

Chapter 4: Entry Window (Rewritten)

The corridor wasn't meant for people anymore.

That was the first honest thing about it.

Concrete walls ran too clean for decay and too untouched for use, surfaces flat in a way that didn't carry history. No scratches, no repair seams, no human correction layered over time. Just infrastructure that had outlived its purpose and hadn't been given a new one.

Ace moved first.

Same as always.

Not rushing. Not testing. Just placing herself where something would break first if it was going to.

Mai followed, slower this time—not because she needed to be, but because this wasn't the part that mattered.

Not yet.

Shammy closed the space behind them, the air shifting slightly around her presence, subtle pressure adjustments that made the narrow corridor feel less like it was trying to compress them.

"It's too clean," Ace said.

Mai nodded once.

"No maintenance noise. No decay patterns. No rerouting."

Shammy's gaze moved along the ceiling piping.

"The air doesn't move," she said.

That—

was worse.

Mai stopped at the port.

It sat exactly where Rogue's schematic had placed it—old hardware, legacy interface, untouched long enough that it should have degraded.

It hadn't.

She didn't connect.

Not immediately.

Ace noticed.

"Why are we still standing here."

Mai crouched slightly, examining the port without touching it.

“Because this isn’t the run.”

Ace’s expression didn’t change.

“Explain.”

Mai glanced back briefly.

“This is access,” she said. “Not execution.”

A beat.

Then:

“I’m not running this from here.”

That landed.

Clean.

Correct.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

“You need more.”

“Yes.”

Mai reached out then—carefully—and slotted the interface probe into the port.

The system accepted it instantly.

No handshake delay.

No resistance.

No verification.

That—

was wrong.

Connection confirmed.

No data pull.

No traversal.

Just a link.

Mai didn’t go deeper.

Didn’t even try.

She watched the connection stabilize—
and stopped.

“That’s it,” she said.

Ace frowned slightly.

“That’s it?”

Mai disconnected immediately.

“No traversal. No probing. No mapping.”

“Why.”

Mai stood, eyes still on the port.

“Because this is where runners made the mistake.”

Silence.

Then:

“They thought access was the same as control.”

Ace’s hand flexed once near her side.

“And it’s not.”

“No.”

Mai turned away from the port.

“We go back.”

Ace didn’t argue.

Didn’t push.

Because for once—

this wasn’t instinct.

It was structure.

Shammy lingered for a second longer, watching the dead interface.

“The air’s still wrong,” she said.

Mai didn’t look back.

“I know.”

And that—

was enough.

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