

CHAPTER 16 — Aftermath

The door was still open.

That mattered.

Ace stepped out first.

The air outside—

louder.

Heavier.

Messier.

Correct.

Behind her, the church remained.

Unchanged—

if you didn't know where to look.

Mai stepped out next.

She didn't turn immediately.

Not because she didn't want to.

Because she was still mapping—

what had been—

and what hadn't.

"It's contained," she said.

Not certain.

Not uncertain.

Functional.

Shammy followed last.

The moment she crossed the threshold—

the air shifted.

Relief.

Subtle.

The pressure—

belonged here again.

She exhaled slowly.

“It’s not pushing anymore,” she said.

Ace nodded once.

“Good.”

Behind them—

Padre didn't move.

He stood at the doorway.

Not crossing.

Not retreating.

Watching.

"...You didn't fix it," he said.

Mai turned slightly.

"No."

A beat.

"We prevented resolution."

Padre's expression didn't change.

"...And that's better."

Mai didn't answer.

Because "better" depended on perspective.

Ace did.

"It's still contained."

That was the only metric that mattered to her.

Padre nodded slowly.

"...For now."

Silence settled.

Not heavy.

Measured.

V leaned against the wall nearby.

They hadn't moved.

Hadn't intervened.

Hadn't needed to.

"...That looked expensive," they said.

Ace glanced at them.

"It was."

V smirked faintly.

“Good.”

A beat.

“That means Rogue’s gonna like it.”

Mai looked down at the object.

It sat in her hand—

not resisting—

not agreeing—

just—

present.

“It changed,” she said.

Shammy nodded.

“It stopped trying to finish.”

That was the key.

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

“Which means it can still start again.”

Ace didn’t react.

“Then we don’t let it.”

Simple.

V pushed off the wall.

“Yeah,” they said.

“...that’s kind of how this place works.”

Padre stepped back—

just one step.

Enough to reclaim his space.

“This stays here,” he said.

Not a request.

A statement.

Mai considered it.

“No,” she said.

Padre didn’t flinch.

“...Explain.”

Mai lifted the object slightly.

“It is not anchored here.”

A beat.

“If it remains, it will attempt to resolve again.”

Padre watched her carefully.

“...And if you take it.”

Mai didn't hesitate.

“It remains incomplete.”

That was the trade.

Padre exhaled slowly.

“...Then take it.”

No argument.

No negotiation.

He understood enough.

Ace turned away.

“Done.”

No ceremony.

No aftermath ritual.

Just movement.

They stepped back into the city.

Noise returned.

Movement.

Life.

Everything that didn't care what had just happened—

continued.

That was Night City.

V fell into step beside them.

“So,” they said.

“...you always do that?”

Ace didn't look at them.

“No.”

A beat.

“Only when it matters.”

V let out a quiet breath.

“Yeah,” they said.

“...figured.”

Mai walked in silence.

Processing.

Mapping.

The structure in the church—

unfinished.

The object—

still wrong.

The connection between them—

not broken.

Just—

deferred.

Shammy glanced back once.

Not at the building.

At the space around it.

It held.

For now.

But the pressure—

deep beneath it—

hadn't gone away.

It had simply—

found somewhere else

to exist.

And as they moved deeper into the city—

the distance between that place—

and everything else—

felt just a little less certain

than it had before.

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