

Chapter 9 — Live Internal

Bright's phone did not ring.

Not in the way phones rang.

Not in the way electronics obeyed rules.

It rang inside a Faraday bag like the universe was doing it on purpose.

A soft, insistent trill, muffled by the bag's lining — and somehow worse because of it. Like a heartbeat you weren't supposed to hear.

Mai stared at the bag on Bright's hip.

Bright stared at it too.

Shammy leaned in, eyes wide with delighted horror. "Ohhh, that's— that's spicy."

Badger, still half on the ground, whispered, "We're getting ghost-called."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger corrected reflexively. "We're getting... anomalously contacted."

Grouse muttered, "Still stupid."

Jello's face had gone pale. "I just watched the sterile node go dark, then come back with a new label."

Mai didn't take her eyes off Bright's bag. "Say it again."

Jello swallowed. "It says—" he glanced down like the words might bite him through the screen, "—O5-LOOK / LIVE INTERNAL."

Ace's posture changed. Not dramatic. Just that subtle tightening that meant she was now a blade you had taken out of its sheath without realizing.

Bright's jaw clenched.

"Okay," Bright said softly. "That's... not a game anymore."

Shammy's smile vanished. "It was a game?"

Bright didn't look at her. "It was a format. Now it's a breach."

Mai's mind raced, scanning the scene like a map.

Civilians still nearby, fussing about drizzle, filming their own small complaints. The camcorder across the street had disappeared into the crowd during the flash — or moved. Or been moved.

The supervisor—the puppet—was half-conscious in Bright's arms, eyes wide and unfocused like he'd just watched himself die.

And in Mai's hand: the sealed evidence bag containing "Episode Three," captured in the most boring way possible.

They had broken the ritual.

But something had retaliated.

Bright's Faraday bag rang again.

Bright's eyes narrowed. "Everyone— eyes up. Move off the entrance."

Mai stepped back, already guiding Triad and Theta-24 sideways, away from the centerline of obvious cameras. They needed space. They needed cover. They needed to stop being the most interesting thing in the frame.

Shammy's drizzle helped — people were busy, irritated, distracted.

Boring.

Mai loved boring.

Except the ring kept going.

Bright grimaced like someone was playing a rude song in a church.

Finally, he did something Mai hated.

He unzipped the Faraday bag.

Just enough to reach inside.

Mai snapped, "Bright—"

Bright didn't look at her. "If it's live internal, it's not going away. Better I hear it than the bag keeps broadcasting 'we're scared.'"

Mai clenched her jaw. He wasn't wrong. That was the problem.

Bright pulled the phone out.

The screen was black.

No caller ID.

No signal bars.

Just one word, typed in crisp white letters like it had been burned into the display.

ANSWER

Shammy whispered, "Do not."

Badger whispered, "Do it."

Heavenly whispered, "I will kill you."

Badger shut up.

Bright stared at the screen for a long second.

Then, without lifting the phone to his ear, he hit speaker.

The sound that came out was not a voice at first.

It was... a tone.

A thin, modulated hum like a VHS tracking error trying to become language.

Then it resolved.

And the voice that emerged was wrong in the way a mannequin is wrong when it smiles.

Not robotic.

Not artificial.

Human cadence with something dead inside it.

“Doctor Bright,” it said.

Mai’s blood went cold.

Shammy’s eyes went storm-bright.

Ace’s gaze locked, predatory.

Bright’s expression didn’t change much — because Bright’s face had learned to hide panic behind sarcasm. But his pupils tightened, a small betrayal.

“Who is this,” Bright said, voice flat.

The voice on speaker did a thing that almost sounded like a laugh.

“You already know.”

Mai felt the ground shift under her thoughts.

Because that line wasn’t just menace.

It was familiarity.

Bright’s jaw clenched. “No. I don’t.”

A pause.

Then the voice said, soft and pleased, “O5-LOOK is watching.”

Mai’s fingers tightened around the evidence bag until plastic creaked.

Bright’s gaze flicked to her bag—then back to the phone.

“You’re not O5,” Bright said.

The voice hummed again, like it enjoyed being told what it wasn't.

"Correct."

Shammy's lip curled. "Ohhh, it's proud."

Ace spoke for the first time, voice low and lethal. "What do you want."

The phone went quiet for a beat.

Then the voice softened, like it was addressing a child.

"Bring the small one."

Ace's presence sharpened. The emerald glow along her katanas brightened as if her anger had a voltage.

Mai stepped in front of Ace without thinking, body doing what it always did: protect the anchor.

Bright's voice turned hard. "No."

The voice responded immediately, amused. "Yes."

Bright's grip tightened on the phone. "You're running a fake tag."

"Yes."

"Using conditioned contractors," Bright continued, jaw clenched. "And a relay disguised as a printer."

"Yes."

Bright's eyes narrowed. "And you just switched it to 'live internal' to make it look like it's inside the Foundation."

A pause. Then:

"Yes."

Mai's mouth went dry. "He's admitting it."

Grouse muttered, "That means he wants us to hear it."

Heavenly's eyes narrowed. "Or he doesn't care."

Bright's gaze flicked to Jello. "Jello. Can you locate the source of that call."

Jello's fingers moved fast, but his face was strained. "It's not a normal call. It's... riding the same seam. It's echoing through the sterile node."

Shammy whispered, furious, "It's inside the pipe."

Ace's voice was a knife. "Then cut the pipe."

Jello swallowed. "If I cut it blind, I might cut something else."

Bright's eyes hardened. "Do it anyway."

