

## Chapter 23 — Episode Six

The whisper hit the car radio like a cigarette burn on clean fabric.

“Episode Six...”

—then it snapped back to music. Some late-night station playing something smooth and stupidly normal, the kind of song you hear in a 24/7 diner at 3:12 a.m. when life pretends it isn't a knife.

Mai didn't move her hands on the wheel.

But the tendons in her forearms tightened.

In the passenger seat, Bright didn't reach for the radio. He didn't flinch. He just turned his head slightly, as if he could smell the interference.

In the back, Ace's eyes sharpened with the same simple, predatory focus she'd had in the relay station. No fear. No confusion. Just: where is it and how do I cut it.

Shammy's gaze went storm-white for a heartbeat. The air pressure inside the cabin thickened, then eased again as she forced herself to breathe like a person.

Nobody spoke for two seconds.

Then Badger's voice came through the now-restored comms, quiet in a way that meant he was trying to behave and hated it.

“...I would like to lodge a formal complaint.”

Heavenly replied instantly. “No.”

Badger: “Not even a small complaint.”

Heavenly: “No.”

Badger sighed like the world was unfair. “Copy.”

Bright finally spoke, voice low and clinical. “That wasn't the root.”

Jello—riding with Theta-24 now, but patched into the shared channel—answered after a half-beat. “Agreed. Pattern doesn't match the main vector. No heavy intrusion signature, no municipal write attempts.”

Mai's jaw tightened. “So what was it.”

Jello hesitated. “A fragment. A residual echo. Like... a cached audio sting.”

Badger chimed in, offended on behalf of reality. “So we killed the guy and the internet still has his voicemail.”

Grouse replied, dry. “Stop making it funny.”

Badger: “I'm not making it funny. It arrived funny.”

Ace spoke once, quiet enough that it didn't feel like conversation so much as a verdict.

“It’s bait.”

Mai nodded once, even though Ace couldn’t see it. “Yeah.”

Bright’s voice remained unnervingly calm. “The template failed to keep a stable frame. So it’s trying to re-establish a hook with the cheapest possible vector.”

Shammy’s tone sharpened. “Meaning anything that can speak can become a mouth.”

Bright: “Yes.”

Badger: “...that’s disgusting.”

Heavenly: “Focus.”

Mai let the music play. She didn’t change the station.

Because changing the station meant reacting to the whisper.

And the format fed on reactions the way fire fed on oxygen.

Boring.

Administrative.

Nonresponsive.

She drove.

They’d already moved their convoy pattern twice. Swapped lanes, swapped spacing, ran a deliberately dull route toward a clean rendezvous point that wasn’t listed anywhere digital. A physical location, old-school, the kind of spot you pick because it’s too inconvenient for a ghost in a machine to care about.

A dry river channel access road behind an industrial park. Dead concrete. Sparse lighting. No foot traffic. The city’s ugly underside that nobody filmed unless something exploded.

Mai loved it for that exact reason.

They rolled in under sodium lights that made everyone look like they’d been dipped in cheap amber.

Theta-24’s vehicles pulled up and parked with minimal chatter—everyone a little quieter now, the earlier adrenaline burned off into something colder.

Badger climbed out first, then remembered he was trying to be professional, and climbed out again but slower.

He looked up at the night sky like it might have captions.

“Okay,” he announced. “If the sky starts typing at me, I’m done.”

Heavenly didn’t even look at him. “Noted.”

Badger blinked. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Heavenly: "Don't get used to it."

Shammy stepped out and turned her face into the wind, eyes half-lidded. She wasn't looking for movement.

She was listening for pressure changes, the tiny way the world's atmosphere lied when something unnatural tried to push through.

Ace stayed near Mai, as always. Close without crowding. Her presence was a quiet line drawn in the sand: If you touch her, you touch me. If you touch me, you bleed.

Bright gathered them in a loose semicircle, hands in pockets like this was a briefing and not a city trying to learn how to speak in curses.

"Episode Six," Bright said. "Let's not pretend it means nothing."

Badger raised his hand, because of course he did. "Could it mean he has a season plan."

Bright stared at him.

Badger lowered his hand. "Sorry. Stress."

Jello's voice came tight over the small speaker from Theta-24's side. "I'm running passive scans. No active network manipulation detected. Which means—"

Mai finished. "It didn't hack the radio. It infected it."

Bright nodded. "A memetic residue. A splinter."

Shammy's eyes flashed. "Then it can spread without infrastructure."

Bright's mouth tightened. "Potentially, yes. But it's weaker. It can whisper. It can't command."

Badger looked offended. "Whispering is arguably worse. My ex used whispering."

Heavenly: "Badger."

Badger: "Copy."

Ace's voice was quiet. "So what's the 'one more thing.'"

Mai didn't answer immediately. She looked at Bright.

Bright understood and spoke first. "O5 will want closure. They'll want a report: termination confirmed, suppression attempted, and—" he glanced at the night, then back at them "—assessment of ongoing copycat risk."

Mai nodded once. "And we're not lying."

Jello's voice came low. "Then we need to treat 'Episode Six' as a seed."

Shammy smiled without humor. "A seed we stomp."

Bright's gaze sharpened. "We can't stomp every radio."

Mai's voice went cold. "No. But we can stomp the story."

Badger blinked. "Wait, are we doing PR warfare against a demon VHS."

Mai: "Yes."

Badger: "I've never been prouder."

Heavenly sighed like his soul was a tired office chair.

Mai continued, flat and deliberate. "We already did the first part: poison the clip, overwrite the metadata, cut the backbone line. But a seed can survive even if the main tree dies. So we do the second part."

Bright's smile turned razor-thin. "We make the seed unattractive."

