

Chapter 6: The Simple Job

The Arasaka job was supposed to be simple.

That was the first lie.

Medical transport. In, out. Premium pay. No questions.

Three days of prep had burned the route into muscle memory. Turns, timings, patrol rhythms. Not numbers—those had stopped behaving—but something deeper. Pattern. Shape. The way the city *breathed* if you watched it long enough.

“Simple gets people killed,” Shammy had said.

She hadn’t said it twice.

Arasaka territory didn’t look dangerous.

That was the second lie.

Clean streets. Wide lanes. Chrome polished to a mirror sheen. Buildings that didn’t just rise—they *observed*. Every surface carried intention. Every angle had been designed to remove uncertainty.

Nothing here was random.

That was the point.

“You don’t fight here,” Shammy said. “You pass through.”

Mai didn’t answer.

Her hand rested against the transport’s frame.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers tried to form.

They failed.

She moved anyway.

The transport was wrong.

Bigger than standard. Too quiet. Corporate engine—no diesel rumble, just a clean, controlled hum that barely touched the air. The kind of machine that didn’t announce itself because it didn’t need to.

The driver didn't speak after the initial check.

That was the third lie.

First checkpoint.

Clean.

Paperwork scanned. Eyes lingered. Passed through.

Second checkpoint.

Slower.

One guard circled the vehicle an extra half-step. Not enough to trigger. Enough to notice.

Mai felt it before she understood it.

Not calculation.

Pressure.

Something was *off*.

She pressed harder against the metal.

Still real.

Still not enough.

The third checkpoint never finished forming.

Ace moved first.

No signal.

No warning.

Just absence.

Her shadow slipped left, cutting sightlines before the guards realized they had them.

Mai shifted center without thinking.

Shammy drifted right.

Three vectors.

Not perfect.

Close enough.

“Stop.”

The voice didn't come from the guards.

It came from above.

Drone.

Not patrol.

Tracking.

Arasaka hadn't escalated.

They had *noticed*.

“Route deviation detected,” the lead guard said.

Not hostile.

Not calm.

Clinical.

“Negative,” Shammy replied. Flat. Professional. Already in the role. “Client route confirmed.”

“Client route is outdated.”

That landed wrong.

Mai felt it immediately.

Not in the numbers.

In the silence.

Ace didn't move.

That meant something.

“Step out of the route,” the guard said.

Not a request.

A calibration.

Testing response.

Testing edges.

Ace spoke.

Quiet.

Controlled.

“We don’t step out.”

No escalation.

No threat.

Just refusal.

The drone shifted.

Subtle.

Barely visible.

But Mai felt the frequency spike.

Electromagnetic interference—localized.

Focused.

On the transport.

On *them*.

Then—

a flicker.

Inside the vehicle.

Mai didn’t look.

She *felt* it.

Something inside the cargo shifted its signal profile.

Not passive.

Not inert.

Alive?

No.

Worse.

Active.

“The cargo just changed state,” Mai said.

Flat.

Too late.

Everything stopped.

Not physically.

Structurally.

The situation redefined itself.

The guard’s head tilted.

Tiny movement.

Decision point.

“Final notice,” she said. “You’re flagged.”

There it was.

Not denial.

Not escalation.

Marking.

Shammy didn’t hesitate.

“Then log it.”

The guard paused.

That was the crack.

Ace moved.

Not attack.

Displacement.

She stepped *through* the moment—the half-second where no one committed—and repositioned reality around it.

Shammy pushed.

Air pressure snapped sideways—just enough to distort sensor readings.

Mai held center.

Not calculating.

Holding.

Anchoring the space where the others moved.

The transport rolled.

Not fast.

Not fleeing.

Just—

continuing.

No shots fired.

No alarms.

No chase.

That was the fourth lie.

They were allowed through.

The rest of the route didn't resist.

That was worse.

Delivery was clean.

Too clean.

Cargo transferred. Paper signed. Credits moved.

The facility didn't ask questions.

Neither did they.

That was the rule.

But Mai felt it.

Residual signal.

The cargo's echo.

Still inside her awareness.

Like something had brushed against her and not let go.

"Simple," Shammy said, once they were clear.

Her voice was steady.

Professional.

Correct.

Mai didn't answer.

Her hand found the wall again.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

"Three checkpoints," Ace said.

Observation.

Not analysis.

“Three marks,” Mai replied.

Shammy stopped.

Not visibly.

Internally.

“What.”

Mai didn't look at her.

“They didn't clear us.”

Pause.

“They logged us.”

Silence.

Heavy.

Real.

Shammy exhaled once.

Slow.

“Yeah,” she said.

No denial.

No spin.

“Yeah. They did.”

The walk back felt different.

Not dangerous.

Observed.

Ace moved closer to center.

Not because she had to.

Because she chose to.

The city changed tone as they crossed out of Arasaka territory.

Less clean.

More honest.

More dangerous in ways you could actually see.

"Martinez," Ace said.

Not a question.

Shammy didn't stop this time.

That was new.

"Yeah."

"You ran Arasaka with him."

A longer pause.

"Yeah."

"Same kind of job?"

Shammy's jaw tightened.

"That was supposed to be simple too."

There it was.

The thread.

"They flagged you," Mai said.

Not accusing.

Not analyzing.

Connecting.

Shammy nodded once.

"Yeah."

"They knew."

"Yeah."

"Someone talked."

"Yeah."

No emotion.

Not on the surface.

That was worse.

“What happened,” Ace said.

Shammy stopped walking.

This time it was visible.

The city moved around her.

Didn't care.

Never did.

“He held the line.”

No buildup.

No dramatics.

Just fact.

“I didn't.”

Mai felt the numbers try to form.

Failed.

Good.

“I got out,” Shammy continued. “He didn't.”

Silence.

“That's not the question,” Ace said.

Shammy blinked.

Once.

“The question is—are you still there?”

That hit.

Harder than anything Arasaka had done.

Shammy laughed.

Short.

Broken.

“No,” she said. “Not really.”

Mai stepped closer.

Didn’t calculate distance.

Didn’t need to.

“We’re not asking you to be okay,” she said.

Flat.

Precise.

“We’re asking if you’re here.”

Shammy looked at them.

Really looked.

Not through the fixer mask.

Not through the years.

At them.

“I am now,” she said.

That mattered.

Ace nodded once.

That was enough.

They kept walking.

Behind them—

somewhere deep in Arasaka systems—

their file updated.

Not a threat.

Not yet.

But no longer invisible.

Inside the apartment, the chairs were still where they had left them.

Three.

Occupied.

The board hadn't changed.

Fifty years still hung on the wall.

But something else had.

The job had been simple.

That was the last lie.

The system had responded.

Marked.

Adjusted.

Remembered.

And the triad—

rusty, imperfect—

had moved through it anyway.

This time.

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