

Chapter 4: Entry Window

The city was different just before a job.

Not quieter.

Not calmer.

Just... aligned.

Mai noticed it in the way traffic lights held half a second longer than usual. In how the noise outside the safehouse didn't spike or dip—it stayed level, like the city had decided not to interfere.

She didn't trust it.

Good.

The terminal came online with a low, clean hum. No extra processes. No background clutter. Just Rogue's packet, stripped down to essentials.

Route.

Timing.

Limits.

Nothing else.

Ace stood near the door, arms folded, posture loose in a way that meant she was already moving in her head. Not impatient. Just ahead.

Shammy leaned against the counter, fingers resting lightly against the surface. The air around her wasn't still—it was *settled*. Pressure balanced, like a room that had already absorbed impact and decided not to echo.

Mai brought up the timer first.

02:00

Bright. Unforgiving.

She didn't look at it again.

"Run it," Ace said.

Mai nodded once.

"Physical entry first."

The maintenance corridor didn't feel abandoned.

It felt... forgotten.

Different.

Abandoned spaces rot. They collapse, decay, accumulate noise. This place didn't. The walls were clean in the way things get when nothing has touched them in too long. No dust patterns. No recent disturbance. Just flat surfaces that didn't tell you anything.

Ace moved first.

Always.

Not fast. Not slow. Just *certain*. Every step placed like she already knew where not to be.

Mai followed, one hand resting lightly against the portable interface unit clipped at her side. Not active yet. Just present.

Shammy closed the distance behind them, her height forcing the space to adjust in subtle ways—shoulders angling slightly, head tilting just enough to avoid contact with overhead piping that looked like it hadn't been inspected in years.

"Feels wrong," Ace said quietly.

Mai almost smiled.

"That's still not a metric."

"It is here."

Shammy's gaze moved along the walls, not focusing on any one point.

"There's no pressure change," she said. "No variation."

Mai glanced back briefly.

"That's normal for enclosed—"

"No," Shammy said, just as softly. "It's *too* normal."

That stuck.

Mai didn't argue.

Instead, she marked it.

Mentally.

Another variable.

They reached the access point without resistance.

No locked panels.

No security bypass.

No decayed infrastructure forcing improvisation.

Just a sealed interface port, old but intact, sitting exactly where Rogue's schematic said it would be.

Waiting.

Ace didn't touch it.

"Talk me through it," she said.

Mai stepped forward.

"Direct line into subgrid layer. No external routing. No active defense signatures detected from this side."

"That last part means nothing," Ace replied.

"I know."

Mai clipped the interface into place.

It connected on the first try.

No delay.

No handshake lag.

The system accepted the link like it had been expecting it.

Mai's expression didn't change.

"Connection live."

Shammy shifted slightly, not closer, not farther.

"Feels... open," she said.

Ace's hand hovered near the hilt at her hip.

"Timer."

Mai brought it up again.

02:00

"Start on my mark," she said. "Verbal check every thirty seconds. If I miss one—"

"I cut," Ace said.

"Yes."

Mai adjusted the neural link.

Not full immersion.

Not yet.

Just enough to establish structure.

She paused.

One breath.

Then:

“Mark.”

The world didn't disappear.

That was the first thing.

No clean transition.

No visual collapse into something else.

Instead—

overlay.

The corridor remained.

But something else sat on top of it.

Not visible.

Legible.

Lines where there hadn't been lines before. Connections implied between points that had no physical relation. Space folding—not physically, but conceptually—distances shrinking based on relevance instead of measurement.

Mai didn't move.

Didn't need to.

The system responded anyway.

Not by pushing.

By aligning.

“Thirty seconds,” Ace said.

Mai nodded once.

“Entry node stable.”

Her voice sounded normal.

Too normal.

The structure expanded slightly—not outward, not deeper, just... more defined. Like a sketch gaining clarity without adding detail.

Mai tracked it instinctively.

“Boundary behavior consistent,” she continued. “No resistance. No active countermeasures.”

Shammy’s voice came quietly from somewhere behind her.

“The air isn’t changing.”

Mai almost answered.

Didn’t.

Focused.

The system wasn’t doing anything.

That was the problem.

It wasn’t reacting to her presence.

It was incorporating it.

Not absorbing.

Not analyzing.

Just—

accepting.

“Sixty seconds,” Ace said.

Mai’s fingers twitched slightly, though she wasn’t using them.

“Connection logic—non-linear. It’s not routing through fixed nodes. It’s... adjusting based on input structure.”

Ace’s voice cut in, sharper now.

“Say that again.”

Mai didn’t.

Because saying it again would make it clearer.

And she already understood.

Too quickly.

The overlay shifted.

Not because she pushed.

Because she noticed something.

A gap.

A place where the structure didn't resolve.

Her mind moved toward it automatically.

Not curiosity.

Completion.

"Mai."

Ace's voice.

Closer now.

"Stay on the edge."

"I am."

She wasn't.

Not entirely.

The system didn't pull.

It didn't need to.

It left space.

And her mind—

filled it.

"Ninety seconds."

