



Epilogue: No Handshake

Later, when they moved her down the corridor toward the next sealed door and the next nameless room, Ace didn't feel like prey.

She felt like a person being walked out of a trap that was still closing behind her.

Mai walked beside her, hand locked with hers.

Bright walked behind, muttering about "policy murder" and "the most expensive speaker system mistake in history."

The facility remained quiet.

No speakers.

No ceiling voice.

No easy narrative.

At the last door before the next compartment, Ace paused.

Not because someone told her to.

Because she felt the tug again—faint, curious, testing.

Like the medium asking: Will you answer now?

Mai noticed instantly. “Ace.”

Ace looked at her.

Mai’s eyes were fierce, steady. “No handshake.”

Ace breathed wrong—ugly, human, stubborn—and answered softly, like a vow she’d chosen.

“No handshake,” Ace said.

The tug eased.

Not defeated.

But denied.

The door opened.

They stepped through.

And Ace, for the first time since she’d heard the ocean knock in three beats, understood the shape of her new life:

Not a heroic sprint.

Not a clean victory.

A long refusal.

A war fought in breaths, in touch, in silence, in paperwork sharp enough to draw blood.

And if the medium wanted her—

it would have to learn the one language she was finally making her own:

human.

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