

CHAPTER 4 — They Were Expecting You

The room didn't distort.

That was the first warning.

Clean lines.

Stable angles.

Distance—

consistent.

After everything behind them—

that felt wrong.

Ace stepped in.

No hesitation.

No adjustment.

The space held.

Didn't react.

Didn't correct.

Just—

accepted.

Mai followed—

eyes moving—

fast—

then slowing.

“Stabilized,” she said.

Flat.

“Externally maintained.”

That mattered.

Shammy stepped in last.

The air—

settled immediately.

No resistance.

No lag.

“They fixed it,” she said.

A beat.

“Or something did.”

Ace didn't respond.

She didn't need to.

They weren't alone.

Figures stood in the space—

not hidden—

not armed—

not aggressive.

Watching.

Waiting.

The symbol was visible—

again.

Not displayed.

Worn.

Natural.

One stepped forward.

Not a threat.

Not passive.

Balanced.

“You made it,” they said.

Calm.

Certain.

No surprise.

Ace stopped.

Measured distance.

Didn't speak.

Mai stepped slightly to the side.

Not defensive.

Observational.

“You expected us,” she said.

Flat.

The figure inclined their head—

just slightly.

“Yes.”

No elaboration.

Shammy shifted—

barely.

The air—

remained stable.

That was wrong.

Ace spoke.

“Object.”

Direct.

No preamble.

The figure didn't answer immediately.

Then—

“They call it that,” they said.

A beat.

“We don't.”

Of course they didn't.

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

“Location,” she said.

Flat.

The figure’s eyes moved—

to her—

then past her—

to Ace.

“You already crossed once,” they said.

Calm.

Measured.

“You just don’t remember all of it.”

Silence.

Short.

Heavy.

Ace didn’t react.

Didn’t question.

Didn’t engage.

“Object,” she said again.

Same tone.

Same demand.

The figure studied her—

longer this time.

Then turned slightly—

gestured.

The space behind them—

opened.

Not mechanically.

Not visibly.

Just—

available.

“There,” they said.

No resistance.

No barrier.

That was worse.

Mai didn’t move.

“This is not defensive,” she said.

Flat.

“They are allowing access.”

Shammy tilted her head.

The air—

still calm.

“They’re not trying to stop us,” she said.

A beat.

“They’re guiding us.”

That tracked.

Ace stepped forward.

Didn’t hesitate.

Didn’t question.

She moved past them.

No one interfered.

No one followed.

Mai hesitated—

just a fraction.

Then followed.

Shammy last.

The air—

unchanged.

Behind them—

the figures remained.

Watching.

Not moving.

As if the outcome—

was already known.

As if this part—

had already happened.

And somewhere—

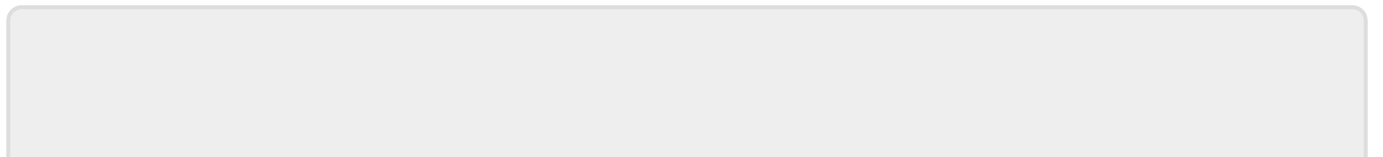
just beyond the space they were entering—

something that had been taken—

was waiting—

not to be found—

but to be returned.



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