

## Chapter 3: Hard Limits

The safehouse felt smaller after Rogue.

Not physically.

Structurally.

Like the walls had decided to pay attention.

Mai noticed it the moment they stepped back inside—not as a feeling, not as something abstract, but as a shift in how space organized itself around objects. The table wasn't just where it had been. It was *exactly* where it needed to be. The terminal sat at an angle that made sense before she consciously registered why.

She stopped halfway into the room.

Ace didn't.

She crossed past her, straight to the far wall, and leaned there again—but not the same way as before. Weight balanced differently. Not resting. Ready.

"Say it now," Ace said.

Mai didn't turn.

"I'm thinking."

"Do it out loud."

"That won't help."

"It will."

A pause.

Not long.

Mai exhaled slowly and stepped forward, setting the terminal packet onto the main display. Rogue's files expanded across the surface—routes, thresholds, time constraints, all of it arranged in clean, unforgiving lines.

"No improvisation," Mai said.

Ace's head tilted a fraction.

"That's new."

"It's necessary."

Shammy moved past them both, not toward the terminal—but toward the window again. Not watching the city. Watching the room reflected in it.

"The air's steadier here," she said. "Than it was before."

Mai nodded once.

"Because now it's defined."

Ace let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh.

"Or because you decided it is."

Mai ignored that.

She pulled the schematic up, overlaid with Rogue's physical access routes.

"Entry here," she said, marking the maintenance shaft. "Rejected."

"Too obvious," Ace said.

"Too constrained," Mai corrected. "If something goes wrong, there's no exit path that doesn't bottleneck."

Her hand shifted.

"Backup route—power conduit access. This one works."

Shammy turned slightly, watching the projection now.

"That's where the current flows."

"Yes."

"You're going to run a system through a system."

Mai didn't look at her.

"That's what netrunning is."

"No," Shammy said softly. "That's what this is."

A small difference.

But it stayed.

Ace pushed off the wall and stepped closer.

"Time limits."

Mai brought them up immediately.

"Three-minute cycles."

Ace's expression didn't change.

"Too long."

Mai's jaw tightened.

"It's the minimum viable window for structural mapping."

"Two."

"That's not enough."

"Then you don't go in."

The words landed clean. No escalation. No edge.

Just a boundary.

Mai looked at her.

Really looked this time.

"You don't understand how this works."

"No," Ace said. "I understand how *you* work."

That stopped it.

Not the argument.

The direction of it.

Shammy stepped in then, not between them—but close enough that the air shifted again, subtle pressure redistributing like the room itself refused to let the tension spike.

"What's the smallest map that still matters?" she asked.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes moved across the schematic—tracing possible routes, compression points, areas where the structure thinned or fractured.

"...entry nodes," she said finally. "Connection logic. Boundary behavior. Not internal resolution."

Ace nodded once.

"Two minutes."

Mai hesitated.

Then:

"...two minutes."

The concession sat heavy.

Not defeat.

Calculation.

Mai adjusted the parameters.

“Verbal confirmation every thirty seconds,” she continued. “If I miss one—”

“I cut,” Ace said.

“Yes.”

Shammy’s gaze flicked briefly to Ace.

“Immediately?”

Ace didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

Mai’s fingers stilled.

“That’s too aggressive.”

“That’s the point.”

A beat.

Then Mai nodded.

“...fine.”

She moved on.

“External monitoring—heart rate, neural load, response latency.”

“Shammy,” Ace said.

Shammy inclined her head slightly.

“I’ll watch.”

Not control.

Not intervene.

Watch.

Mai keyed in the final constraints.

Hard limits.

Visible.

Non-negotiable once active.

The system didn’t argue.

It never would.

That was the problem.

Silence settled in again, but not the same as before. This one had edges. Defined space. Contained variables.

Mai leaned back slightly, eyes still on the display.

"I'll go in once," she said. "Map the entry layer. Get out."

Ace's voice came immediately.

"You don't get a second pass."

Mai almost smiled.

"Let's see how the first one goes."

"No," Ace said. "We don't do that here."

Mai turned her head slowly.

"That's exactly what we do."

Ace stepped closer.

"Not when the cost is you deciding one more minute matters."

That line again.

Different voice.

Same weight.

Mai held her gaze.

Then looked back at the system.

"...one pass," she said quietly.

Ace didn't move.

"Say it like you mean it."

Mai closed her eyes for half a second.

Not to think.

To lock it.

"One pass."

Better.

Shammy exhaled softly, something in the room easing—not disappearing, just settling into a shape that could hold.

“Then we should sleep,” she said.

Ace made a small sound that could have gone either way.

“Yeah. That’ll happen.”

Mai didn’t argue.

Didn’t agree either.

She closed the active windows, leaving only the base schematic dimly visible on the screen. Not inviting. Not hidden.

Waiting.

She stood.

Moved away from the terminal.

One step.

Then stopped.

Her gaze flicked back—not to the full system, not to the data—

Just to a single node she’d marked earlier.

Entry point.

Clean.

Unresolved.

For a fraction of a second—

her mind ran the sequence.

Connection.

Mapping.

Completion.

It fit.

Too easily.

Mai turned away.

This time without hesitation.

“Two minutes,” she said again, more to herself than anyone else.

Ace heard it anyway.

"Yeah," she said. "Two minutes."

Shammy watched them both.

Then reached over and killed the terminal completely.

Not sleep mode.

Not standby.

Off.

The room dimmed instantly.

No glow.

No data.

No structure.

Just Night City bleeding in through the blinds, uneven and alive and impossible to fully map.

Mai didn't protest.

Didn't move to turn it back on.

She walked past Ace, past Shammy, into the back room without another word.

Ace stayed where she was.

Listening.

Not to the city.

To the absence of keys.

Of movement.

Of the quiet, obsessive rhythm that usually followed Mai when she found something worth solving.

It didn't come back.

Not yet.

Shammy stepped beside her.

"You're going to pull early," she said.

"Yes."

"Even if she's close."

"Yes."

A pause.

Then:

“You’re not wrong.”

Ace didn’t answer.

Her gaze stayed on the dark screen.

“She won’t thank you for it.”

“I don’t need her to.”

Another pause.

Shammy’s voice softened, just slightly.

“No,” she said. “You don’t.”

The city shifted again outside.

Somewhere, far off, sirens started and then cut out mid-wail, like the sound itself had changed its mind.

Ace pushed off the wall.

“Get some rest,” she said.

Shammy tilted her head.

“You first.”

Ace almost smirked.

“Not happening.”

Shammy didn’t push.

Didn’t need to.

They both knew how this worked.

The lights stayed off.

The terminal stayed dark.

And for once—

Mai didn’t turn it back on.

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Last update: **22/04/2026 11:49**

