

Chapter 4 — The Myth Engine

Bright answered on the second ring.

Which, in Foundation terms, was either comforting or horrifying depending on how much you liked your illusions.

His voice came through the encrypted handset in Mai's palm — no static, no delay, no warmth.

"Tell me you didn't play it," he said.

Mai stared at the blank wall like it had personally offended her. "We didn't play it."

A pause. Not relief. Calculation.

"Good," Bright said. "Because if you had, I'd have to add 'Triad self-inflicted stupidity' to my report and I'm fresh out of patience."

Shammy leaned over Mai's shoulder. "Hi Bright."

"Hi Shamaterazu," Bright replied immediately, like he'd been expecting her to join. "Please don't electrocute anyone unless I specifically ask you to, and even then, check twice."

Shammy's smile brightened. "I would never."

Ace, from the corner, said nothing. But the air shifted slightly in that way it did when she was listening hard enough to make words flinch.

Mai kept her voice clipped. "Someone wrote on the offline laptop."

Another pause. This one had weight.

Bright's tone sharpened, losing the usual playful edge. "Repeat."

Mai repeated. Exactly. No adjectives.

When she finished, Bright exhaled once, slow. "Okay. That confirms it."

"Confirms what," Mai asked, already regretting the question.

"That this isn't just a killer with a camcorder," Bright said. "This is a system. Either he has a breach vector, or he has a collaborator with access, or"—his voice went even flatter—"he's baiting us into proving we have one."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "He's using you as a prop."

Bright's laugh was short and humorless. "Welcome to the Foundation. We've been props since before you were born."

Mai held up a finger unconsciously, as if Bright could see it. "The sterile node. I found it. Foundation-adjacent routing. It shouldn't exist in LA."

"I know," Bright said. "That's why I'm calling you before you finish the thought."

Mai's pulse spiked. "You already knew."

"I suspected," Bright corrected. "Then Theta-24 confirmed it."

Shammy perked up like she'd heard her favorite song start. "Badger and the boys?"

Bright's voice tightened. "Yes. Walking War Crimes. And before you get excited—"

"I'm not excited," Mai lied.

Ace, from nowhere, said softly, "You are."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Ace."

Bright continued as if he hadn't heard any of that, which meant he had heard all of it and was choosing violence by omission.

"They're already in motion," he said. "They found a second tape."

Mai's stomach dropped. "Where."

Bright paused just long enough to make it worse.

"Studio City," he said. "Not the nice part. A smaller production house on the edge of the district. Old building, old equipment, dust in places dust shouldn't survive."

Shammy's eyes flashed. "That's my map."

Mai didn't like being right when it looked like this.

Ace's gaze sharpened. "What did they find besides the tape?"

Bright's voice lowered. "A body. Different staging. Same... grammar."

Mai closed her eyes briefly. "Same myth engine."

"Exactly," Bright said. "He's iterating. First episode taught the audience what to expect. Second episode expands the language. If we don't break the chain soon, it won't matter if we terminate him. The format will already be out there."

Shammy leaned closer. "So what's the play?"

Bright's voice turned clinical. "You do what you do best. You read the world. You predict the next move. And you keep Theta-24 from turning this into a YouTube highlight reel."

Shammy's grin returned, sharp. "They can't help it. It's in their blood."

Mai said, "Bright."

"Yes," Bright replied instantly.

Mai took a breath. "If there's a Foundation-adjacent seam in LA, we need to know whose."

Bright's silence on the other end was... deliberate.

"Oh," Mai said softly. "You know."

Bright sighed. "I have a shortlist. It's ugly. And it's not something I want to say over a line, even an encrypted one."

Shammy's eyebrows rose. "When Bright gets paranoid, you know it's gourmet."

Bright ignored her. "Meet me at the secondary site. Thirty minutes. Bring the offline machine. Do not bring the tape. Leave it locked."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Secondary site?"

Bright's tone sharpened. "Yes, Mai. A place that doesn't have 'killer wrote on your laptop' vibes. Now move."

The line clicked dead.

Mai stood still for a second longer than she needed to.

Then she looked at Ace and Shammy.

