

## Chapter 5 — The Countdown

For half a second nobody moved.

Because half a second is how long it takes for the human brain to decide whether something is real, or whether it's about to be embarrassed by reality.

The projector's pale rectangle trembled on the wall. The warehouse footage played in jerky, compressed frames — Triad walking out under police lights, Mai holding up her phone, Ace scanning the dark like she could smell a camera.

Then the overlay snapped in like a stamp on a corpse.

A countdown timer.

00:14:59... 00:14:58... 00:14:57...

In the corner, that clean little label:

O5-LOOK

Mai's throat tightened.

It wasn't the timer that did it.

It was the tag.

Because "O5" wasn't a vibe. It wasn't something people guessed. It wasn't something you wrote on a meme because it sounded spooky.

It was a keycard word.

It belonged to a world that killed you for saying it too loudly.

Shammy's eyes went bright, storm-charged, and the air in the room thickened like someone had poured pressure into it. "I hate this."

Badger stared at the wall, then at Mai, then at the wall again like his brain was trying to buffer. "Okay. Alright. So... we're being pranked by the government?"

Mai didn't look at him. "Not a prank."

Grouse's voice was dry. "It's worse than a prank. It's a flex."

Jello leaned in toward his workstation, fingers moving fast. "Projector's not even plugged in. That signal's not coming from the room."

Skullker, silent until now, turned his head slightly toward the speakers. He didn't look surprised. He looked annoyed. Like the world had violated an unspoken rule of proper doors.

Ace's katanas woke fully, emerald lines breathing light into the dust. She didn't draw them yet. She didn't need to.

Not when her stare did the same job.

“Kill the output,” Mai snapped.

Badger looked at her like she’d asked him to restart the sun. “How?”

Mai pointed at the projector. “Physically.”

Badger brightened instantly. “Oh, that I can do.”

He took one step toward it.

Heavenly caught his vest and yanked him back hard enough that Badger stumbled. “No.”

Badger blinked. “Why not?”

Heavenly’s voice was sharp, controlled. “Because if that thing is a trigger, you don’t want your face within hugging distance when it goes off.”

Badger opened his mouth, then closed it again, grudging respect winning a quick fight.

Shammy leaned in toward Mai, voice low. “That tag. That’s not normal.”

Mai’s jaw clenched. “Nothing about this is normal.”

Ace’s gaze didn’t leave the wall. “He wants us to see it.”

Grouse folded his arms. “He wants us to react to it.”

Mai’s mouth tasted like metal again. “He wants to put us on stage.”

Jello pointed at his screen without looking up. “Timer isn’t local either. It’s embedded in the stream. Which means...”

Mai finished for him. “It’s a broadcast.”

Badger’s grin twitched in, unwilling. “So we’re famous.”

Mai turned her head slowly. The look she gave him could have sterilized a room.

Badger held up both hands. “Okay, sorry. Bad time. Bad time. I get it. I’m shutting up.”

He lasted approximately two seconds.

“So what happens at zero?”

Nobody answered him.

The timer kept ticking.

00:14:41... 00:14:40... 00:14:39...

Mai’s brain ran through possibilities like a grim shopping list.

A dead drop? A kill window? A scheduled upload? A bomb? A memetic payload?

She hated that she had to consider all of it.

Jello swore softly. "The sterile node is active again."

Mai snapped her attention to him. "Meaning?"

Jello's eyes were glued to his monitor. "Meaning somebody is pinging this stream from inside that segment. Over and over. Like they're... watching for our watch."

Grouse tilted his head. "That's... intimate."

Shammy's lips curled. "That's predatory."

Ace's voice was flat. "That's permission."

Badger blinked. "Can you guys stop saying sentences that make my spine itch?"

Mai pointed at the speakers. "We cut sound first."

Heavenly nodded once, already moving. He grabbed a long power strip from the floor and yanked it out of the wall. Half the room's practical lights died. The projector didn't even flicker.

Badger made a small, offended noise. "It's still on."

Jello didn't look up. "Because it's not powered. It's being fed."

Skullker finally spoke, voice low and gravelly like it hadn't been used since last mission. "Wall."

Everyone looked at him.

He gestured at the rectangle of light. "It's coming through the wall."

Badger stared at him. "That's not how walls work."

Skullker's eyes slid to Badger with the patience of a man looking at an uncooperative lock. "Today it is."

Mai's heartbeat steadied into something colder. "Okay. We treat this like a hostile projection. No one gets close. No one touches it. Jello — can you trace the feed?"

Jello's mouth twisted. "Trace a ghost? Sure. Give me—"

He paused.

Then his expression changed in a way that made Mai's stomach tighten.

