

CHAPTER 1 — Something That Doesn't Belong

The Afterlife didn't care what you brought through its doors.

As long as it made sense.

This didn't.

Ace felt it before Rogue said a word, before the room had fully settled around them again. It wasn't tension, and it wasn't threat. It was something more specific than that. Misplacement. The precise, ugly sensation of something being where it did not belong—and the world, for whatever reason, not correcting it.

Rogue Amendiares didn't waste time.

"Client lost something," she said, her tone flat as ever. Then, after the smallest pause: "Didn't lose it by accident."

Ace stepped closer. "Object."

Rogue gave a single nod. "Crystal skull."

V blinked. "...You're kidding."

Rogue didn't smile. "No."

That was enough.

Mai's gaze sharpened at once. "Origin?"

Rogue lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug. "Client didn't say." A beat. "Did say it shouldn't be here."

That tracked.

Rogue tapped the shard resting on the counter and, this time, pushed it forward without ceremony.

Mai picked it up immediately.

No hesitation. No wasted motion.

The data unfolded fast across the surface—camera feeds, still frames, angles pulled from different systems, each one trying to give shape to the same absence of certainty. One sequence stood out from the rest almost immediately. Clearer. Cleaner. Useful.

A corridor.

Dim. Industrial. Narrow in the way places became when they were built to be passed through, not occupied.

A figure moved through it.

No rush. No concealment. Nothing furtive about the motion at all. Whoever it was, they wanted to be seen—if not fully, then enough.

The symbol was visible.

Clean. Unhidden.

Mai paused. Zoomed. Enhanced.

There was no ambiguity after that.

A coiled hand, open, with a serpent wrapped around it.

She didn't say it aloud. She didn't have to.

Ace had already seen it.

"Confirmed," Mai said, her voice flat and stripped of everything unnecessary.

Rogue watched them for a moment. "Yeah," she said. "Thought you might recognize that."

V shifted slightly beside them. "...Okay," they muttered. "...that's not great."

No one disagreed.

Rogue leaned back just a little, eyes still on them. "They didn't hide it," she said. After a short pause, she added, "They wanted it seen."

That mattered.

Ace didn't look at the shard again. "Location."

Rogue tapped once against the counter. "Still in the city," she said. "Didn't leave the grid."

Then, after another beat:

"Didn't try to."

That was worse.

Mai closed the shard with deliberate care, as though the act itself required precision. "Containment priority," she said. A pause followed, thin and exact. "Unknown effect."

Rogue nodded once. "Yeah."

Another beat.

"Client wants it back."

Of course they did.

"Value," Ace said.

Rogue answered without hesitation. "High."

It always was.

Silence followed, but only briefly—short, locked, functional.

Ace turned. "We go."

There was no delay after that. No negotiation. No further shaping of the problem into something smaller than it was.

As they moved, Rogue added one last thing.

“Hey.”

Ace didn't turn. “What.”

Rogue's voice remained perfectly even. “They knew you'd see it.”

A beat.

“That symbol wasn't for me.”

That tracked too well.

Ace stepped out into the city, and Night City met them the way it always did: lights bleeding through rain-slick surfaces, movement stacked on movement, noise layered so thick it became its own kind of weather. Everything looked normal. Everything kept moving exactly as it should.

Except now there was something inside it that wasn't.

And somewhere in the city—in some place that should not have existed in quite the way it did—something that had been taken was already waiting to be found.

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