

# ACE 38 — Dead Channel

Rain didn't fall evenly in Pacifica.

It never had.

---

Ace noticed it halfway across the street — not because it was loud, but because one stretch of asphalt stayed just a little too dry.

Not dry enough to matter.

Just enough to register.

"...that's annoying," she muttered.

---

Mai didn't look.

She was already scanning something else — not the street, not the buildings.

The *gaps*.

"...it's not random," she said.

---

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

The air shifted around her—

Then stopped.

---

"...it's quieter here," she said.

---

Ace snorted.

"...this whole district's quiet."

---

Shammy shook her head.

---

“...no,” she said softly.

“...this is missing something.”

---

## □ AFTERLIFE — EARLIER

Rogue didn't wait for them to sit.

---

“You ever see a channel die without anyone killing it?” she asked.

---

Ace leaned on the bar.

“...depends. Net or people?”

---

“Net,” Rogue said.

---

Mai slid into position beside her.

---

“That shouldn't happen,” she said immediately.

---

Rogue nodded.

“Yeah.”

A beat.

---

“That's why you're here.”

---

# THE BRIEF

Rogue pushed a shard across.

---

“Secure comm line,” she said.

“Corporate-grade. Clean. Stable.”

---

Mai picked it up.

Slotted it in.

---

The data came up—

---

Flat.

---

No spikes.

No noise.

No trace.

---

Nothing.

---

“...dead,” Mai said.

---

Rogue shook her head.

---

“No,” she said.

---

A pause.

---

“Dead channels leave residue.”

---

Ace tilted her head.

“...and this?”

---

Rogue tapped the bar once.

---

“This one doesn’t exist anymore.”

---

Silence.

---

Mai frowned.

“That’s not possible.”

---

“Yeah,” Rogue said.

“Say that again after you hear the rest.”

---

## □ CONSEQUENCES

Rogue leaned in slightly.

---

“People using that line?”

---

A beat.

“They don’t crash.”

---

Ace raised an eyebrow.

“...good for them.”

---

“They don’t finish anything either,” Rogue continued.

---

That landed differently.

---

Mai looked up.

“...define.”

---

Rogue’s voice dropped.

---

“They miss timing.”

---

Another beat.

---

“They don’t show up where they’re supposed to be.”

---

Ace exhaled slowly.

“...sounds like bad planning.”

---

Rogue shook her head.

---

“No.”

---

A pause.

---

“It’s consistent.”

---

## ▣ **VISUAL DATA**

Mai flicked through the shard.

---

Security footage.

---

A team in motion.

---

Clean entry.

Clear objective.

---

Everything correct.

---

Then—

---

A pause.

---

One of them hesitates.

Not long.

---

Just enough.

---

The next move happens—

Too early.

---

Then another—

Too late.

---

The sequence breaks.

---

No attack.

No interference.

---

Just—

Wrong timing.

---

The footage cuts.

---

Mai removed the shard slowly.

---

“...they didn’t fail,” she said.

---

Ace crossed her arms.

---

“...they did.”

---

Mai shook her head.

---

“No,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“They lost synchronization.”

---

## ▣ **ROGUE’S ANGLE**

Rogue watched them both.

---

“Whatever’s happening,” she said, “it’s tied to that channel.”

---

Ace tilted her head.

“...so we just don’t use it.”

---

Rogue didn’t smile.

---

“They didn’t either.”

---

Silence.

---

## □ THE HOOK

Mai's voice dropped.

---

"...someone else is."

---

Rogue shook her head.

---

"No."

---

A pause.

---

"That's the part I don't like."

---

Another beat.

---

"There's no traffic."

---

## □ FINAL LINE

Shammy spoke for the first time.

---

"...it's not empty," she said quietly.

---

Ace glanced at her.

---

“...yeah?”

---

Shammy’s gaze drifted slightly.

---

“...it’s being kept that way.”

---

## ▣ **BACK TO PACIFICA**

Rain tapped against metal somewhere nearby.

---

Ace looked at the building ahead.

---

Unmarked.

Unremarkable.

---

Wrong.

---

“...this it?” she asked.

---

Mai nodded once.

---

“Yes.”

---

A pause.

“Last known access point.”

---

Ace stepped forward.

---

The door was closed.

---

Not locked.

---

Just—

Closed.

---

Shammy stopped just short of it.

---

The air didn't move.

---

“...this is it,” she said.

---

Ace glanced back.

---

“...you sure?”

---

Shammy nodded.

---

“...nothing is happening here,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“...that’s why it’s wrong.”

---

Silence.

---

Ace reached for the door.

---

Paused.

---

Just for a second.

---

“...we’re not using that channel,” she said.

---

Mai nodded.

---

“Agreed.”

---

Shammy didn’t move.

---

“...it doesn’t need us to.”

---

Ace pushed the door open.

---

Inside—

Nothing.

---

No sound.

No movement.

---

No delay.

---

Just—

Absence.

---

And for the first time—

It felt like something was already missing.

---

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