

Chapter 2: The Job That Waits

Rogue did not come to the safehouse.

Of course she didn't.

People like Rogue made other people move.

The call rerouted twice, then once more for no reason Mai could detect, before resolving into a location packet with no text attached. Just coordinates, timestamp, and a dead channel afterward. Clean. Minimal. Deliberate.

Ace looked at the display for half a second.

"See."

Mai didn't bother asking what exactly that proved.

"Rogue being irritating is not evidence."

"It is when she's efficient about it."

Shammy, standing near the sink with a mug in one hand, tilted her head slightly. "That does sound like her."

The place Rogue had chosen sat on the edge of Japantown, above a bar that advertised discretion with the kind of neon that guaranteed the opposite. The sign outside flickered between two names and committed to neither, pink washing briefly into acid blue before collapsing into static. The stairwell smelled like wet concrete, hot wiring, and a perfume that had lost the battle three floors ago.

The room upstairs was worse than the safehouse, which was probably why Rogue liked it.

Bare walls. Narrow table. Two chairs. One broken fan turning just enough to remind everyone that the air could be more annoying if it wanted to. A city map glowed on one wall, cut through with traffic data and gang colors that shifted every few seconds like the district couldn't hold one identity for more than a minute.

Rogue stood in front of it with one hand in her pocket and the other resting on the table. Not tense. Not relaxed. Something older and harder than either.

Her eyes went first to Mai.

Then to Ace.

Then, finally, up to Shammy.

A faint pause there.

Not surprise. Calculation.

"Still collecting strays?"

Ace leaned one shoulder against the wall without answering.

“Depends,” Mai said. “Are you selling them?”

Rogue’s mouth almost moved.

Almost.

“Cute. Sit down.”

Nobody did.

Rogue didn’t seem offended. She tapped the display instead, and the city map vanished, replaced by a schematic that looked unfinished even before Mai registered what she was seeing.

Subgrid topology.

Old municipal backbone architecture.

Patched. Overlaid. Repurposed. Then abandoned halfway through something large enough to matter.

Mai took one step closer.

“That’s not current city planning.”

“No,” Rogue said. “That’s because city planning didn’t build it.”

“Who did.”

“If I knew, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

The schematic expanded. Several sections pulsed dimly, then one isolated block lit in hard white—an old service corridor beneath a commercial district, physically inaccessible without going through two sealed utility gates and a maintenance shaft nobody had officially used in years.

Ace folded her arms.

“So it’s underground.”

“Everything worth overpaying for is.”

Mai ignored both of them.

“The architecture’s wrong,” she said quietly. “There’s a continuity break here. And here.”

Rogue looked at her, properly this time.

“Yeah. That’s why you’re here.”

Another set of windows opened. Not diagrams now.

Profiles.

Three faces.

All dead-eyed in the way only runner portraits ever looked—half focus, half exhaustion, like the image had been taken in the moment before sleep became a negotiation.

"Missing," Rogue said. "Not dead. No body recovery, no burn signature, no fried deck, no clean disconnect failure. Just... gone from the chair before the people with them realized something was off."

Shammy's gaze lingered on the first face, then the second.

"Gone how."

Rogue's eyes slid to her.

"Physically present. Then not useful. Same body. Same chair. Same room. But nobody home."

That changed the air.

Even the fan felt quieter.

Ace's voice dropped a degree.

"So they're alive."

Rogue gave a tiny shrug.

"Depends how sentimental you want to get with definitions."

Mai's jaw tightened—not visibly, not to anyone who didn't know where to look. But Ace saw it. Of course she did.

"What were they running?" Mai asked.

"Originally? Data theft. Corporate blackmail. A private vault skim. Standard greed."

Rogue shifted the display again.

"Then one of them found this thing."

A block of data opened. Fractured logs. Partial route traces. Entry signatures cut off mid-pattern.

Not because the files were corrupted.

Because whoever compiled them had stopped understanding what they were looking at.

Mai stepped closer to the projection until the light washed silver across her face.

"This isn't defensive architecture."

Rogue lit a cigarette she had no intention of smoking properly.

"Yeah, your girlfriend said that on the call."

Ace didn't blink.

"Keep talking."

Rogue did.

“Every runner who touched this system described the same thing differently. No ICE bloom. No hard pushback. No predatory loops. No false reward layers. No bait. Just open structure.”

“Open to what,” Shammy asked.

Rogue took one drag, mostly for punctuation.

“Depends who you ask. One called it elegant. One called it unfinished. One said it felt like a room that wanted furniture.”

