

ACE 36 — “Open Without Exit”  
Chapter 2 — Approach Without Entry

Night City didn't end.

It thinned.

That was the part most people missed. The skyline didn't break. It didn't give way to distance or darkness. It just... stopped overlapping. Light separated. Reflections stopped stacking. Space appeared where there usually wasn't any.

Out here, the city felt unfinished.

Not abandoned.

Unresolved.

Mai watched it through the window as the vehicle adjusted its route.

No input.

No delay.

No correction.

It didn't hesitate at intersections. It didn't compensate for traffic. It didn't slow for pedestrians who hadn't moved yet.

Everything—

already accounted for.

“It's not reacting,” she said quietly.

Ace didn't look up.

“...to what.”

Mai tracked the movement of a passing vehicle.

It crossed their path—

exactly when it should.

Not early.

Not late.

No margin.

“To anything,” she said.

Shammy's hand hovered near the glass.

Not touching.

Close enough that the air between her fingers and the surface should have shifted—

compressed—

responded.

It didn't.

Her fingers stilled.

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

A beat.

"It already happened."

The vehicle slowed.

Not because it needed to.

Because it had reached the point where slowing occurred.

No command.

No visible trigger.

Just—

completion.

Mai noticed.

Of course she did.

Her gaze flicked to the console.

No driver input.

No external override.

"System commitment," she murmured.

Ace's eyes lifted slightly.

"...why."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She watched the building come into view.

Not emerging.

Not revealed.

Just—

present.

Matte surfaces. No reflection. No attempt to match the surrounding structures. It didn't integrate with the environment.

It didn't need to.

Nothing interacted with it.

Vehicles passed nearby—

but not too close.

Pedestrians moved—

but not toward it.

No signage.

No security.

No obstruction.

And yet—

no one entered.

"Because it already decided we would stop," Mai said.

The vehicle came to a halt.

Exactly where it needed to.

No adjustment.

No correction.

The door unlocked—

before Ace reached for it.

She stepped out.

Her boots hit the ground—

and the sound ended too soon.

Not quieter.

Shorter.

Like it had been cut before it finished existing.

She didn't react.

Didn't need to.

Her gaze had already fixed on the structure.

Locked.

Holding.

Mai exited next.

Her eyes moved immediately—edges, seams, lines that should have aligned but didn't quite meet.

There were no visible cameras.

No sensors.

No defensive grid.

Nothing—

watching.

That was wrong.

"Nothing is measuring us," she said.

Flat.

Shammy stepped out last.

The air shifted—

then stopped.

Not stabilized.

Not balanced.

Just—

held.

She inhaled.

The breath came—

but didn't return the way it should.

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

A beat.

"It's just there."

Ace started forward.

No hesitation.

No delay.

The distance between them and the building—  
didn't compress.

Each step took the same amount of time—  
but the space didn't respond.

Didn't acknowledge approach.

Didn't resolve into arrival.

Mai noticed on the third step.

"Don't commit to distance," she said.

Ace didn't break stride.

"...already didn't."

Halfway across—  
the city behind them thinned further.

Not gone.

Not erased.

Just—

irrelevant.

Sound dropped.

Not volume.

Priority.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air didn't follow.

Not fully.

Like something else had already decided how it should behave.

"They're not observing," she said.

A beat.

"They don't need to."

Mai didn't stop.

"Of course they don't."

Another step.

Closer—

but not closer.

The entrance should have been obvious.

A door.

A seam.

A line that separated outside from inside.

There wasn't one.

Ace stopped.

Not hesitation.

Recognition.

"...it's open," she said.

Mai's gaze locked onto the surface.

Measured.

Compared.

Nothing moved.

Nothing changed.

"...no," she said slowly.

"It's already passed that state."

Silence.

Then—

a line appeared.

Not forming.

Not opening.

Just—

noticed.

Thin.

Vertical.

Running along the edge of what had always been there.

Not a gap.

A decision.

Shammy stepped closer.

The air resisted—

just slightly—

then gave.

Reluctantly.

“...pressure gradient,” she said.

A beat.

“Not physical.”

Mai reached out.

Didn't touch.

Her fingers hovered just short of the surface.

“There's no mechanism,” she said.

Ace's voice was flat.

“...then why is it closed.”

Mai didn't look at her.

“It isn't.”

Silence.

Then—

the panel shifted.

No sound.

No motion.

Just—

state change.

The interior did not reveal itself.

It waited.

Light held—

even—

contained—

refusing to spill past the threshold.

Ace stepped forward.

Crossed.

No hesitation.

The moment she entered—

the space changed.

Not visually.

Structurally.

Mai followed.

Her boots met the floor—

and the sound ended early.

Again.

But now she was ready.

Measured the cutoff.

Stored it.

“...consistent truncation,” she said under her breath.

Shammy stepped in last.

The air shifted—

then stalled.

Didn't settle.

Didn't respond.

For the first time—

her presence didn't integrate.

It just—

existed.

The seam behind them—

was no longer there.

Not closed.

Not hidden.

Never needed.

The corridor ahead stretched forward in perfect linearity.

Too perfect.

No asymmetry.

No wear.

No environmental drift.

Light existed—

without source.

Shadow—

did not exist at all.

Ace stopped.

Just enough to anchor.

Her gaze moved once—

left wall—

right wall—

forward.

“...it’s wrong.”

Mai didn’t argue.

She was already tracking pattern spacing.

Panel intervals.

Light repetition.

Something repeated every eleven segments—

but not exactly.

Not enough to map.

“Don’t trust the rhythm,” she said.

“It’s not for navigation.”

Shammy lifted her hand slightly.

The air responded—

then didn’t.

Like something else had priority.

“They’ve taken control of the medium,” she said quietly.

A camera appeared.

Not hidden.

Not obvious.

Placed exactly where the eye would land—

after enough steps.

A small lens—

flush with the wall.

Not pointed at them.

At the space they occupied.

Ace stopped.

Completely this time.

The camera didn’t move.

Didn’t track.

Didn’t react.

Mai studied it.

“There’s no recording signal,” she said.

Shammy tilted her head.

“...it’s not storing anything.”

Ace’s voice cut through.

“...then what is it doing.”

Mai answered slower.

Measured.

Careful.

“It’s maintaining observation.”

Silence.

Ace didn’t blink.

“...same thing.”

Mai shook her head once.

“No.”

The difference mattered.

Behind them—

the camera adjusted.

Not visibly.

Not through motion.

But the angle—

was no longer the same.

Shammy’s voice dropped.

“...it noticed us noticing it.”

Mai didn’t look back.

“Good,” she said quietly.

A beat.

“Then we’re already late.”

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