"Well," Shammy said, bright and dangerous, "we're going to meet the clowns."

Mai grabbed her bag. "We're going to meet the support element."

Shammy's smile widened. "Clowns."

Ace picked up her katanas. "War crimes."

Mai glared at both of them. "Stop adopting their brand."

Shammy's tone turned innocent. "I'm not adopting. I'm appreciating."

Ace, deadpan: "Data."

Mai pointed at Ace again. "You're banned from saying 'data' for the rest of the day."

Ace blinked. "Under protest."

Shammy laughed. "Oh my God, Ace has unionized."

Mai ignored them and moved. Because if she stopped, she'd think too hard about a laptop that had typed without hands.

They left the safehouse and slid back into the SUV. LA daylight was already climbing the skyline, pale and indifferent. The city looked clean in the morning — like it didn't know what happened at night. Like it could pretend.

Mai didn't let it.

She drove toward Studio City, cutting through side streets, avoiding the obvious routes. Not paranoia. Protocol.

Shammy watched the streets pass like she was reading them. "It's... thick again," she murmured. "The air feels like it's waiting for someone to say the wrong thing."

Mai didn't look at her. "Then nobody says the wrong thing."

Ace's gaze tracked every reflection in every window. "He likes cameras."

Shammy sighed. "So do influencers."

Mai muttered, "Please don't say 'influencers' like it's a species."

Shammy grinned. "It's a genus."

Ace, quietly: "A plague."

Mai almost smiled. Almost.

They reached the production house by mid-morning.

It looked like a place where dreams went to get invoices.

A squat building with faded signage, a loading bay open like a mouth, and a cluster of unmarked vans and black SUVs parked at angles that screamed "not police," despite the uniforms moving around inside.

Mai parked at the edge. Killed the engine.

"Okay," she said. "We go in calm. We don't—"

Shammy opened her door. "—make friends. Got it."

Mai sighed. "That's not what I was going to say."

Ace was already out, moving toward the building like gravity had assigned her a direction.

Mai followed, Shammy beside her, tall enough that people noticed even when they tried not to.

At the entrance, a man in tactical gear leaned against the frame like he owned the concept of doorways. His helmet was off. His face was casual, almost bored — the look of someone who'd seen so much chaos that chaos had become background music.

He saw them and straightened, grin already forming.

"The Triad," he said, voice bright with amusement. "Damn. They're real."

Mai stopped three steps away. "Yes."

He looked Ace up and down, then Shammy, then Mai, like he was mentally assigning difficulty sliders.

Then he grinned wider. "I'm Badger."

Shammy's eyes lit like she'd been handed a present. "Hi Badger."

Badger's gaze flicked to Shammy and he froze for half a heartbeat. It was subtle — just a micro-stutter of "holy shit, she's tall."

Then he recovered instantly. "Hi... uh... Weather Goddess."

Shammy smiled sweetly. "Close enough."

Mai's voice was flat. "We're here for the scene."

Badger held up his hands. "Totally. Totally. Professional. Serious face." He made a serious face for exactly one second, then it cracked. "Okay, no, I can't do that."

Ace's gaze pinned him like a knife. Badger's grin didn't falter — but his eyes sharpened, registering that Ace wasn't small in the way people were safe. Ace was small in the way bullets were small.

Badger cleared his throat. "Anyway. We found a tape. We found a body. We found some... weird vibes."

Shammy leaned closer to Mai. "He talks like a human meme."

Mai murmured back, "Yes."

Badger turned and motioned them inside. "Come on. Grouse is in there being ominous, Jello is doing nerd murder, Heavenly is trying to stop me from licking evidence, and Skullker..." He paused, grin widening like he was about to share gossip. "Skullker is just standing there like a haunted refrigerator."

Shammy laughed out loud.

Mai did not. But her eyes narrowed in a way that almost counted as enjoyment.

They stepped inside.

The production house smelled like old electronics and stale coffee. The floor was scuffed, cables ran everywhere, and the walls were lined with posters for films nobody remembered.

In the center of the main room, another stage had been built.

Different from the warehouse. More intimate. More... cinematic.

