

CHAPTER 1 — Contract Value

The Afterlife didn't get quieter.

It got precise.

That was the difference.

Noise stayed.

Movement stayed.

Voices overlapped like always—

but the moment something carried weight—

the room adjusted around it.

Ace noticed it before they reached the bar.

Not who.

Not where.

When.

Conversations didn't stop.

They shifted—

just enough to leave space where it mattered.

"This one pays," she said.

Mai didn't answer.

She was already watching the room—

not faces—

intent.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air—

tight.

Not wrong.

Focused.

“It’s cleaner than usual,” she said.

V glanced sideways.

“...That’s not a sentence people usually use for this place.”

Ace didn’t slow.

“Still holds,” she said.

That was enough.

They reached the bar.

This time—

Rogue Amendiaries didn’t make them wait.

She was already watching them.

Not evaluating.

Expecting.

"...Took you long enough," she said.

Ace stopped at the counter.

"We move when needed."

Rogue's expression didn't change.

"Yeah," she said.

"...and right now, it's needed."

Mai stepped forward.

“Details.”

No buildup.

No small talk.

Rogue nodded once.

“High-tier client,” she said.

A beat.

“Top floor. Corpo tower.”

That narrowed it.

“Which one,” Ace said.

Rogue didn’t answer immediately.

Because the name mattered.

“Night Corp,” she said.

Silence.

Short.

Even V straightened slightly.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...that tracks.”

Mai didn't react.

“Problem.”

Rogue leaned forward slightly.

“Penthouse,” she said.

A pause.

“Ownership breach.”

Ace’s gaze sharpened.

“Explain.”

Rogue tapped the counter once.

“Doors work,” she said.

Flat.

“Locks work.”

Another tap.

“Security works.”

A beat.

“...System says everything’s fine.”

That was the problem.

Mai’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Then it is not.”

Rogue’s mouth twitched.

“There it is.”

She reached under the counter—

pulled up a shard—

set it down.

No slide.

Just—

placed.

Mai picked it up.

The interface lit instantly.

Blueprint.

Penthouse layout.

Access points.

Security overlays.

Everything—

clean.

Too clean.

“No anomalies recorded,” Mai said.

Rogue nodded.

“Exactly.”

That was wrong.

Ace crossed her arms.

“Then what’s happening.”

Rogue’s gaze shifted—

not to the shard—

to them.

For the first time—

there was weight behind it.

“People are getting in,” she said.

A beat.

“Not breaking in.”

Another beat.

“Getting in.”

Silence.

V frowned.

“...Define that.”

Rogue didn't look at them.

She didn't need to.

“They walk up,” she said.

“Doors open.”

A pause.

“They walk inside.”

Another.

“System logs them as authorized.”

That landed.

Hard.

Mai's voice didn't change.

"That is not access."

Rogue nodded slowly.

"No."

A beat.

"It's acceptance."

There it was.

Ace didn't react.

"Value."

Rogue leaned back slightly.

"High," she said.

No number.

Didn't need one.

"Client doesn't want it fixed," she added.

That got a reaction.

Small.

But real.

Mai looked up.

“Clarify.”

Rogue’s gaze sharpened.

“They don’t care why it’s happening,” she said.

A beat.

“They care that it stops being unpredictable.”

That was different.

Ace nodded once.

“Usable.”

Rogue smiled.

Just slightly.

“Yeah.”

“There it is.”

Shammy shifted.

The air—

tightened.

Not wrong—

just—

anticipating.

“It’s already active,” she said quietly.

Rogue’s eyes flicked to her—

then back.

“...Yeah,” she said.

“...figured you’d say that.”

Mai set the shard down.

“Object.”

Rogue didn’t hesitate.

“Keycard,” she said.

Simple.

Wrong.

Ace uncrossed her arms.

“Location.”

“Inside the penthouse.”

Of course it was.

Mai nodded once.

“It belongs there.”

Rogue didn’t smile this time.

“Yeah.”

“That’s the problem.”

Silence settled.

Short.

Ace turned.

“We go.”

No hesitation.

No negotiation.

Rogue didn't stop them.

Didn't add warnings.

Just one thing—

as they moved away.

“Hey.”

Ace didn’t turn.

“What.”

Rogue’s voice didn’t change.

“Don’t fix it.”

A beat.

“Make it usable.”

Ace didn’t respond.

She didn’t need to.

Because that—

was exactly what they did.

And as they stepped back into the city—

Night City didn't react.

It didn't shift.

It didn't care.

Because somewhere—

in a tower that didn't allow mistakes—

something had already decided—

that the wrong people

belonged

exactly where they weren't supposed to be.

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