

ACE 34 — CHAPTER 1: Something That Doesn't Belong (Rewrite)

The Afterlife wasn't a place that reacted easily.

It had seen too much, filtered too much, and learned long ago that most things weren't worth noticing unless they forced themselves into the room. Noise, rumors, even violence — those passed through like background static. Only patterns that didn't fit had any weight here.

This time, something didn't fit.

Ace felt it before she reached the bar. It wasn't tension or threat, nothing that would have made anyone else look twice. It was subtler than that — a quiet sense that something had been placed where it didn't belong, and the system hadn't corrected it yet.

That alone was enough.

Rogue Amendiares didn't bother with introductions. She never did when a job mattered.

"Client lost something," she said, her tone flat, almost dismissive.

Ace stopped in front of her. "Object."

Rogue gave a small nod. "Crystal skull."

There was no reaction from Ace, but the word itself carried weight. Not because of what it was, but because of how it was said. Rogue wasn't treating it like a curiosity or a collectible. This wasn't art. It wasn't decoration.

"Didn't lose it by accident," Rogue added, leaning back slightly. "Taken. Clean. No noise."

Mai stepped closer and picked up the shard Rogue had already placed on the counter. She didn't hesitate. She never did when information was available.

The data unfolded cleanly — multiple camera feeds, overlapping angles, timestamps that lined up exactly the way they were supposed to. Whoever had taken the object hadn't tried to hide. That was the first problem.

The second was what they hadn't hidden.

Mai paused the feed and zoomed in.

A corridor, dimly lit, industrial. A single figure moving through it at a steady pace, not rushed, not cautious, not concerned about being seen. Their posture wasn't defensive. It was deliberate.

And on their arm — clearly visible, deliberately visible — was the symbol.

A coiled serpent wrapped around an open hand.

Mai didn't comment on it immediately. She didn't need to. Ace had already seen it.

“Confirmed,” Mai said, her voice level.

Rogue watched their reaction carefully, though she kept her expression neutral. “Yeah. Thought you might.”

There was a brief silence, not empty but locked — the kind that settled when everyone in the room understood more than they were saying.

“They wanted it seen,” Rogue continued. “That symbol wasn’t for me.”

Ace didn’t look at the shard again. “Location.”

“Still in the city,” Rogue replied. “Didn’t leave the grid. No attempt to.”

That made it worse.

Most people who stole something valuable in Night City tried to disappear. They cut signals, changed routes, vanished into layers of noise. This wasn’t that. Whoever had taken the skull hadn’t tried to hide because hiding hadn’t been part of the plan.

“Containment priority,” Mai said, closing the shard with deliberate care. “Unknown effect.”

Rogue nodded once. “Client wants it back. Quiet. No headlines, no panic.”

Of course they did.

“Value,” Ace said.

“High.”

That was enough.

Ace turned without another word. There was no need for negotiation, no need for clarification. The job had already resolved itself into something simple.

Find it. Take it back. Don’t ask the wrong questions unless they forced themselves into the answer.

As she moved toward the exit, Rogue spoke again, just once.

“They knew you’d see it.”

Ace didn’t turn. “Yes.”

Outside, Night City moved exactly the way it always did — lights shifting across wet pavement, traffic threading through impossible density, systems operating at a pace that never slowed for anything.

Nothing had changed.

And yet something inside that movement had shifted, just slightly, just enough to matter.

Because somewhere in the city, something that didn’t belong had been placed deliberately — not hidden, not lost, but moved.

And it wasn’t waiting to be found.

It was waiting for them.

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