

ACE 36 — “Open Without Exit”
Chapter 3 — Something That Looks Back

The corridor did not end.

It thinned.

Not gradually.

Not in a way that could be tracked.

One step—

and the structure that had been consistent—

stopped needing to be.

Mai felt it first.

Not as movement.

As absence of requirement.

The pattern she had been tracking—panel spacing, light repetition, micro-interval drift—

didn't break.

It simply—

no longer applied.

She slowed.

Not enough to stop.

Enough to anchor.

“...this isn't a continuation,” she said quietly.

Ace didn't look back.

“...no.”

Shammy's gaze lifted slightly.

The air—

didn't change.

That was the problem.

It should have.

“Nothing's moving,” she said.

A beat.

“...but something already is.”

The space ahead opened.

Not wide.

Not large.

Just—

available.

No walls.

No defined boundaries.

And yet—

it held.

Ace stepped forward.

No hesitation.

No adjustment.

The floor remained where it needed to be.

That was enough.

Mai followed.

Her eyes moved immediately—

not across objects—

across relationships.

Distance.

Angle.

Depth.

Something—

resolved too cleanly.

She stopped.

“...there,” she said.

Ace saw it.

Of course she did.

Not because it was obvious.

Because it didn't belong.

At the far end—

where the space should have terminated—

there was a surface.

Not a wall.

Not a screen.

Not an opening.

Just—

a plane.

Perfectly defined.

Too defined.

It held depth.

That was the first lie.

It didn't reflect.

Didn't refract.

Didn't distort.

It simply—

presented.

Like looking through something—

that wasn't there.

Shammy's breath caught.

Not sharply.

Just—

interrupted.

"...that's not air," she said.

A beat.

“It’s not anything.”

Mai stepped closer.

Not toward it.

Along it.

Testing angle.

Parallax.

Consistency.

“It maintains perspective,” she said.

Flat.

“But not position.”

That mattered.

Ace didn’t move.

Her gaze had already locked—

not onto the surface—

but through it.

Something—

was there.

Not clearly.

Not fully.

But enough.

A horizon—

that didn’t match Night City.

Structures—

too large—

or too far—

or both.

Movement—

that wasn’t movement.

Her voice dropped.

"...it's not empty."

Mai didn't look directly.

She adjusted angle.

Measured deviation.

Compared input.

"It's not a location," she said.

A beat.

"It's a resolution."

Shammy stepped slightly to the side.

The air—

did not follow.

Did not correct.

It simply—

remained.

Her voice lowered.

"...it's not on the other side."

Silence.

Ace didn't blink.

"...then where."

Mai answered.

"Nowhere."

Flat.

Precise.

"It doesn't connect."

A pause.

"It convinces."

The surface didn't react.

Didn't ripple.

Didn't shift.

But—

the longer you looked—

the more it held.

Depth increased.

Not physically.

Perceptually.

Details—

almost—

resolved.

Shammy felt it first.

Pressure—

not on her body—

on her attention.

"...don't focus," she said immediately.

Ace didn't respond.

Her gaze didn't move.

"...too late."

Mai stepped in.

Sharp.

She broke the angle.

Not blocking—

interrupting.

The surface—

didn't change.

But the depth—

reduced.

Just slightly.

“That’s it,” she said.

“It requires commitment.”

Ace exhaled.

Slow.

Measured.

Didn’t look away.

“...it’s getting closer.”

Mai’s head snapped toward her.

“It isn’t moving.”

Ace didn’t argue.

“...I didn’t say it was.”

Shammy shifted again.

The air—

finally—

reacted.

A small distortion.

Localized.

Like something had pushed against it—

and failed.

“...it’s pulling,” she said.

Mai corrected immediately.

“No.”

A beat.

“It’s resolving.”

That was worse.

Because nothing had crossed the surface.

Nothing had emerged.

Nothing had entered.

And yet—

the space between them and it—

felt smaller.

Ace took one step forward.

No hesitation.

No test.

The surface—

remained exactly where it was.

But—

what she saw through it—

shifted.

Not dramatically.

Not visibly.

Just enough—

that it was no longer the same.

Her voice dropped.

“...it knows I’m here.”

Mai didn’t look at the surface.

She watched Ace.

Her posture.

Micro-adjustments.

Centerline tension.

“It doesn’t know anything,” she said.

A beat.

“It doesn’t need to.”

Shammy’s breath slowed.

Not by choice.

The air around her—

flattened.

“...we’re already inside it,” she said quietly.

Silence.

Ace didn’t move.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t give anything.

“...no,” she said.

A beat.

“...it’s inside us.”

The surface held.

Perfect.

Stable.

Impossible.

Because nothing came through.

Nothing crossed.

Nothing changed—

except how close it felt.

Mai stepped back.

Just enough to break the angle completely.

The depth—

collapsed.

Not gone.

Reduced.

Controlled.

“That’s the rule,” she said.

Flat.

Final.

“It only exists when we agree it does.”

Silence settled.

Tight.

Measured.

Ace didn't step back.

Didn't disengage.

Her gaze remained—

locked—

just off-center.

“...then we don't agree,” she said.

And for the first time—

the surface

felt

like it was waiting

for that.

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