Mai snapped her head toward Bright. "Bright—"

Bright didn't look away from the phone. "Mai. If it's truly 'live internal' now, that means someone will believe it. Someone will act on it. We can't let that label sit."

Mai felt the logic like a punch: the killer wasn't just staging murders. He was staging authority. If "O5-LOOK / LIVE INTERNAL" existed even for an hour, it could trigger real Foundation responses. Real teams. Real cleanups. Real deaths.

Not because the killer had power.

Because people would give it to him.

Mai inhaled, slow. "Jello. Cut it."

Jello's hands shook once, then steadied. "Okay. Okay. Give me two seconds."

Badger leaned toward the phone, unable to resist. "Hey— whoever you are—"

Heavenly snapped, "Badger."

Badger shut up mid-syllable, eyes still wide.

Bright's voice stayed flat, controlled. "You're trying to get her killed."

The voice hummed again. "Correct."

Mai's stomach turned. "Why."

The voice paused, and for a second it sounded almost... thoughtful.

Then it answered.

"Because she breaks the format."

Shammy's eyes narrowed. "He means Ace."

Mai's voice came out low. "You're afraid of her."

The voice on the speaker sounded pleased.

"Yes."

Ace's eyes burned. "Then come here."

Mai snapped, "Ace—"

Ace didn't look at her. "He wants me on camera. Fine. I'll be on camera."

Mai felt a spike of fear, sharp and ugly. "That's what he wants."

Ace's voice was quiet, furious. "He wants me small."

Mai reached for Ace's wrist — a grounding touch.

Ace didn't pull away. That mattered.

Bright's voice cut in, sudden and sharp. "No. Listen."

Bright turned slightly so the phone's speaker faced all of them.

"You want Ace," Bright said. "Because she doesn't play your game. She doesn't give you the reaction you want. She doesn't show fear for your audience. And you hate that."

The voice on the phone hummed. "Yes."

Bright's smile turned razor-thin. "Good. Keep hating it."

Then Bright's tone snapped colder.

"Because the moment you step into reach," he said, "she will cut you in half and the audience won't even understand what happened."

A pause.

Then the voice said, softly, "That is why you brought friends."

Mai's blood went cold again.

Because the voice wasn't wrong.

Theta-24.

A public venue.

Cameras everywhere.

A staged exchange.

This was the episode.

And now it had shifted.

From "killer eliminates criminals" to "killer provokes Foundation assets."

From vigilante myth to institutional horror.

Shammy whispered, "He's moving genres."

Ace's voice was tight. "He's evolving."

Jello suddenly said, "Now."

His fingers slammed a key.

On his screen, the sterile node flashed.

For half a second, it went black.

The phone on speaker screamed.

Not a human scream— a burst of static so sharp it felt like needles in the teeth.

People nearby flinched, rubbing ears, annoyed, thinking it was feedback from a bad PA system.

Boring irritation.

Mai loved boring irritation.

Bright's phone screen flickered.

The single word ANSWER vanished.

Replaced by a new line:

CUTE.

Shammy's eyes widened. "Oh my God, it's petty."

Ace's katanas hummed brighter.

Bright's face hardened. "You survived the cut."

The voice returned, softer now, but with a grin in every syllable.

"You cut the wrong thing."

Mai's heart sank. "What did he do."

Jello's face went pale. "I— I didn't cut the node. I cut the... decoy."

Bright's gaze sharpened. "Show me."

Jello shoved the laptop toward him.

The map had changed.

The sterile node had split into two.

One was dark.

One was still bright, and now labeled:

O5-LOOK / ROOT

Mai felt a chill spread through her chest.

The voice on the phone purred, almost affectionate.

"Episode Three is already in the building."

Shammy's breath caught. "Which building."

The voice answered instantly:

“Yours.”

Mai’s spine went cold.

Ace’s head snapped toward the street like she could see through distance.

Bright’s voice went sharp. “Mai. Safehouse.”

Mai’s stomach dropped.

Because if the node was “root,” if it wasn’t just a relay in a studio, then the seam wasn’t localized.

It had already moved.

Already nested.

Already grown.

Mai’s voice went flat, lethal. “We go. Now.”

Bright didn’t argue. He snapped the phone shut like it was a cockroach and threw it into the Faraday bag again.

Badger stared, breathless. “Did... did we just get threatened by an evil IT department.”

Heavenly grabbed his shoulder and hauled him into motion. “Move.”

Shammy’s drizzle stopped without her even thinking about it — not because she chose to be dramatic, but because her attention had shifted. The air went dry, tense.

Ace looked up at Mai, voice quiet.

“He went after our home.”

Mai’s chest tightened.

“Yes,” she said. “And that means he made a mistake.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “He thinks he can control us.”

Mai’s voice was ice. “He can’t.”

Bright’s jaw clenched. “If he’s in your safehouse, he’s either after your tape... or after your machines... or—”

Shammy finished, softly. “Or after your borders.”

Mai didn’t like that word in Shammy’s mouth.

Borders.

Seams.

Edges.

Things that were supposed to keep worlds apart.

They moved fast, spreading out, minimizing profile, disappearing into vehicles like the city swallowed them.

And as Mai drove, her comms—silent, disciplined—picked up one last whisper, slipping through the seam like a finger through a crack.

Not the dead broadcast voice this time.

Something calmer.

More personal.

A single sentence that made Mai's blood turn to ice because it was phrased like someone who knew her.

“Bring the small one home.”

Mai didn't respond.

She just drove.

Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaamn.. eteenpäin!!!!—

© 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:chapter9>

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