Mai nodded. "We make it embarrassing to repeat."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "How."

Mai looked at Badger.

Badger straightened reflexively. "Oh no."

Mai's voice was calm. "Oh yes."

Badger swallowed. "I'm afraid."

Mai: "Good. You're still doing it."

Heavenly's head turned sharply. "Mai."

Mai didn't blink. "Theta-24's whole brand is 'Walking War Crimes.' They're already a meme vector. If there's going to be a lingering whisper of Episode Six, we bury it under something louder, dumber, and less replicable."

Badger's face brightened in slow horror. "You want me to... out-meme the monster."

Mai nodded once. "Exactly."

Bright's grin sharpened. "Weaponized cringe."

Badger whispered, reverent and terrified. "That's my domain."

Jello's voice went uncertain. "Wait. This is actually— this might work. Memetic competition. If the whisper attaches to curiosity, we attach it to disgust."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "So people hear 'Episode Six' and think 'ugh, not that stupid thing' and scroll away."

Mai: "Yes."

Ace looked at Mai like she was half impressed and half concerned for the universe. "You're evil."

Mai's mouth twitched. "I'm efficient."

Badger raised a finger. "Okay. Counterproposal: we make Episode Six sound like a boring municipal PSA. Like... 'Episode Six: Road Salt and You.'"

Heavenly: "Don't improvise."

Badger: "I'm brainstorming!"

Bright, maddeningly, nodded. "No. He's on the right track."

Badger froze. "Did Doctor Bright just validate me?"

Bright: "Don't make it weird."

Badger: "Too late."

Mai cut through the noise. "Here's the payload: We plant an intentional false 'Episode Six' clip. Something that looks like it's going to be analog horror, then it's two minutes of nothing. A dead room. A chair. HVAC noise. A municipal test tone. Then a caption: CITY SYSTEM TEST — FALSE ALERT. Again."

Jello's voice tightened. "We can propagate that faster than the whisper. We can seed the same mirror channels with our own 'Episode Six' decoy and choke the search results."

Bright nodded once. "And because it's boring, it doesn't generate fan edits."

Shammy smiled, feral. "It becomes anti-fandom."

Badger whispered, almost emotional. "This is the most bureaucratic assassination of a ghost I've ever seen."

Heavenly: "Stop narrating."

Badger: "Sorry."

Ace's voice was quiet but certain. "Do it."

Mai looked at Bright. "O5 will ask if we're sure."

Bright's smile sharpened. "We don't do 'sure.' We do 'best available move.'"

Mai nodded. "Then we do it now."

Jello hesitated. "I need footage."

Badger stepped forward instantly. "I can film a dead chair. I'm incredible at filming nothing. It's my natural state."

Heavenly closed his eyes like he was asking God for patience.

Mai pointed at a patch of concrete under the light. "There. Chair. Two minutes. No talking. No jokes."

Badger looked wounded. "No jokes?"

Mai: "If you joke, it becomes shareable."

Badger swallowed. "Okay. That's... fair."

They found a folding chair—because the universe had a sense of humor—and set it dead center under the sodium light. The chair looked pathetic. Perfect.

Badger filmed. Completely silent, shockingly disciplined, like someone had threatened his entire bloodline.

Just a chair.

Just dead air.

Just the faint sound of the city breathing.

After two minutes, Mai stepped into frame for exactly one second, held up a printed sheet of paper—yes, printed, because they weren't giving the format anything clean to ingest—reading:

CITY SYSTEM TEST — FALSE ALERT NO INCIDENT NO FOLLOW-UP

Then she stepped out.

Done.

Jello took the file, ran it through compression that made it uglier and uglier until it looked like a fourth-generation copy of a copy of a copy.

Then he seeded it.

Not everywhere.

Just the places the hydra tended to bloom.

A boring pollutant.

A dead-end.

A meme that didn't want to be repeated.

He finished and exhaled, shaky. "Okay. It's out."

Bright nodded once. "Now we wait to see if the whisper gets drowned."

Mai didn't like waiting. But she could respect it.

Shammy tilted her head. "Do you feel it?"

Ace answered before Mai could. "Yes."

Mai looked at Ace. "What?"

Ace's eyes were hard, but calm. "It's still there. Not in the air. Not in the machines."

A beat.

"In people."

The sentence landed like a cold nail.

Bright's voice went low. "Curiosity. The desire to be chosen."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Copycats."

Badger whispered, unusually serious. "People love costumes."

Heavenly finally spoke, flat. "Then we made the costume stupid."

Mai nodded once. "Exactly."

Silence held for a few seconds.

Then, somewhere in the industrial dark, a car drove past on a distant road, music thumping, someone living their life without knowing anything.

And in that sound—barely there, like a thread you could almost pretend wasn't real—Mai thought she heard it again.

Not a full whisper.

Not a command.

Just the faintest suggestion of a word trying to be born:

... "Episode—"

Mai didn't react.

She didn't look up.

She didn't feed it.

She just reached back and touched Ace's wrist.

Anchor touch.

Ace squeezed back.

Shammy's storm eased.

Bright exhaled once, slow.

And Badger—quietly, respectfully—said the one thing that mattered, not as a joke, but as a promise.

"Okay," he murmured. "If it comes back... we'll make it boring again."

Mai's voice was ice-cold, certain.

"No," Mai said. "If it comes back—"

She looked into the dark like it might be watching.

"—we terminate the next cameraman before he learns how to upload."

Bright's smile returned, razor-thin. "That's the spirit."

And with that, the operation finally began to feel like it was ending—

—not because the world was safe,

but because for the first time all night,

the story didn't get to decide what happened next.

Epilogi?—

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