"Uh," Jello said, quieter. "Mai."

Mai's voice was clipped. "What."

Jello pointed at a line of data on his screen. "The stream's origin... it's bouncing. But the last hop before it hits us is... in this building."

Shammy's eyes went wide. "That's impossible."

Ace's gaze sharpened. "Not if someone planted a relay."

Heavenly's voice went tight. "A relay in our scene."

Badger's grin vanished completely. "Okay, yeah, that's... that's nightmare fuel."

Grouse looked toward the hallway. "Back rooms."

Mai's mind snapped into motion. "Everyone— tighten. We sweep. But we do it smart."

Shammy cracked her knuckles, and the air around her hummed like it wanted to become lightning. "Finally."

Mai turned her head, eyes hard. "No fireworks. Not yet."

Shammy's smile turned feral. "Define fireworks."

Mai didn't blink. "Define restraint."

Shammy sighed like a teenager asked to do chores. "Ugh. Fine."

Ace stepped toward the hallway, small and silent, and somehow made the room feel like it had gained a predator. Her katanas stayed in her hands now, not raised — just present, like punctuation.

Skullker moved too, taking point like doors were already offending him in advance.

Badger fell in behind, trying to look serious and failing, like his face hadn't been trained for it.

Heavenly stayed near Mai and Jello, not because he was afraid of the back rooms, but because he understood the real danger wasn't in the dark — it was in the signal.

"Timer," Mai said quietly, checking the wall again.

00:12:22... 00:12:21... 00:12:20...

"You think it's a drop?" Heavenly asked.

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Or a kill window."

Jello's fingers flew. "Or an upload trigger. Something releases when it hits zero."

Badger leaned over from the doorway, whisper-yelling. "Or it's just a dramatic countdown because the guy has theater kid energy."

Ace didn't look back. "He has director energy."

Badger's eyes widened. "That's worse."

They moved down the hallway into the building's guts.

The production house back rooms weren't glamorous. They were storage and cables and dusty props that had lived too many fake lives. Old monitors stacked like tombstones. Shelves of tape reels. A cracked mannequin head staring at nothing.

Shammy glanced at the mannequin and muttered, "Absolutely not."

Badger pointed at it. "See? Even the mannequin is judging us."

Grouse walked past without slowing. "It's seen your search history."

Badger wheezed. "Bro—"

Even Mai's mouth twitched, traitorous.

Then Ace stopped so abruptly everyone nearly collided.

She held up a hand.

Silence.

Not "quiet." Silence like a room suddenly realizing it had been breathing too loud.

Ace's head tilted.

Shammy's eyes narrowed, sensing it too.

Mai's skin prickled.

From behind a closed door — a door that looked like it belonged to an electrical closet — came a faint sound.

Not footsteps.

Not voices.

A mechanical whirr.

And under it... something that sounded like a tape rewinding.

Badger whispered, very softly, "Okay. Nope."

Skullker didn't whisper. He just walked up to the door like it had insulted him personally.

Heavenly said, low, "Skullker—"

Skullker raised a hand without looking back. A wait signal. Not for permission. For timing.

Mai shifted to the side, giving herself a line of sight. Ace's katanas hummed faintly.

Shammy's fingers twitched, the air around her tightening.

Jello stayed behind with his laptop like a priest clutching a relic.

Skullker tried the handle.

Locked.

Of course.

He stared at the lock for half a second like it had disappointed him.

Then he did what he did.

There was no dramatic kick. No shoulder charge.

He simply put his hand on the latch, flexed, and the lock gave up its entire will to live with a small, offended snap.

The door swung open.

Inside was a small equipment room.

Racks of gear. Spools of cable. A table with a CRT monitor that looked older than everyone present's patience.

And on the table:

A VHS deck.

Not a joke. Not a prop.

A real VCR, humming softly like it was content.

A tape was inside it.

The CRT flickered, showing a frozen frame.

Not the warehouse.

Not Triad.

Something else.

A corridor.

A narrow, sterile corridor with bright lights and white walls that screamed institution. Not a studio. Not a set.

Mai's stomach dropped.

Because she knew those corridors.

Maybe not that exact corridor.

But the type.

Foundation-adjacent architecture had a smell, even through pixels.

Badger stared at the VCR like it had crawled out of hell and asked for a subscription.

He whispered, awed, "VCR time."

Mai's head snapped toward him. "I swear to God—"

Badger held up a hand, grinning despite himself. "I couldn't help it. It was right there."

Shammy leaned in, eyes bright. "Okay, but... that's kind of iconic."

Heavenly stepped closer, voice tight. "Do not touch anything."

Ace stared at the CRT. "It's already playing."

Mai looked closer.

