hit the mirrors like an oil spill. Anyone clicking the clip gets... garbage."

Bright exhaled once. "Good."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Now we terminate. As ordered."

The room went still.

Not because anyone hesitated about the decision.

Because everyone understood what the decision meant now.

Termination wasn't revenge. It wasn't catharsis.

It was containment by erasure.

Heavenly raised his sidearm again—steady. Controlled. No drama.

Badger's voice, very small now: "So... this is the part where the war crimes happen."

Heavenly didn't look at him. "Don't call it that."

Badger swallowed. "Copy."

Ace's hand found Mai's wrist again—anchor touch, reversed—quiet support, no words.

Mai looked at the copycat one last time.

He stared up at her, mask half-off, tears and sweat making his face shine in the phone's glow.

"Please," he whispered. "I can help—"

Mai's voice stayed flat. "You already did."

He didn't understand.

That was fine.

Mai rose.

She nodded once to Heavenly.

Heavenly fired.

A single suppressed crack—short, clinical—swallowed by the dead building.

No slow motion.

No speech.

No episode.

Skullker's grip loosened as the body went limp, and Grouse lowered his rifle a fraction.

Badger exhaled shakily. "Okay. That's... done."

Bright didn't look at the body.

He looked at the phone.

"At the myth seed.

"At the place the format had tried to stand.

“Now,” Bright said, voice low, “we clean the rest.”

Shammy’s eyes were still storm-white. “How many people saw it before the poison hit.”

Jello’s fingers hovered. “Unknown. But the mirror network spreads fast—”

Bright cut in. “Then we spread faster.”

Mai’s voice was ice. “We need one more thing.”

Bright glanced at her. “What.”

Mai looked at the smashed CRT remains on the floor, then at the dead man, then at the phone’s glow.

“A counter-title,” Mai said.

Badger blinked. “A counter-title?”

Mai nodded once. “The format runs on labels. ‘O5 runs.’ ‘O5 kneels.’ It’s meme logic. We need a line that kills curiosity.”

Bright’s smile sharpened. “Something that makes people click away.”

Shammy’s grin returned, feral. “Make it lame.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “Make it contemptible.”

Mai looked at Jello. “Can you push a final overwrite. Not the clip—just the metadata.”

Jello swallowed. “Maybe. If the mirrors accept my injection, I can push a title tag update.”

Bright: “Do it.”

Badger leaned in, whispering like this was sacred art. “Can we call it ‘Maintenance Training Video’?”

Heavenly: “No.”

Badger: “Okay.”

Mai didn’t smile. But her eyes sharpened.

“Title it,” Mai said, “‘CITY SYSTEM TEST — FALSE ALERT’.”

Bright’s mouth twitched. “Boring.”

Mai nodded. “Boring.”

Jello typed fast, then hit enter.

A second later, the phone on the floor refreshed.

The thumbnail was still there—night-vision green, Mai framed, the hook still trying to bite—

—but the title above it had changed:

CITY SYSTEM TEST — FALSE ALERT

Badger stared at it, then whispered, reverent: “You just murdered a myth with paperwork.”

Heavenly muttered, “Good.”

Shammy’s storm eased by a degree. “Now copycats won’t feel chosen.”

Ace’s voice was quiet, satisfied. “Now they feel stupid.”

Bright exhaled once, sharp. “Now we get to leave.”

Mai didn’t relax yet.

Because she’d learned something in the last hour:

the format didn’t need a CRT.

It didn’t need a loop.

It needed attention.

So Mai did one last ugly thing.

She stepped to the relay rack, found the city backbone cable Jello had used, and with a cold, controlled motion—

she cut it.

Not with a katana. Not with lightning.

With bolt cutters from a maintenance shelf.

A brutal, mundane snap that severed the building’s last vein to the outside world.

Jello winced. “That... is going to annoy someone.”

Bright’s smile was thin. “Good.”

Badger whispered, impressed: “Mai just committed infrastructure sabotage in the most boring way possible.”

Heavenly: “Stop narrating.”

Badger: “Sorry.”

They exited the relay station in silence—no comms, no chatter, just the sound of boots and breath and the city being a city.

Outside, the night had teeth.

But it felt less hungry.

In the distance, sirens rose and faded—normal city noise, not a directed extraction chorus.

Bright paused at the fence line and looked back at the building like it might blink.

Then he spoke, quiet, almost respectful.

"That," Bright said, "was the closest thing to an infohazard cult I've seen try to bootstrap itself off municipal infrastructure."

Mai didn't answer.

She was watching Ace.

Ace had gone quiet too—focused inward, blades no longer humming, but the tension still coiled in her shoulders like a spring that didn't fully trust silence.

Mai stepped closer and touched her wrist.

Anchor touch.

Ace's eyes met hers.

A flicker of that private spark again—small, fierce, human.

"You okay," Mai asked softly.

Ace's answer was immediate, flat in a way that meant truth.

"I'm angry."

Mai nodded once. "Good."

Shammy drifted close, eyes still bright. "He tried to name you."

Ace's jaw tightened. "He failed."

Bright's phone buzzed once.

Everyone tensed.

Bright glanced at the screen, then exhaled.

"It's O5," Bright said.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Real O5."

Bright nodded. "Real."

He read it, voice dry:

"Status report. Confirmation of termination. Confirmation of copycat suppression."

Badger whispered, "O5 texting is the scariest thing."

Heavenly replied, "Shut up."

Bright typed with one hand.

“Termination confirmed. Distribution poisoned. Metadata overwritten. Infrastructure severed.”

He paused, then added:

“Recommend ongoing watch for secondary copycats.”

He hit send.

A beat.

Then another message arrived.

Bright’s mouth tightened as he read it.

Mai watched him. “What.”

Bright looked up, voice quiet.

“O5 wants the file name of your counter-title.”

Badger blinked. “They want... the boring title?”

Bright nodded. “They like it.”

Shammy smiled, feral. “Of course they do.”

Ace’s lips twitched—barely. The closest she got to a grin.

Mai exhaled slowly.

Not relief.

Not yet.

But the first hint of something like control returning.

“Let’s go,” Mai said.

They moved.

And behind them, in a dead relay station with a cut backbone line and a smashed CRT, the format had nothing left to stand on—

except the faint possibility that somewhere, someone still had a clip.

Somewhere, someone still wanted to be chosen.

So, one more thing - go!—

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