

Chapter 6 — The Seam

The emergency exit sign should not have text.

It should not have opinions.

It should not have directions.

And yet there it was, glowing a sickly green above the corridor like a smug little oracle:

PLAY THE NEXT ONE.

Badger stared at it as if it had just asked for his credit card details.

“Okay,” he said, voice low and reverent. “That is... aggressively illegal.”

Shammy tilted her head, eyes narrow. “It’s not just text. It’s... attitude.”

Ace didn’t blink. “It’s bait.”

Mai’s brain was already moving, stripping the scene down to components.

A projector that wasn’t plugged in.

A VCR playing footage of a corridor that smelled like Foundation.

A sterile node that “moved into the building.”

An exit sign that changed.

And now the building itself — sprinklers rotating like camera heads.

This wasn’t haunting.

This was infrastructure.

Jello’s fingers flew over his laptop. “I’m pulling ARP tables. I’m pulling local routing. I’m pulling—” He stopped, eyes widening. “Oh.”

Mai felt her stomach drop. “What.”

Jello swallowed. “There’s a device on the network.”

Badger blinked. “We have a network?”

Jello shot him a look. “Every building has a network. It’s 2026. Even the coffee machine probably has Wi-Fi and emotional needs.”

Badger’s eyes widened. “That explains the taste.”

Heavenly didn’t laugh. Heavenly didn’t even blink. He just leaned in, voice tight. “What device.”

Jello tapped the screen. “It’s... not in the building inventory. Not a camera. Not a router. Something... pretending to be a printer.”

Mai stared at him. "A printer."

Jello nodded slowly. "It's using a printer profile. It's announcing itself as 'HP-OfficeJet' like it's trying to be boring."

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

Ace's voice was flat. "Smart."

Badger raised a hand, genuinely curious. "Why a printer?"

Jello didn't look up. "Because nobody questions printers. Printers are the Foundation's natural predators. People fear them. People avoid them. They live in corners. They have cables. They have paper. They have... plausible deniability."

Badger whispered, "That's... true."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "So the relay is disguised as a printer. It's inside the building. Which means someone physically planted it."

Heavenly nodded once. "And someone expected us to find it."

Ace's gaze flicked toward the rotating sprinkler head. "And someone wants us to look up."

Shammy's voice sharpened. "Why is the sprinkler doing that?"

Mai's jaw clenched. "Because this is a set."

Jello pointed at a rough network map on his screen. "It's not just one device. It's... a chain. Relay to relay. Like a snake."

Mai exhaled slowly. "A seam."

Shammy blinked. "A what?"

Mai didn't take her eyes off the map. "A seam between systems. Something that's bridging networks that shouldn't touch."

Ace's gaze went distant, tracking angles. "He's sewing."

Badger frowned. "He's sewing what?"

Ace's voice was quiet. "Us."

Heavenly's expression tightened. "We need Bright. Now."

As if summoned by the mention, Bright's voice echoed down the corridor again, louder and closer.

"HELLO? ANYONE? I BROUGHT—"

Mai moved before she thought.

She stepped out into the hallway, walked toward the sound, and met Bright halfway like a missile meeting a wall.

Bright rounded the corner in a black coat that looked too dramatic for daytime and too comfortable on him to be accidental. His hair was a controlled disaster. His grin was present—until he saw Mai’s face.

His grin died.

“What,” he said. One word. Immediate seriousness.

Mai shoved her phone—still in a Faraday bag—toward him like she was handing him a live grenade. “He wrote to the offline laptop.”

Bright’s eyes flicked to the bag, then to Mai. “You didn’t bring the tape.”

Mai’s voice was sharp. “No.”

Bright’s gaze narrowed. “Good. Because Theta-24 is currently arguing with each other in a parking lot about whether a VCR counts as a weapon.”

From behind Bright, a familiar voice yelled, cheerful and wrong for the situation:

“IT TOTALLY COUNTS.”

Another voice, calmer, replied, “Everything counts if you throw it hard enough.”

Badger winced like someone had poked his soul. “Oh, thank God, more of us.”

Mai didn’t move. “Bright. The building is compromised. There’s a relay disguised as a printer and the sterile node moved into the structure.”

Bright’s expression tightened hard enough to turn his face into something that belonged in a file photo.

“Show me,” he said.

Mai stepped aside. Bright entered the equipment room and took in the black CRT, the VCR on the table, the dead screen, the wrongness in the air.

