

ACE 36 — “Open Without Exit”  
Chapter 9 — Exit Without Meaning

They didn't rush.

There was nothing left to outrun.

Ace moved first—

steady—

unbroken—

no need to disrupt what no longer responded.

The space ahead didn't shift.

Didn't stretch.

Didn't hesitate.

It simply—

existed.

Mai followed—

not offset—

not correcting—

just moving.

For the first time since entering—

she didn't calculate the next step.

Didn't need to.

Shammy came last.

The air—

fully hers again.

No resistance.

No interference.

Just—

flow.

Behind them—

nothing closed.

Nothing collapsed.

Nothing marked their exit.

The structure remained—

exactly as it had been.

Which was the problem.

Shammy glanced back once.

Only once.

“...it’s still there,” she said.

Mai didn’t turn.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“But it doesn’t matter.”

Ace didn’t look either.

“...same thing.”

They walked.

The corridor—

if it could still be called that—

did not resist.

No rhythm.

No cadence.

No hidden alignment waiting to catch them.

Just—

distance behaving like distance again.

Each step—

complete.

Unquestioned.

Unshared.

And that was enough.

The door—

appeared.

Not because it opened.

Because it became relevant again.

A seam—

clean—

simple—

real.

Ace didn't hesitate.

She stepped through.

The world—

returned.

Not violently.

Not all at once.

Sound came first.

Wind—

distant traffic—

the low hum of a city that never stopped moving.

Then light—

uneven—

imperfect—

alive.

Then space—

real distance—

real perspective—

real consequence.

Mai followed.

Her breath—

aligned with her body.

No lag.

No correction.

Just—

hers.

Shammy stepped out last.

The air—

rushed—

then settled.

Balanced.

Free.

Behind them—

the building stood.

Matte.

Silent.

Unremarkable.

Already blending back into everything Night City didn't bother to remember.

No distortion.

No signal.

No indication that anything inside it had ever mattered.

Shammy watched it a second longer than she needed to.

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

Mai shook her head slightly.

"No."

A beat.

"It just can't do anything."

Ace's voice stayed flat.

"...then it's done."

That was enough.

They moved.

Not together—

not apart—

just—

forward.

The city swallowed them the way it always did.

Lights stacked.

Voices overlapped.

Movement layered into movement until nothing stood out long enough to matter.

Except—

now—

they could hear it.

The gaps.

Small.

Precise.

Places where something almost aligned—

and didn't.

Mai noticed first.

Of course she did.

She didn't stop walking.

"...residual patterning," she said.

Ace didn't look at her.

"...danger."

Mai answered immediately.

"No."

A beat.

"...not anymore."

Shammy exhaled.

The air—

smooth.

Clean.

"...it can't build from this," she said.

Mai nodded once.

"Yes."

Another beat.

"There's nothing to agree on."

That was the difference.

Not suppressed.

Not contained.

Not hidden.

Just—

meaningless.

They reached Afterlife without needing to speak.

The noise hit them first.

Full.

Layered.

Alive.

And now—

obvious.

Where it didn't connect.

Rogue was already there.

Same booth.

Same position.

Different glass.

Her eyes moved once as they approached.

Not scanning.

Counting.

"...you're on time," she said.

Ace didn't sit.

"...job's done."

Rogue's gaze flicked—

once—

to Mai—

to Shammy—

back to Ace.

"...you don't have anything."

Silence.

Mai slid into the seat.

Calm.

Resolved.

"We completed the transfer," she said.

Rogue tilted her head slightly.

"...to where."

Mai met her eyes.

Didn't hesitate.

"...nowhere that resolves."

A beat.

"...it no longer stabilizes."

Shammy sat last.

The air around the booth—

quiet—

contained—

hers.

"...it's not usable," she added.

Rogue didn't respond immediately.

She lifted the glass.

Watched the surface.

For a moment—

perfectly still.

Flat.

Then—

a ripple.

Small.

Precise.

Unforced.

She set the glass down.

"...client's not going to like that," she said.

Ace didn't blink.

"...client asked for something that doesn't exist."

A pause.

"...we made sure it stays that way."

Silence.

Rogue considered that.

Not weighing it.

Recognizing it.

"...fair," she said.

A beat.

"Payment's already cleared."

Of course it had.

Mai confirmed—

instant—

“Received.”

Clean.

Done.

Shammy leaned back slightly.

The air—

steady—

alive—

real.

“...we didn’t bring anything out,” she said.

Mai’s gaze shifted—

not to the room—

to the gaps.

“...we did,” she said quietly.

A beat.

“...we brought back a space where it can’t happen.”

Silence.

Ace didn’t respond.

Didn’t need to.

Because that was the outcome.

Not absence.

Not victory.

Constraint.

The kind that didn’t announce itself.

Didn’t need to.

Outside—

Night City kept moving.

Unaware.

Unchanged.

Except—

now—

somewhere between one moment and the next—

between one decision and the one that followed—

there was a fraction of space—

where nothing could force itself

into being real.

And that—

was enough.

Ace stood.

No hesitation.

No reason to stay.

“...next,” she said.

Flat.

Rogue’s lips curved—

just slightly.

“...yeah,” she said.

A beat.

“There’s always a next.”

The noise of Afterlife filled the space again—

imperfect—

incomplete—

alive.

And for the first time—

that was exactly how it was supposed to be.

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From:

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Last update: **13/04/2026 15:56**

