

Chapter 11: The Corporate Job

The Arasaka job came back around.

Of course it did.

Not the medical transport. Not the flagged route. Not the neat little lesson in how corporate systems noticed without escalating. This was something larger. Meaner. The kind of work that made people in the Afterlife lower their voices without fully realizing they were doing it.

Rogue brought it up like she was setting a blade on the bar between them.

“Corporate intercept,” she said. “Arasaka transport. Client wants it stopped before it reaches Watson.”

Not stolen.

Not recovered.

Stopped.

That word changed the air.

The Afterlife was loud enough to bruise with sound. Bass under the ribs. Synthetic highs sharp enough to make teeth ache. Neon bleeding in from outside. Chrome everywhere—hands, eyes, jawlines, reflex twitches polished until they looked natural by repetition alone. The room pulsed with the economy of violence. People drinking because they were celebrating. People drinking because they were waiting. People drinking because staying sober in Night City required an ideology most people couldn't afford.

Shammy stood at the bar with her arms crossed.

Professional.

Too professional.

Ace could see the tension anyway. Shoulders slightly high. Jaw set a fraction too tight. Warmth gone behind the fixer wall, not absent, just buried.

“Stopped,” Shammy repeated.

Rogue nodded once.

“Premium pay.”

“That's not what I asked.”

Rogue looked at her like she had asked something decorative.

“Transport moves. Client doesn't want it arriving. You intercept. End of story.”

“No recovery?”

“No.”

“No package?”

“No.”

“Just stop.”

“Just stop.”

Simple.

There was that word again, even unsaid.

Ace hated it on principle now.

Shammy didn't move.

“The client.”

Rogue's eyes narrowed very slightly.

“The client is paying enough that you don't need curiosity.”

That was not an answer.

Which meant it was the only one on offer.

Mai stood a little back from the bar, one hand against the wall, grounding through chipped polymer and old metal while the city screamed through every nearby signal. Her silver hair caught red, then blue, then red again as the signage shifted. The numbers were loud—Ace could see it in the tightness around her eyes, in the way she kept almost speaking and then refusing to.

“We'll take it,” Shammy said.

Rogue studied her for one second too long.

Then slid the shard across.

“Three days.”

They walked home through Heywood without rushing.

Night City did the rushing for them.

Traffic stacked in layers. Food smoke rose from curb grills. Ads chased them down the street with smiling promises of body upgrades, debt solutions, synthetic intimacy, and legal immunity fine-tuned to desperation. Somewhere above, a delivery drone clipped a tower corner, corrected, and kept going like almost crashing was part of the route.

Shammy said nothing at first.

Mai endured the noise with one hand dragging lightly across surfaces whenever she could—wall, railing, alley fence, rusted service cabinet. Cool. Solid. Real. The ritual had become quieter. Less

announced. More necessary.

Ace walked half a step behind Shammy.

Watching.

Waiting.

"You said that name differently," Ace said at last.

Shammy did not stop.

"Did I."

"Yes."

Mai glanced over.

"The probability that your vocal pattern shifted at the mention of Arasaka is—"

"Don't."

Shammy didn't raise her voice.

Didn't need to.

Mai stopped there, mouth tightening around the unfinished sentence.

Good.

Shammy kept walking.

"Arasaka is the kind of name that changes how people breathe in this city," she said. "That doesn't make it mysterious. It makes it expensive."

"That isn't what Ace meant," Mai said.

Shammy laughed once.

No warmth in it.

"I know."

The street narrowed around them for half a block, compressed by unfinished repairs and a shuttered clinic front still glowing with dead signage.

Ace let the silence sit.

Then: "You know more than you're saying."

Shammy looked at her then.

Not angry.

Measured.

“Yes.”

There it was.

No denial.

Mai’s hand found the edge of a utility box.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

“The probability that this job connects to something in your board is high.”

“Yes,” Shammy said again.

“And you’re still not telling us.”

“I’m telling you enough.”

“For the job,” Ace said.

“For now.”

That was the first real answer.