His eyes flicked to the emergency exit sign in the hallway where the text still glowed.

PLAY THE NEXT ONE.

Bright stared at it for one second.

Then he laughed.

It wasn’t his usual laugh. It was the laugh of a man who recognized an insult.

“Oh,” Bright said softly. “That’s cute.”

Mai’s stomach sank. “What.”

Bright leaned closer to the sign like he was reading a menu. “That tag earlier. ‘O5-LOOK.’”

Mai nodded. “Yes.”

Bright’s eyes sharpened. “That is not an O5 tag.”

Shammy's brows rose. "So it's fake."

Bright's smile turned razor-thin. "Yes. It's fake."

Ace's voice was cold. "But it worked."

Bright looked at her, and for once he didn't joke. He just nodded.

"It worked," he agreed. "Because whoever made it understands how we think."

Mai's throat tightened. "Someone inside."

Bright's gaze slid to Jello's workstation. "Or someone adjacent. Or someone who built a seam and is testing how fast we bleed into it."

Jello lifted his laptop slightly. "I can trace the 'printer.' If it's physical, I can—"

Bright cut him off, sharp. "No. Not yet."

Jello blinked. "What? Why?"

Bright's eyes were on the hallway, on the rotating sprinkler head that had stopped moving now, as if it had achieved the angle it wanted.

"Because it wants us to trace it," Bright said. "And if we do, we'll show it exactly what our tools are."

Badger frowned. "So what do we do. Just... leave the haunted printer alone?"

Bright's eyes flicked to Badger. "Yes. We do."

Badger looked deeply offended. "That feels irresponsible."

Bright's smile returned, sharp and mean. "Welcome to counterintelligence. It always feels irresponsible until you win."

Shammy leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "So we pretend we didn't see it."

Bright nodded. "Exactly. We step back. We control the environment. We force him to move on our terms."

Ace's gaze didn't soften. "He won't."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "He will."

Mai watched him, feeling that shift — the moment Bright stopped being a walking joke and became what he actually was: a man who had survived the Foundation's internal politics long enough to develop a predator's patience.

"He wants an episode," Bright said. "He wants footage of us reacting. He wants us to chase the relay. He wants us to touch the seam."

Mai's voice was flat. "We don't."

Bright's smile widened. "Exactly."

Badger leaned in, stage-whispering to Shammy, "I'm starting to like him."

Shammy whispered back, "He has 'dramatic uncle' energy."

Bright's head turned slightly without looking at them. "I can hear you."

Shammy smiled brightly. "Good."

Bright exhaled, then snapped his attention back to Mai. "Where's the tape?"

"In a locked cabinet," Mai said. "Far from this building."

Bright nodded, approving. "Good. Keep it that way."

He turned to Heavenly. "You good?"

Heavenly nodded. "We kept Badger from touching anything."

Badger protested, "I touched air."

Heavenly's stare made him stop.

Bright turned to Jello. "You have the map."

Jello nodded. "Yes."

Bright's eyes sharpened. "Then here's what we do."

He stepped into the center of the room as if it were a briefing space, not a crime scene.

"We stop thinking like containment," Bright said. "Because O5 made the call. This isn't about keeping him in a box. This is about killing a format."

Badger whispered, "That's metal."

Bright ignored him. "We need to identify two things: his production chain, and his distribution chain. Production is physical— equipment, locations, habits. Distribution is narrative— where the content spreads and why."

Mai nodded slowly. "We were building that."

Bright's smile twitched. "Good. Because you're doing the part that matters."

He looked at Ace. "You read rhythm. You tell us where he escalates."

Ace's gaze was steady. "He'll pick a target that splits the audience."

Bright nodded. "Exactly."

He looked at Shammy. "You read pressure. You tell us where the city is leaning."

Shammy's smile sharpened. "Studios. Service arteries. Westlake. The veins."

Bright nodded again. "Perfect."

Then Bright looked at Badger and the Theta-24 cluster behind him—Grouse leaning in the doorway like he'd been born bored, Skullker standing so still he looked like he was waiting for the building to apologize, Heavenly quietly making sure nobody committed an accidental war crime, Jello still half in data-land.

"And you," Bright said, pointing at Theta-24, "are going to do something you hate."

Badger blinked. "Be subtle?"

Bright smiled. "Yes."

Badger made a face like he'd bitten lemon. "That's cruel."

