

CHAPTER 17 — Assessment

The Afterlife hadn't changed.

That was the first thing Ace confirmed.

Same entrance.

Same lighting.

Same pressure in the air—

not physical—

intentional.

Inside—

nothing had shifted.

That mattered more than anything.

They stepped in.

No pause.

No announcement.

Movement adjusted around them.

Subtle.

Precise.

Recognition—

not of who they were—

but of what they represented now.

V didn't say anything.

They didn't need to.

The room already knew:

something had been tested—

and had not broken.

That was enough.

They reached the bar.

This time—

Rogue looked up immediately.

Rogue Amendiares didn't speak.

She watched them approach—

and this time—

she didn't measure.

She evaluated.

A few seconds passed.

Then—

“...You’re still standing.”

Flat.

Ace stopped at the counter.

“So are you.”

A fraction of a smile.

Rogue’s gaze flicked between them.

No injuries.

No visible strain.

That told her more than words would.

“Padre’s place is still there,” she said.

Not a question.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Rogue leaned back slightly.

“...And?”

Mai didn’t elaborate.

“It remains unresolved.”

Silence.

That answer—

was not what most people would have given.

Rogue understood it anyway.

“...Good,” she said.

V blinked.

“...Good?”

Rogue didn't look at them.

“If it was gone,” she said,

“...I'd be asking what you replaced it with.”

That landed.

Ace didn't react.

“Paid,” she said.

Direct.

Rogue’s eyes shifted to her.

“Yeah,” she said.

“...you are.”

She reached under the counter.

No rush.

No drama.

A small device slid across the surface.

Mai picked it up.

The interface responded immediately.

Numbers.

High.

Confirmed.

“Transfer received,” she said.

Rogue nodded once.

“That’s the easy part.”

That got Ace’s attention.

“Next.”

Rogue’s gaze shifted—

not to the object—

but to Mai’s hand.

“...You kept it,” she said.

Not surprised.

Just—

noting.

Mai didn’t answer.

She didn’t need to.

Rogue exhaled quietly.

“Yeah,” she said.

“...figured you would.”

A beat.

“That thing’s still wrong.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

The air around the bar—

held.

But thinner.

“It stopped pushing,” she said.

Rogue’s eyes flicked to her.

“...For now.”

That was the correct answer.

Mai spoke.

“It will attempt resolution again.”

Rogue nodded slowly.

“Yeah.”

A pause.

“Which means it’s worth more now.”

V let out a quiet breath.

“...You’re kidding.”

Rogue didn’t smile.

“People don’t pay for problems that are finished,” she said.

A beat.

“They pay for ones they think they can control.”

That tracked.

Ace crossed her arms.

“Then who.”

Rogue didn’t answer immediately.

Because the answer mattered.

Her gaze moved across the room—

not looking—

checking.

Then back to them.

“...I’ve got a few options,” she said.

A beat.

“None of them clean.”

Mai nodded.

“Expected.”

Rogue leaned forward slightly.

“But here’s the thing,” she said.

This time—

her voice shifted.

Not louder.

Sharper.

“You don’t move that through normal channels.”

Silence.

Ace didn’t react.

“Then we don’t.”

Rogue held her gaze.

A second longer than before.

“...Good,” she said.

That was the test.

Passed.

She leaned back again.

Relaxed.

For the first time—

slightly.

“You’re not mercs,” she said.

Not a question.

A statement.

Mai answered.

“No.”

Rogue nodded.

“Yeah,” she said.

“...I figured.”

A pause.

Then:

“...That makes this interesting.”

V shifted slightly.

“...That’s not always a good thing here.”

Rogue ignored them.

She was already thinking ahead.

“Padre was step one,” she said.

A beat.

“You want to stay ahead of whatever that thing turns into—”

Her eyes flicked briefly to the object.

“—you don’t wait for it to come back.”

Mai processed that instantly.

“Then we move first.”

Rogue nodded.

“There it is.”

Ace didn’t need more.

“Target.”

Rogue's expression didn't change.

"...Working on it."

A small pause.

Then:

"...But if I were you?"

That got their attention.

"I'd assume that wasn't the only one."

Silence.

Heavy this time.

Because that—

changed the scale.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air held.

But not comfortably.

Mai's grip tightened slightly—

not on the object—

on the implication.

Ace didn't react.

"Good," she said.

Rogue raised an eyebrow.

“...Good?”

Ace met her gaze.

“Then we’re not chasing.”

A beat.

“They are.”

Rogue smiled.

This time—

genuinely.

“...Yeah,” she said.

“...you’re going to do just fine here.”

And for the first time since they had entered Night City—

they weren't just surviving it.

They were becoming
something the city
would have to account for.

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