They kept walking.

Mai’s eyes sharpened.

“The job connects to Arasaka and to something in your past. That is no longer a theory.”

“No.” Shammy’s voice flattened. “It isn’t.”

“Then what.”

Shammy stopped.

The city moved around them. Didn’t care. Never did.

“I’ve been here fifty years,” she said. “That means I know things I didn’t learn for your benefit. It means some names have teeth. It means some jobs don’t end just because the money changed hands.” A pause. “And it means there are parts of my life I do not unpack on command.”

No one argued.

Good again.

Ace stepped closer by half a pace.

“We’re not asking for command,” she said. “We’re asking for what matters if this thing turns.”

Shammy held her gaze.

The warmth flickered once.

Then settled low.

"It matters," she said quietly, "that Arasaka never forgets cleanly. It matters that they file everything. It matters that if this transport is being hit inside their own territory, someone important wants noise." Her eyes shifted away, just for a second. "And it matters that I have been close to that kind of noise before."

Martinez hung there without being named.

Ace heard it.

Mai did too.

Neither pushed.

That was progress.

The board looked worse at night.

More honest.

During the day it could almost pass for a fixer's system—contacts, strings, jobs, crossed-out lines, practical analog logic. At night, under red-blue spill from the street and the sickly wash of the apartment's old overheads, it became what it actually was:

a life pinned to a wall so it could not disappear.

Arasaka was everywhere once you started looking.

Old contracts. Route maps. dead names. circles around internal codenames Mai did not recognize. Transport notes. Security references. One cluster that had clearly once been central and was now partially torn down, as if Shammy had tried to erase it and then stopped halfway through.

Mai stood in front of it with one hand against the wall.

The numbers were useless here.

Observation wasn't.

"You worked with them," she said.

Shammy, in the kitchenette measuring tea she would barely taste, didn't turn immediately.

"Yes."

"Against them."

"Yes."

"You know their route discipline. Their patrol logic. Their internal habits."

“Yes.”

Mai waited.

Shammy turned.

The fixer was back in her posture, but not perfectly.

Something underneath kept leaking through.

“There are things on that wall I know how to talk about,” she said. “And things I do not.”

“This is one of the second kind.”

“Yes.”

Ace pushed off the window and came closer.

Her shadow followed a fraction too slowly.

The fragment was awake again, not surging, but near enough to be felt in the edges of her movement.

“You said in the street this one matters if it turns,” Ace said. “That means it matters before it turns too.”

Shammy set the tea tin down.

Her eyes moved to the board.

To one particular section of it.

Then away.

“Year thirty-one,” she said.

The room changed.

Mai stopped moving entirely.

Ace didn’t.

That was her version of stillness now.

“What happened,” Ace asked.

Shammy’s mouth twitched.

Not with humor.

With refusal fighting its own erosion.

“I did something for Arasaka.”

Silence.

Mai's voice came out flat.

"What."

"No."

Not harsh.

Absolute.

Mai's jaw tightened.

"The probability that—"

"Don't." Shammy's warmth vanished almost completely. "Not this way."

Mai pressed harder into the wall.

The numbers tore themselves apart and she let them.

Ace watched Shammy.

Not the answer.

The strain behind not answering.

"We're asking," Ace said.

"I know."

"Then tell us what kind of damage this is."

That landed.

Shammy's eyes closed once.

When they opened, the warmth had returned just enough to make honesty possible.

"It was a containment-adjacent job," she said. "Corporate deniable. Not official enough to exist if anyone asked the right questions. I was younger. Meaner. More convinced that surviving and being correct were the same thing." A bitter little breath. "I was wrong."

"Did Martinez know?"

"Yes."

That answer was immediate.

"And?"

"And he told me not to take it."

There.

Mai said nothing.

Ace said nothing.

Shammy's hands tightened around the edge of the counter until the knuckles changed color.

"I took it anyway," she said. "Because the money was absurd and because by then I still believed I could enter a nightmare, do the job clean, and come out structurally intact." Her mouth flattened. "Night City teaches that lesson expensively."

