

ACE 39 — Signal That Doesn't End

Chapter 1: Incomplete Systems

Night City never really went quiet.

It only changed frequency.

The safehouse sat three floors above a street that refused to sleep, light bleeding upward through cracked blinds in uneven pulses—neon ads looping, glitching, correcting themselves mid-cycle like the city couldn't quite decide what it wanted to be. Somewhere below, a car engine coughed twice and died. Laughter followed. Then silence again, but not the empty kind. The kind that listened.

Mai didn't look up.

The terminal glow painted her face in pale blue layers, eyes tracking lines that shifted faster than they should have. Not because the system was fast—but because it was wrong.

She slowed the feed.

Not with a command. With intent.

The data reorganized itself into something cleaner. Not simpler—just... more legible.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, then stopped entirely.

"...that's not a loop."

The words barely left her lips.

Behind her, the soft scrape of fabric—Shammy shifting position on the couch without fully moving. The air adjusted with her, barely perceptible, like pressure easing before a storm decides not to arrive.

"What is it?" Shammy asked, voice low, not pushing.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She isolated the pattern again.

Ran it through a secondary filter.

Then a third.

Each pass stripped away noise, until what remained wasn't a signal, and wasn't absence either.

It was—

"...incomplete."

That got a reaction.

Not from Shammy.

From the other end of the room.

Ace didn't look up from where she sat on the floor, back against the wall, one knee pulled in, the other stretched out like she'd dropped into place and decided not to move again. One katana rested within reach—not drawn, never drawn here—but never out of mind either.

"Incomplete how."

Not a question. A demand shaped like one.

Mai leaned back slightly, just enough to let the chair creak.

"It's not missing data."

"Same thing," Ace said.

"No." Mai shook her head. "Missing data implies expected structure. This—" she gestured at the screen without looking away from it "—doesn't have one."

A pause.

Long enough to matter.

Ace's gaze lifted then, sharp and immediate, like the word itself had weight.

"That's worse."

Mai almost smiled.

"Only if you assume intent."

"I do."

Her voice stayed flat. Certain.

"Because things that don't decide what they are... let someone else do it."

There was no heat in it. Just difference.

Shammy's fingers tapped lightly against her knee, once, twice. The rhythm didn't repeat.

"The air feels... flat," she said, almost to herself.

That pulled Mai's attention for half a second.

"Flat?"

Shammy nodded slowly. "Like something is... not reacting."

Ace pushed off the wall in a single, fluid motion. No hesitation, no buildup—just movement.

She crossed the room and stopped behind Mai's chair, not looking at the screen yet. Watching Mai instead.

"You're already in it."

Mai exhaled through her nose.

"I'm looking at it."

"You're inside the pattern."

"That's how analysis works."

Ace leaned slightly forward, just enough that her presence registered as pressure.

"That's how traps work."

Silence again.

The city flickered outside. Light shifted across the room, turning edges into something softer, less defined.

Mai finally leaned back fully, letting the chair tilt just a fraction.

"Then it's a bad one."

Ace didn't respond.

"Traps push back," Mai continued. "They close. They redirect. This doesn't do any of that."

"So what does it do."

Mai turned, just enough to meet Ace's eyes.

"It waits."

That landed.

Not hard. But deep.

Ace straightened, gaze finally dropping to the terminal.

"Show me."

Mai hesitated.

Not because she doubted the system.

Because she didn't.

She rotated the display slightly.

The data didn't look like anything at first glance. No obvious structure, no clear pattern—just fragments that almost aligned, then didn't. Lines that suggested connections but never committed to them. A system that hinted at rules without enforcing any.

Ace watched for five seconds.

Then ten.

Her expression didn't change.

"Feels wrong."

"That's not a metric."

"It is for me."

Mai turned back to the screen.

"It's not behaving like anything hostile I've seen."

"You don't know that."

"I know it isn't acting like a weapon."

That was better. Still too fast.

Ace's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Say that again."

Mai didn't.

Instead, she pulled up a secondary overlay—something cleaner, more controlled. Highlighted interaction points, possible entry vectors, containment boundaries.

"If it was built to repel intrusion," she said, slower now, "we'd be seeing resistance. Feedback. Correction loops. This has none of that."

"Because it doesn't need to," Ace replied.

Mai shook her head.

"No. Because it's not finished."

The word settled differently this time.

Not a flaw.

A state.

Shammy leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on her knees now, posture shifting from passive to engaged.

"Who builds something like that?"

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Her fingers moved again, this time deliberate—marking nodes, mapping edges, constructing a framework that didn't exist until she imposed one.

"That's the question."

Ace didn't look at her.

“Wrong question.”

Mai glanced sideways.

“Then ask the right one.”

Ace’s gaze flicked back to the screen.

“Who goes in and doesn’t come back.”

That... shifted it.

Not the system.

The context.

Mai’s hands stilled again.

“...we don’t know that yet.”

Ace didn’t move.

“Don’t we.”

The room tightened, just slightly.

Shammy’s presence adjusted with it, pressure redistributing in ways that weren’t visible but were felt—edges softening before they could sharpen too far.

“Rogue will know,” Shammy said quietly.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

She closed the current view, not the system—just the layer she’d built over it.

The underlying structure didn’t disappear.

It waited.

Ace stepped back, just enough to break the immediate pressure, but not enough to disengage.

“You’re not going in alone.”

Mai didn’t even look at her this time.

“I’m not going in yet.”

“That’s not what I said.”

A beat.

Then:

"I know."

Shammy's gaze shifted—not to the screen, but to Mai's hands.

The rhythm had changed.

Slightly.

Too steady.

She stood, smooth and unhurried, and moved toward the window. The glass caught her reflection and broke it into faint distortions, light bending around her in subtle ways that had nothing to do with the city outside.

"Call Rogue," she said. "Before this turns into a decision."

Mai's fingers hovered over the comms interface.

For a second—

just one—

she considered opening the system again.

Just to check something.

Just to refine the model.

Just—

She stopped.

Exhaled.

Opened the line instead.

"Rogue," she said as the connection clicked live, voice steady again. "We might have found something you're looking for."

A pause on the other end.

Then, dry as ever:

"If it's not trying to kill you yet, I definitely am."

Mai glanced at the screen once more.

The pattern hadn't changed.

It didn't need to.

"It's not trying anything," she said.

Ace's eyes stayed on the terminal.

“It doesn’t need to.”

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