

CHAPTER 6 — Not an Accident

The space behind them didn't close.

It simply—

stopped mattering.

Ace didn't look back.

The skull in her hand no longer distorted the world around it. No shifts, no misalignment, no visible effect pressing outward.

But it didn't feel neutral.

It felt—

compressed.

Like something that had been forced into shape and hadn't agreed to it.

Mai walked beside her, her attention fixed on the object—not analyzing anymore, not breaking it down, just monitoring it.

"It will not remain stable indefinitely," she said.

Flat.

A warning, not a hypothesis.

Ace didn't respond.

She didn't need to.

Shammy followed just behind them. The air around her held steady, balanced the way it always did when she was actively keeping things from slipping.

But it felt thinner now.

"It's quieter," she said.

A beat.

"But not empty."

That tracked.

The Serpent's Hand didn't follow.

They didn't try to stop them.

They didn't need to.

The same figure spoke again, their voice carrying from behind them without effort.

Calm.

Certain.

"You think you took it," they said.

A pause.

"You didn't."

Ace stopped.

Just once.

Turned slightly—not fully, not giving them more than necessary.

"Client," she said.

Flat.

The figure inclined their head.

"Yes."

A beat.

"For now."

That was enough.

Ace didn't ask more.

Didn't push.

Didn't try to force clarity out of something that wasn't offering it.

She turned back—

and kept walking.

The path out was shorter now.

Cleaner.

The building no longer resisted them.

No shifting corridors. No misaligned space. No layered geometry trying to rewrite itself around their movement.

Just—

structure.

But something was missing.

The wrongness was gone.

Not resolved.

Removed.

Replaced by—

absence.

Mai noticed it first.

"The system has normalized," she said.

Flat.

A pause.

“But incorrectly.”

Shammy gave a small nod, her attention flicking once across the space as if checking for something that wasn't there anymore.

“It feels... incomplete,” she said.

A beat.

“Like something is missing that shouldn't be.”

Ace didn't respond.

She stepped outside.

The city met them exactly as it had before.

Lights.

Movement.

Noise.

Everything continuing without interruption, without acknowledgment, without the slightest indication that anything had been wrong at all.

Except now—

something that didn't belong was inside it.

And it wasn't reacting.

Mai looked at the skull again.

Still contained.

Still wrong.

“This was not random,” she said.

A beat.

“It was placed.”

That landed clean.

Ace gave a single nod.

“Yes.”

Flat.

Final.

Shammy looked back once.

Just once.

The building was already dissolving into the city’s background, blending into everything else that wasn’t worth noticing.

Unremarkable.

Forgotten.

“They knew we’d come,” she said.

A pause.

“They needed us to.”

That was the core of it.

Ace didn’t answer.

Because she already knew.

She had seen it before.

Not clearly.

Not in a way that could be held onto.

But enough.

Felt it—

just outside memory.

Just beyond recall.

Not the first time.

Never the first time.

The skull remained silent in her hand.

Contained.

Unmoving.

Waiting.

And somewhere behind everything that had just happened—behind the hallway, behind the symbol, behind the space that refused to hold—

something had already decided, long before they arrived,

that this

would happen

exactly

like this.

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