The tape wasn't moving.

But the screen was.

The corridor frame twitched. Glitched. Like the footage itself was alive and impatient.

Jello peered around the doorframe, eyes widening. "Oh. Oh no."

Mai's voice was low. "What."

Jello swallowed. "That corridor... that's not just 'Foundation-ish.' That's a real segment. I've seen that layout in routing diagrams."

Shammy's eyebrows rose. "So the killer is... inside?"

Ace's voice was cold. "Or someone wants us to think that."

Badger looked at the VCR, then at everyone else. "Can we just set the whole building on fire and call it a day?"

Mai shot him a look. "No."

Badger's shoulders slumped. "Cruel."

The CRT suddenly flickered hard.

The corridor footage stabilized.

And then, right in the center of the frame, a figure stepped into view.

Not a clear face.

Just a silhouette in harsh fluorescent light.

But the movement was deliberate.

Staged.

The figure lifted something into frame.

A card.

White.

Printed text.

The camera zoomed — not smoothly. Like it was being operated by someone who hated smoothness on principle.

The card filled the screen.

YOU BROUGHT FRIENDS.

Shammy's smile vanished. "He's watching us right now."

Badger muttered, "Okay, I'm officially uncomfortable."

Ace's gaze locked on the screen. "He wants escalation."

Mai's fingers tightened. "He wants to include Theta-24 in the story."

Heavenly's voice was sharp. "Not happening."

Jello's eyes darted between his laptop and the CRT. "Timer— Mai, the timer—"

Mai looked back down the hallway, toward the main room where the projector still ran.

They could hear it faintly even from here — a thin hiss of static like a snake in the walls.

Mai checked her watch.

Then, like her brain had been waiting to punish her for existing, she realized something.

The timer on the wall wasn't counting down to a broadcast.

It was counting down to a moment.

A synchronized beat.

A cue.

Mai's voice went cold. "He's running a live production."

Ace whispered, "Multiple cameras."

Shammy's teeth clenched. "Multiple stages."

Badger's eyes widened. "Multiple— oh god— multiple episodes?"

Grouse, flat as death: "Season drop."

Mai's mouth tightened. "Jello. Kill the relay."

Jello swallowed. "In the building? Sure. If I can find it."

Skullker stepped forward like he'd found his purpose. "Doors."

Mai didn't even argue. "Yes. Doors."

Heavenly glanced at Mai, voice quiet. "Bright isn't here yet."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "He needs to be."

As if the universe had been listening and decided to be funny in the worst way possible, the hallway

lights flickered once.

Then again.

Then stabilized.

A moment later, footsteps echoed from deeper in the building.

Not one set.

Multiple.

Fast. Purposeful.

Not cops. Not staff.

And then a voice, distant but unmistakably loud, carried down the corridor.

“WHERE’S THE CREEPY TV ROOM? I HEARD THERE’S A CREEPY TV ROOM.”

Badger’s head snapped toward the sound. His face lit up with recognition and dread at the same time.

“Oh no,” he whispered. “That’s... that’s Bright.”

Mai closed her eyes for one fraction of a second, then opened them with the expression of a woman preparing to strangle bureaucracy.

Shammy’s lips curled. “Of course he announces himself like a foghorn.”

Ace’s voice was flat. “He wants to be heard.”

Heavenly muttered, “We’re going to die.”

Badger, like an excited child watching a car crash: “We’re going to die with flavor.”

Mai turned sharply toward the main room. “Everyone back. Now. We do not let this become a scene.”

The CRT flickered again.

The silhouette raised another card.

The words were shorter this time.

Sharper.

TEN MINUTES.

Mai felt her pulse lock into something steady and murderous.

She grabbed the VCR’s power cable — not the machine, just the cable — and yanked it out of the wall.

The CRT went black instantly.

For one breath, relief tried to exist.

Then the projector's audio hissed louder, as if offended.

From the direction of the main room, the dead broadcast voice returned — clearer now, almost pleased.

“GOOD.”

Mai froze.

Shammy whispered, furious, “It liked that.”

Ace's voice was quiet and certain. “It wanted us to cut it.”

Jello stared at his laptop, pale. “Guys...”

Mai turned to him. “What.”

Jello's voice cracked, just slightly.

“The sterile node,” he said. “It just moved.”

Mai's blood went colder than it had any right to.

“Moved where,” she demanded.

Jello swallowed.

“Into the building,” he whispered. “Like it's... local now.”

And from somewhere in the walls — not the VCR, not the projector, but the structure itself — a faint mechanical click sounded.

Like something switching on.

Like a relay answering.—

© 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

**Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.**

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace21:chapter5>

Last update: **31/03/2026 16:21**