Bright's tone sharpened. "You will not become part of his story. You will not do anything loud. You will not scare the city in a way that gives him free footage."

Badger held up a finger. "Okay, but—"

Bright cut him off. "No buts."

Badger's finger lowered slowly.

Bright pointed at Jello. "You are going to cut distribution. Quietly. Systematically. No grand gestures."

Jello nodded once. "Got it."

Bright pointed at Grouse. "You find physical nodes. You find where the gear lives."

Grouse nodded. "Already doing it."

Bright looked at Skullker. "And you..."

Skullker waited.

Bright's smile turned cruelly pleased. "You get to do doors."

Skullker's face didn't change.

But something in his posture shifted, like the universe had just granted him a gift.

Badger whispered to Mai, "That's the happiest I've ever seen him."

Mai didn't answer. She was watching the exit sign.

PLAY THE NEXT ONE.

The text flickered once, like an eyelid.

Bright noticed her gaze.

He stepped closer to the sign and spoke to it casually, like he was addressing a person in the room.

"No," Bright said.

The sign flickered.

Bright smiled.

“No,” he repeated, softer. “You don’t get to direct us.”

The sign’s text pulsed, then changed.

For one second it displayed:

WHY NOT?

Shammy’s smile vanished. “Oh— it’s interactive.”

Badger whispered, delighted and horrified, “He’s live-chatting the building.”

Mai’s skin went cold.

Bright stared at the sign, then slowly tilted his head.

“Because,” Bright said, voice gentle in a way that made it worse, “I’ve killed better stories than you.”

The sign flickered violently.

Then it went blank.

The emergency exit sign returned to normal. Just glowing green. Just a sign. Just an object.

The building exhaled, or maybe Mai just imagined it.

Shammy stared at Bright like she was reassessing him. “Okay. Uncle Dramatic just grew teeth.”

Badger nodded slowly. “Yeah. That was... kinda hot.”

Heavenly muttered, “Please don’t say that.”

Mai exhaled, tight. “So what now.”

Bright stepped back, eyes sharp, all business.

“Now,” he said, “we leave.”

Badger blinked. “We leave the creepy set?”

“Yes,” Bright said. “We deny him the footage of us scrambling in his maze.”

Ace’s gaze was cold. “He’ll escalate.”

Bright nodded. “Good.”

Mai stared at him. “Good?”

Bright’s smile returned, thin. “Escalation makes him predictable. And predictability makes him dead.”

Mai felt the logic click into place, reluctantly.

Shammy’s eyes brightened. “So we let him think he’s winning.”

Bright nodded. “Exactly.”

Badger’s grin returned, feral. “Oh, I like this game.”

Mai shot him a look. “It’s not a game.”

Badger’s grin didn’t fade. “It’s always a game. It’s just sometimes the stakes are corpses.”

Mai hated that he wasn’t wrong.

Bright turned to Mai, voice low. “We move to the secondary site. We set up our own environment. We force him to come to us.”

Mai nodded slowly. “And the second tape.”

Bright’s eyes hardened. “We don’t play it.”

Shammy’s smile sharpened. “We dissect it.”

Bright nodded. “Exactly.”

He looked at Ace. “And we remember: this isn’t a killer. This is a format.”

Ace’s gaze didn’t waver. “Formats die when no one copies them.”

Bright’s smile returned, pleased. “Good. Let’s go kill a format.”

They moved out of the production house in disciplined silence — and for a moment, the building felt normal again, like it was ashamed of what it had tried.

Mai didn’t trust shame from buildings.

As they stepped into daylight, Jello’s phone buzzed in his pocket — except it wasn’t his phone. He didn’t carry one on missions.

It was an old flip phone he’d grabbed from a prop box as a joke.

It buzzed anyway.

Jello stared at it like it had grown teeth.

Badger leaned in. “Please tell me that’s not—”

The flip phone clicked open by itself.

Its tiny screen lit up with blocky text.

EPISODE THREE IS UPLOADING.

Mai’s blood went cold.

Bright’s smile vanished.

Ace’s katanas hummed softly.

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright.

Badger whispered, almost reverent, "Oh hell yes."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger corrected instantly, quieter: "Oh hell no."

Bright looked at the flip phone, then at Mai.

"Now," Bright said softly, "we find out what he thinks Episode Three should be."

Hmmmmmmmmmm... nyt tuli taas sellainen kierrepallo että eikun eteenpäin!—

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