"Is this transport connected to that job," Ace asked.

"I don't know."

A pause.

"Which means yes, maybe, or close enough that you hate the possibility," Mai said.

Shammy looked at her.

For a moment, the old warmth came back almost fully.

"Yeah," she said. "That."

They trained because not training would have meant thinking.

The space at the back of the apartment was too small to be called a room and too intentional to be called storage anymore. Shammy had cleared it years ago for forms, maintenance drills, pressure work, the kind of routines that kept a body functional when the city kept trying to turn it into a receipt.

Ace moved first.

Katanas out.

Emerald arcs through stale apartment air. Shadow-pressure building and receding. The fragment touched now and then at the edge of her sight, offering wrong angles, faster lines, crueller solutions. She refused the ones that felt like surrender and took the ones that still belonged to her.

Mai watched from the side, grounding hand against the wall, then joined, then stopped, then joined again as the numbers broke and re-formed and broke once more.

Shammy moved between them like weather trying not to become a storm.

Not old Shammy.

Not yet.

But closer.

The warmth still dropped every time Arasaka came up.

The fixer still arrived first when control threatened to leave.

But now it came and went faster, as if her body had begun relearning a shape it no longer trusted.

“You’re holding back,” Ace said once.

Shammy snorted.

“I’m trying not to level my own apartment.”

“No,” Ace replied. “That isn’t what I meant.”

Shammy’s eyes flashed.

Then, against her own apparent preference, she smiled.

Just a little.

“Yeah,” she said. “I know.”

Mai, from the wall: “The probability that emotional restraint is degrading output—”

“Don’t start,” both of them said at once.

That stopped the room for half a second.

Then, somehow, it almost became laughter.

Almost was enough.

Later that night, Mai found Shammy at the board again.

No overhead lights.

Only street spill.

Daniel Martinez’s crossed-out name sat under her hand.

Shammy didn’t look around when Mai approached.

“Arasaka,” Mai said.

“Yes.”

“You’re afraid of this job.”

That made Shammy laugh once.

Tired. Honest. Unpleasant.

“Yes.”

“Of the job itself.”

“Yes.”

“And of what it might wake up.”

A longer pause this time.

“Also yes.”

Mai stayed with her hand on the wall.

Grounded.

Present.

No numbers.

Progress again.

“We can still walk away.”

Shammy finally turned.

The warmth in her face was low, but steady.

“No,” she said. “We can still choose. That isn’t the same thing.”

Mai thought about that.

Accepted it.

“Okay.”

Shammy’s mouth shifted.

“Okay.”

They stood there another few seconds with Martinez between them and Arasaka spread all over the board like a slow, elegant infection.

Then Shammy took her hand off the name.

That mattered too.

The job was tomorrow.

The apartment had changed shape again.

Not much.

Enough.

The third chair sat where it belonged now—at the table, not borrowed, not temporary in posture even if its wood still held the memory of storage dust. The old chair remained in the corner. Untouched. Unreplaced. History did not need to be erased to make room for the present.

Ace stood by the window.

Mai sat at the table.

Shammy stood by the board one last time before turning away from it.

“We do the job,” she said. Professional tone, yes. But not only that now. “We take the intercept seriously. We assume Arasaka sees more than it should. We assume the client is not telling us everything. We assume nothing clean stays clean.”

“The probability something goes wrong is never zero,” Mai said.

Shammy looked at her.

“No,” she said. “But that one can stay.”

Ace turned from the window.

The fragment pushed once.

She pushed back harder.

“What matters,” she said, “is not whether the job turns. It’s whether we do.”

That landed squarely in the center of the room.

Shammy nodded once.

Mai did too.

The triad wasn’t repaired.

The sync wasn’t stable.

The city hadn’t softened.

Arasaka hadn’t become less dangerous because they now understood one another better.

But they were here.

Three chairs.

Three people.

One table holding a future no one trusted and a past no one could afford to ignore.

For now—

that was enough.

Tomorrow would ask for more.

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