

CHAPTER 10 — First Job

The building wasn't marked.

It didn't need to be.

Everything around it already told the story.

Low-tier block. Reinforced doors that had been replaced too many times. Windows patched from the inside. Cameras that worked just well enough to discourage the wrong kind of attention—but not enough to attract the right kind.

Functional.

Disposable.

V stopped a few steps short of the entrance.

"Target's inside," they said.

No theatrics.

No briefing tone.

Just information.

"Name's irrelevant. Missed payments. Wrong people."

A beat.

“Doesn’t like opening doors.”

Ace glanced at the building.

“Then we don’t ask.”

V smirked faintly.

“Figured you’d say that.”

Mai didn’t look at the door.

She looked at the structure around it.

Entry points.

Exit routes.

Sightlines.

“No unnecessary escalation,” she said.

Ace didn’t argue.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

The air around the building—

steady.

No distortion.

Good.

V stepped aside.

Didn't follow.

Didn't need to.

"Your job," they said.

A small pause.

"I'll be here if it goes loud."

Ace didn't respond.

She moved.

The door didn't open.

Of course it didn't.

Her hand hit it once.

Measured.

The lock failed before the structure did.

The door gave.

Inside—

dark.

Not empty.

Ace stepped in.

Mai behind her.

Shammy last.

The air inside was stale.

Used.

Voices from deeper inside.

Nervous.

Good.

Ace moved forward.

Not rushing.

Not hiding.

The first man appeared from the hallway.

Weapon raised.

Too slow.

Ace closed the distance.

One movement.

The weapon hit the wall before it fired.

The man followed.

Not hard enough to break.

Hard enough to end the decision.

“Sit,” Ace said.

He did.

Mai moved past them.

Already mapping the interior.

Two rooms.

One back exit.

Three more heat signatures.

“Left,” she said.

Ace turned.

No hesitation.

The second one fired.

Too early.

The shot went wide.

Ace was already there.

The weapon was removed.

The resistance—

brief.

“Done,” Ace said.

Shammy moved through the space.

Not engaging.

Not needed.

The air stayed stable.

No pressure spikes.

No anomalies.

This was—

normal.

That mattered more than anything.

Mai reached the back room.

Door closed.

She didn't open it.

"Last one," she said.

Ace stepped forward.

No kick.

No force.

The handle turned.

Unlocked.

The door opened.

The man inside froze.

Not because of fear.

Because of recognition.

He knew what this was.

“You’re late,” he said.

Ace didn’t respond.

Mai stepped into view.

“You owe,” she said.

No threat.

No emphasis.

Just fact.

The man laughed.

Short.

Tired.

“Yeah,” he said.

A beat.

“I do.”

He didn’t reach for a weapon.

Didn’t move.

Good.

Ace leaned against the doorframe.

“Then pay.”

The man shook his head slightly.

“Can’t.”

Mai’s gaze didn’t shift.

“Then we take equivalent.”

The man smiled.

“That’s the thing,” he said.

A pause.

“They don’t want eddies.”

That tracked.

Mai stepped closer.

“Then what.”

The man reached slowly—

not toward a weapon—

toward the table beside him.

Ace watched.

Didn’t intervene.

The object was small.

Unremarkable.

At first.

He placed it on the table.

“That,” he said.

Silence.

Mai didn't touch it.

She didn't need to.

The space around it—

felt wrong.

Not unstable.

Just—

misaligned.

Shammy stepped closer.

The air shifted slightly.

Recognition.

“It’s not from here,” she said.

V’s voice came from the doorway.

“...Yeah.”

They stepped inside.

Slow.

Measured.

“That’s what they’re paying with now,” V said.

Ace looked at it.

Not interested in what it was.

Interested in what it meant.

“Value.”

V exhaled.

“Enough that someone’s offering serious eddies for it.”

Mai processed that.

“Then we take it.”

No hesitation.

The man leaned back.

Relief.

“Take it,” he said.

A beat.

“And we’re square?”

Ace looked at him.

“No.”

Silence.

“Debt’s cleared,” she said.

That was all he got.

Mai picked up the object.

The weight didn’t settle.

Her grip adjusted—

not to hold it—

to agree with it.

Shammy watched closely.

The air held.

But tighter.

“It’s incomplete,” she said.

V nodded slowly.

“Yeah,” they said.

“...that’s one way to put it.”

Ace turned.

“We’re done.”

No cleanup.

No extra damage.

Just resolution.

They walked out.

The city noise hit them immediately.

Louder than before.

Heavier.

But consistent.

That mattered.

V fell into step beside them.

“Told you,” they said.

Ace didn’t respond.

Mai looked at the object again.

Not understanding.

Not yet.

Shammy listened.

The air around it—

held.

But not comfortably.

And for the first time—

since they arrived—

something from the place they had left behind

had followed them

into this one.

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