Mai’s eyes lifted from the projection.

That line hit too cleanly.

Rogue noticed.

“There it is,” she said. “That look. That’s the problem.”

Mai crossed her arms then, not defensive—containment.

“You called because you think I’ll understand it.”

“I called because I think you’ll stop trying to fuck it after the first ten seconds.”

Ace turned her head slightly.

“Optimistic.”

For the first time, Rogue actually smiled. It was brief and looked expensive.

“Yeah. That’s why you’re here too.”

She killed the cigarette against the edge of the table without asking the table’s permission.

“Listen carefully. This thing doesn’t pull. It doesn’t grab. It doesn’t even lie. That’s what makes it dangerous. Every runner who stayed too long made the same mistake.”

Rogue reached forward and collapsed the windows into a single line of text—one quote, stripped of metadata.

I thought one more minute would finish it.

Nobody spoke.

The fan clicked.

Below them, somewhere in the street, a bottle shattered and someone started laughing much too hard.

Mai read the line again.

Then once more.

Ace was already watching her.

"You don't get to prove her wrong," Ace said.

"I wasn't going to."

"Yet."

Mai's eyes moved to the schematic.

The continuity break pulsed softly, almost polite.

"What do you want from me," she asked.

Rogue answered immediately.

"A map."

"Only a map?"

"If you're smart."

That earned her a glance from Mai that was almost dry.

"Not reassuring."

"Wasn't trying to reassure you."

Shammy finally set her mug down on the corner of the table. The ceramic made a small, precise sound.

"What happens if the map says it can be completed?"

Rogue looked at her for a second longer than before.

"Then you leave."

It was Ace who answered.

"Good."

Rogue's eyes slid back to Mai.

"That part isn't for you."

Mai didn't smile.

"No. I noticed."

The next set of files opened—floor access, maintenance schedules, utility blind spots, old conduit routes. Physical entry options. Limited. Ugly. Possible.

This, at least, looked honest.

Mai stepped in closer, posture changing as the work became real. Not fascination now. Focus. She marked the service shaft first, dismissed it second, then traced the backup power route with two fingers in the air as if the motion itself clarified thought.

“You’ll need someone topside.”

Rogue gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Have one.”

“Not enough.”

Rogue arched a brow.

“You volunteering?”

Mai ignored that.

“If the system doesn’t resist, then the danger isn’t intrusion. It’s time loss. Cognitive overcommitment. Decision drift. I need a hard clock, verbal confirmation every interval, and an external cut authority who doesn’t care whether I’m close to understanding it.”

Ace pushed off the wall.

“Finally. Something useful.”

Rogue looked between them, unimpressed and faintly entertained.

“That dynamic ever get less exhausting?”

“No,” Shammy said.

Rogue accepted that answer as if she trusted it more.

Mai kept studying the route overlays.

“There’s one more problem.”

Rogue’s tone flattened. “There usually is.”

“This wasn’t built for theft.”

“No.”

“It wasn’t even built to hide.”

Rogue watched her.

“No.”

Mai turned then, and for the first time since they had entered the room there was something unguarded in her expression. Not fear. Worse.

Recognition.

“It was built to be used.”

The sentence settled over the room with a weight no one tried to move.

Ace’s hand rested near the hilt at her hip—not gripping. Just there.

Rogue nodded once.

“Now you understand why I didn’t hand this to some disposable genius with more chrome than instincts.”

“Flattering,” Mai said.

“Professional.”

Another lie that wasn’t quite a lie.

Rogue sent the packet to Mai’s terminal key. Secure burst. One-time decrypt.

“Job is simple on paper,” she said. “Get in. Confirm structure. Establish whether the missing runners got swallowed by design or by their own stupidity. Get out. You do not complete anything. You do not improve anything. You do not get curious in ways that cost me future contractors.”

Ace made a quiet sound in her throat.

“You say that like curiosity’s optional.”

“For you?” Rogue asked. “No.”

Her gaze fixed on Mai again.

“For her? That’s the entire contract.”

Mai held her stare.

“Then write it that way.”

Rogue did not bother pretending she hadn’t planned to.

A final window appeared. Terms. Payment. Hazard multiplier. Kill-switch authorization clauses. External disconnect priority assigned to field partner. Not optional. Not appealable once threshold flags were hit.

Ace read that part first.

Then looked at Mai.

She didn’t say anything.

Didn’t need to.

Mai read it too. Every line. Twice.

“This is excessive.”