The gap clarified.

Edges forming where there hadn't been any before.

Not given.

Constructed.

Mai's breathing stayed even.

Controlled.

But her focus—

narrowed.

"This isn't mapping," she said quietly.

"What is it," Ace asked.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because the answer was forming faster than she wanted it to.

"It's responding to structure input," she said finally.

"That's what you said before."

"No." A slight shake of her head. "Not responding. Completing."

Silence.

For half a second.

Then Ace:

"Time."

"Almost—"

"No."

The word cut clean.

No escalation.

No argument.

Just final.

Mai's mind hovered at the edge of the gap.

So close.

One more adjustment—

One more pass—

The structure would resolve.

Clean.

Complete.

Understandable.

"Mai."

Not sharp now.

Not forceful.

Just there.

She exhaled.

Pulled back.

Hard.

The overlay collapsed instantly—not resisting, not holding—just gone the moment she disengaged.

The corridor snapped back into full priority.

Concrete.

Metal.

Air that moved the way it was supposed to.

02:00 → 00:03

Three seconds left.

Mai blinked once.

Twice.

“Disconnected,” she said.

Her voice was steady.

Too steady.

Ace didn’t move for a full second.

Then:

“Step back.”

Mai did.

Immediate.

No hesitation.

Shammy moved in slightly, not touching—just close enough that the air shifted again, pressure normalizing in subtle, almost imperceptible ways.

“How was it,” she asked quietly.

Mai didn’t answer.

Not right away.

She looked at the port.

At the place where the system still existed.

Untouched.

Unchanged.

Waiting.

"...clean," she said finally.

Ace's expression didn't soften.

"That's not what I asked."

Mai's gaze stayed on the interface.

"It doesn't resist," she said. "It doesn't push. It doesn't trap."

"Then what does it do."

Mai's fingers flexed once at her side.

"It leaves space."

The words came out slower now.

Measured.

"It creates gaps. And if you understand structure—" she stopped.

Ace didn't help her finish.

Didn't need to.

"You fill them," Ace said.

Mai nodded once.

"Yes."

Silence settled in the corridor.

Different now.

Not waiting.

Watching.

Ace reached out and disconnected the interface physically, pulling the connector free with a sharp, final motion.

"No second pass."

Mai didn't argue.

Didn't even look at her.

"...no," she said quietly.

But her eyes—

flicked once more to the port.

Not longing.

Not exactly.

Recognition.

Shammy saw it.

Of course she did.

"The air's different now," she said.

Ace glanced at her.

"How."

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

"It's... quieter."

Mai finally turned away from the port.

"Because it didn't change anything," she said.

Shammy shook her head slowly.

"No."

A pause.

Then:

"Because you did."

That stayed with them longer than anything else.

They didn't talk on the way back.

Didn't need to.

The city picked up where it had left off—noise, motion, light bleeding into places it didn't belong. But something had shifted anyway.

Not out there.

In here.

Mai walked half a step ahead.

Not consciously.

Just slightly faster than before.

Ace noticed.

Adjusted.

Closed the distance without making it obvious.

Shammy stayed behind them both.

Watching the space between.

Not the distance.

The tension.

By the time the safehouse door closed behind them, the job had already changed.

Not the objective.

Not the parameters.

Just the weight.

Ace leaned back against the wall again, same position as before.

Almost.

"Report," she said.

Mai didn't sit.

Didn't go to the terminal.

She stood in the center of the room, looking at nothing in particular.

"It's not incomplete," she said.

Ace's eyes narrowed.

"Then what is it."

Mai exhaled slowly.

"It's unfinished on purpose."

Silence.

Then Ace:

“That’s worse.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Shammy stepped closer, just enough that her presence shifted the air again.

“Can it be finished?”

Mai didn’t answer.

Not immediately.

Because she already knew what the honest answer was.

“...yes.”

Ace didn’t react.

Didn’t move.

“Then we’re done,” she said.

Mai’s head snapped slightly toward her.

“That’s not—”

“It is.”

“No,” Mai said, sharper now. “That’s exactly why we’re not done.”

There it was.

Not loud.

Not explosive.

But real.

Ace straightened slowly.

“Say that again.”

Mai held her gaze.

“If it can be completed, then that’s the point of the system. That’s what it’s for.”

“And you think that’s a good idea.”

“I think it’s a *fact*.”

Ace stepped forward.

“One pass,” she said.

“That wasn’t enough.”

“It was the deal.”

“It was a *limit*, not a conclusion.”

Ace’s voice didn’t rise.

Didn’t need to.

“That limit is the only reason you’re standing here.”

That hit.

Harder than anything else so far.

Mai’s jaw tightened.

She knew it was true.

That didn’t make it acceptable.

Shammy moved then, not between them—but close enough that both of them registered it.

“We knew this would happen,” she said quietly.

Neither of them argued.

“Then we decide now,” Shammy continued. “Before the system gets another say.”

Ace didn’t look away from Mai.

“I already decided.”

Mai met her gaze.

“I haven’t.”

And that—

more than anything else—

was the problem.

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