

EPILOGUE — What Was Left Closed

The skull didn't change.

That was the problem.

It stayed exact.

Too exact.

Ace placed it on the table.

The safehouse was quiet. Contained in a way that felt intentional, not accidental. Outside, the city kept moving—lights shifting, traffic flowing, noise layering into its usual restless rhythm.

Inside—

nothing moved.

Mai watched the skull.

She wasn't scanning it anymore. Not processing it, not breaking it apart into something manageable.

Just observing.

"It is stable," she said.

A beat.

"Artificially."

Of course it was.

Shammy leaned back against the wall. The air around her held its balance, but it felt thinner now, like something had been removed from it and the space hadn't fully recovered.

"It's quieter than it should be," she said.

A pause.

“Like it’s holding its breath.”

Ace didn’t respond.

She stepped closer.

No distortion.

No reaction.

She touched it again.

The pressure returned instantly.

Contained.

Too much space forced into too little place.

She let go.

“It’s not off,” she said.

Flat.

Mai nodded once.

“No.”

A beat.

“It is waiting for a condition.”

Not a trigger.

A state.

That mattered.

Shammy shifted slightly, the air tightening around her for a moment before easing again.

“It didn’t come with us by accident,” she said.

A pause.

“It needed to.”

Ace looked at the skull.

Just once.

Long enough.

“Not here,” she said.

Flat.

Final.

Mai understood immediately.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“This is not its intended location.”

Of course it wasn’t.

Nothing about this was.

Silence settled into the room.

Not empty.

Measured.

Outside, the city continued exactly as it always did—unaware, unchanged, indifferent.

But now—

inside it—

inside their space—

something existed that didn't belong.

And it wasn't reacting.

Because it didn't need to.

Ace turned away.

She didn't watch it.

Didn't track it.

"That wasn't random," she said.

Quiet.

Not a question.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Then—

"No."

Flat.

Shammy looked between them, the air steadying again under her presence.

"They knew we'd take it," she said.

A beat.

"They wanted us to."

That was enough.

Ace didn't argue.

Didn't question.

Because somewhere—

past what she remembered—

past what she could verify—

past what the city itself could record—

there was a point.

A moment.

A crossing.

Something that didn't belong to this timeline.

And whatever had happened there—

whatever had been decided—

had already accounted

for this.

The skull didn't move.

Didn't react.

Didn't need to.

Because whatever it was waiting for—

hadn't happened yet.

And when it did—

it wouldn't ask.

Wouldn't announce itself.

Wouldn't change.

It would simply—

become

what it had always been meant to be.

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