Rogue flicked ash into an empty glass that probably belonged to somebody else.

“No. Excessive is what happens after smart people start believing one more minute is the same thing as control.”

Shammy’s gaze moved, not to the files this time, but to Mai’s face.

“Can you work inside that limit?”

Mai answered too quickly.

“Yes.”

Ace’s eyes sharpened.

Mai noticed, exhaled once, and corrected herself.

“Yes,” she said again, this time slower. “If I go in for a map.”

Rogue reached out and killed the projection.

The room dimmed immediately, the city returning through dirty windows and broken neon seams.

“Good,” she said. “Then don’t go in for anything else.”

The meeting was over the moment she decided it was.

No handshake. No theater.

Just a packet on Mai’s terminal, a time stamp for entry, and Rogue already turning toward the window as if they had ceased to exist the second the useful part was done.

Triad silence carried them halfway down the stairs.

Only when the bass from the floor below started vibrating through the metal railings did Ace speak.

“She quoted the one line she knew would work on you.”

Mai didn’t deny it.

“She quoted the line that mattered.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No.”

Shammy walked between them, one hand gliding briefly along the chipped railing. Static snapped faintly against the metal and vanished.

“She was afraid,” Shammy said.

Ace snorted softly. “Rogue?”

“Yes.”

Mai glanced at her.

“Of what.”

Shammy’s answer came without effort.

“That you would understand it too quickly.”

The stairwell seemed narrower after that.

Outside, Japantown was all reflected color and wet pavement, the city smeared into electric streaks by a thin layer of recent rain. A pair of bikes screamed past the corner hard enough to make a food vendor curse without looking up. Somewhere across the street, a braintance ad projected a woman's smile onto drifting steam from a sewer grate, then broke her face into pixels when the signal buckled.

Mai stopped under the awning.

Not because she needed to.

Because she was thinking.

Ace stopped too. Immediate. Watching her from the side.

"Say it."

Mai kept her eyes on the street.

"It isn't hostile."

Ace's expression didn't move.

"Wrong answer."

Mai's mouth tightened.

"It isn't defensive, then."

"Still not it."

Shammy said nothing. Just listened.

Mai watched the ad rebuild itself over steam.

Piece by piece.

Then she said, quieter now:

"It makes intelligence dangerous without forcing anything."

That was closer.

Ace nodded once.

"Better."

Mai looked at her.

"You're enjoying this."

"No," Ace said. "I'm checking whether you're already arguing with the job instead of reading it."

The streetlight buzzed overhead. Not steady. Almost insectile.

Mai folded her arms against the damp night air.

“I know what the job is.”

Ace stepped closer, not threatening, not soft either.

“Do you.”

Mai met her gaze.

“Yes.”

A beat.

Then Ace asked the only thing that mattered.

“And if the map tells you it can be finished?”

That one stayed between them.

No traffic noise cut through it. No ad spill. No distant bassline from the bar.

Just the city, waiting to see which shape the silence would take.

Mai looked away first.

Not evasive.

Honest.

“I don’t know.”

That was the first right answer she had given all night.

Ace nodded once, sharp and final.

“Good. Now we’re talking about the same thing.”

Shammy’s hand settled briefly against Mai’s shoulder—not anchoring, not restraining. Just contact. Warm. Present.

“We make the limits before we go in,” she said.

Mai gave a small nod.

“Yes.”

Ace’s voice went flat in the way it only did when she had already made a decision and was now letting language catch up.

“I hold disconnect authority.”

Mai closed her eyes for half a second.

Opened them again.

“Yes.”

“You argue once,” Ace continued. “After that, I cut.”

“That’s not a negotiation.”

“No.”

A faint breath of something like amusement moved through Shammy’s expression. Brief enough to miss if you didn’t know where to look.

“That’s why it will work,” she said.

Mai stared out at the rain-polished street a second longer, then reached for her terminal and pulled up the packet Rogue had sent. Terms. Routes. Time windows. Disconnect thresholds. Cold, hard, unromantic.

Good.

She needed it to be ugly.

Needed it to feel like work, not invitation.

“Back to the safehouse,” she said.

Ace was already moving.

Shammy fell into step beside them.

Above the street, a damaged holo-sign flickered through three colors and failed on the fourth, leaving the alley mouth ahead in a dim, uncertain blue.

Mai didn’t look at it again.

But the line from the file stayed with her anyway.

I thought one more minute would finish it.

Not because it was dramatic.

Because it sounded reasonable.

And that was worse.

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