

ACE 36 — “Open Without Exit”  
Chapter 1 — Nothing To Fix

Afterlife didn't change.

It didn't need to.

The noise held.

Glasses met surfaces in uneven rhythms. Voices overlapped without pattern. Music pressed through the floor in a low, constant pulse that never quite settled into anything you could follow.

It was supposed to be messy.

Tonight—

it wasn't.

Mai noticed it before she understood why.

Not the sound itself.

The absence of failure.

No clipped words. No mistimed interruptions. No conversations collapsing into each other at the edges. Everything overlapped—

cleanly.

Too cleanly.

She didn't move when she spoke.

“Do you hear that.”

Ace didn't look at her.

Her gaze stayed forward, fixed somewhere past the bar, past the movement, past the light that always shifted just enough to break pattern.

“...hear what.”

Mai let the question sit.

Measured again.

Everything landed exactly where it should.

Every sound—

completed.

“Exactly,” she said.

That was the problem.

Shammy leaned back slightly, one arm resting along the top of the booth. The air around them followed her, subtle, controlled—

and then didn't.

It didn't resist.

It didn't lag.

It just—

matched.

Her fingers stilled.

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

A beat.

"It's already where it's supposed to be."

Rogue didn't look up immediately.

She was already there, opposite them, a glass in her hand she hadn't touched. Ice had melted just enough to round the edges, but the surface—

held too still.

"You noticed," she said.

No greeting.

No lead-in.

Mai didn't reach for anything.

"What changed."

Rogue's eyes moved once.

Not scanning.

Checking.

"Nothing," she said.

A beat.

"That's why you're here."

Silence.

Short.

Functional.

Ace leaned forward slightly.

"...explain."

Rogue set the glass down.

Carefully.

No ripple.

"For the last three weeks," she said, "nothing's gone wrong."

V frowned from the edge of the booth.

"...in Night City."

Rogue didn't smile.

"No delays. No lost shipments. No runner dropouts. No route failures."

A pause.

"No improvisation."

That last part landed heavier than the rest.

Mai's gaze sharpened.

"That's not stability," she said.

Flat.

"That's closure."

Rogue nodded once.

"Yeah."

She reached under the table and slid a thin shard across the surface. This time, she didn't leave it within reach.

She pushed it.

Direct.

Mai picked it up.

No hesitation.

Data unfolded—

clean.

Too clean.

Logistics routes.

Transport chains.

Access logs.

Every line—

resolved.

No error margins.

No variance.

No drift.

“This is synthetic,” Mai said.

Not a question.

Rogue shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“It’s real.”

Another.

“It’s just... not leaving room.”

V exhaled slowly.

“...for what.”

Mai answered without looking up.

“Decision.”

Silence.

Ace didn’t touch the shard.

“Source.”

Rogue tapped once against the table.

“Small outfit,” she said.

“Cross Applied Technologies.”

A beat.

“Local.”

That alone was wrong.

Mai scrolled.

Stopped.

One node—

different.

Not flagged.

Not highlighted.

But—

everything passed through it.

Not routed.

Not processed.

Passed.

“That’s it,” she said.

Flat.

Rogue nodded.

“They built something.”

A pause.

“Transport system.”

V blinked.

“...okay, that sounds normal.”

Rogue looked at them properly for the first time.

“It doesn’t fail,” she said.

A beat.

“It doesn’t miss.”

Another.

“It doesn’t delay.”

Silence.

Mai’s fingers stilled on the shard.

"That's not transport," she said.

A beat.

"That's prediction."

Rogue leaned back.

"Client doesn't care what it is."

"Doesn't want analysis."

"Doesn't want access."

Her gaze moved between them.

"Wants it gone."

Ace didn't hesitate.

"...why."

Rogue's answer came clean.

"Because if nothing can go wrong—"

A beat.

"nothing can change."

That was enough.

Mai closed the shard.

Carefully.

As if the act itself mattered.

"It's centralized," she said.

"Single dependency point."

Rogue nodded.

"Facility's still active."

Another beat.

"They're not hiding it."

Of course they weren't.

Ace stood.

No delay.

“We go.”

No one argued.

No one needed to.

As they moved, Rogue added one last thing.

“Hey.”

Ace didn't turn.

“What.”

Rogue's voice didn't change.

“They think it's a portal.”

A beat.

“They're wrong.”

Silence.

Then—

“They just haven't figured out why yet.”

Afterlife noise rushed back in around them.

Messy.

Layered.

Alive.

Except now—

they could hear

exactly where it wasn't.

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