

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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