A body lay on a set of black curtains. Lights positioned at angles that made the dead face look carved. A camera tripod stood nearby, empty, pointed at the corpse like it was waiting for an operator to return.

Mai's stomach tightened.

This time there was a camera.

Ace's voice was quiet. "He upgraded."

Grouse stood near the body, hands in pockets, looking at the scene like it had personally inconvenienced him. He glanced up as they entered, eyes sharp.

"Hey," he said, casual. "You're late."

Mai blinked. "Excuse me?"

Grouse shrugged. "He dropped this like he wanted you to find it. You're supposed to be the audience."

Shammy's smile vanished. "I hate him."

Grouse nodded. "Same."

Jello was at a workstation in the corner, laptop open, cables snaking like veins. He looked up briefly.

"You're Triad," he said, like he was identifying hardware. "Cool. Your city's infected."

Mai felt something like professional respect spark, unwilling. "What did you find?"

Jello gestured at the screen. "Codec fingerprints. Same render chain. Same compression quirks. Same 'I'm trying to look analog but I'm actually digital' hypocrisy."

Badger leaned in, loud-whispering to Shammy. "See? Nerd murder."

Shammy whispered back, delighted, "Nerd murder."

Heavenly stepped into view, hands up like he was physically holding the team's sanity together.

"Hi," he said to Mai, tone polite and grounded. "We're trying to keep this clean."

Mai looked at him and felt, instantly, why Bright had assigned him.

"Good," Mai said. "Because this is already a performance."

Heavenly's eyes flicked to the staged lights, the empty tripod, the curtains like a theater set.

"Yeah," he murmured. "We noticed."

Ace moved closer to the body, gaze scanning angles, shadows, intent. She didn't touch. She didn't need to.

"This isn't for us," Ace said.

Badger frowned. "It's not?"

Ace's eyes lifted to the posters on the wall — old, faded, half-torn.

"It's for them," Ace said.

Mai followed her gaze.

A poster for a superhero film, cheap and stylized.

A bat-like silhouette in the art.

Not the bat. But close enough.

Mai's mouth went dry.

Shammy whispered, "He's making it familiar."

Ace nodded. "He's teaching."

Jello's screen pinged again.

He looked up, expression sharpening. "Uh... Mai?"

Mai turned instantly. "What."

Jello pointed at his monitor. "That sterile node you were worried about?"

Mai's blood went cold. "Yes."

"It just touched the tape," Jello said.

Silence hit the room like a dropped hammer.

Badger blinked. "Wait. The tape is... online?"

Heavenly's voice was tight. "It's sealed."

Jello shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Something in that node is reaching out. It's like..." He paused, searching for the right word. "...like it's checking if the tape is alive."

Mai's voice dropped to ice. "It's a handshake."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Someone is expecting an upload."

Shammy's fingers flexed, air around her tightening. "Someone wants to watch."

Badger's grin was gone now. "Okay, that's not funny."

Mai looked at the staged corpse, the empty tripod, the lights angled for maximum drama.

And she understood.

This wasn't Episode Two.

This was behind-the-scenes.

A production house. A camera. A handshake reaching out.

A Foundation-adjacent node checking for content.

Mai's gaze snapped to Bright's absence.

"Where's Bright," she demanded.

Heavenly's eyes flicked toward the hallway. "He's in the back. On his way."

Mai's voice was sharp. "Tell him to run."

Badger stared at her. "Run from what?"

Mai's stomach twisted as if the answer had claws.

"From whoever just tried to log into our crime scene," she said.

And as if the universe appreciated timing, a projector in the corner — dusty, unplugged, forgotten — clicked on by itself.

A rectangle of pale light splashed across the wall.

Static hissed.

Then, in that dead broadcast voice, words crawled out of the speakers like insects.

“PLAY IT.”

Shammy’s eyes went storm-bright. “Oh, I’m going to commit a felony.”

Ace’s katanas woke, emerald light spilling like a breath.

Mai’s voice was low, controlled, lethal.

“Everyone— offline. Now.”

Daaaaaaamng 🤪 Go ahead!—

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