

INTERLUDE — Calibration **acemaishammy**

The safehouse hadn't changed.

That mattered.

Same walls.

Same angles.

Same imperfect alignment that didn't try to correct itself.

Normal.

Ace stood by the window.

Watching movement below.

Not tracking targets—

tracking flow.

Mai sat at the table.

The object—

resting in front of her—

not moving.

But not still.

Shammy leaned against the wall.

The air—

steady.

For now.

V moved around the room.

Not restless.

Checking.

Adjusting.

“You’re going to need gear,” they said.

Ace didn't turn.

"We have gear."

V snorted quietly.

"Not for here."

That landed.

Mai didn't look up.

"Define."

V gestured loosely.

"Local weapons. Interfaces. Stuff that actually connects to the system."

A beat.

“And stuff that doesn’t scream ‘you’re not from here’ the second someone scans you.”

Ace didn’t respond.

Because that was valid.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

The air around V—

consistent.

“You’re stable,” she said.

V blinked.

“...I’m starting to think that’s a compliment.”

Mai finally looked up.

“It is.”

A short pause.

Then:

“We go.”

No delay.

No debate.

The object remained on the table.

For a moment—

none of them touched it.

Then—

Mai picked it up.

Carefully.

Not to hold it—

to keep it from settling.

The market wasn't organized.

It didn't need to be.

Neon bled across metal.

Voices overlapped without structure.

Everything moved—

but nothing aligned.

Perfect.

Ace stepped into it without hesitation.

The crowd adjusted.

Not consciously—

but instinctively.

Space opened.

That told V everything they needed to know.

“...Yeah,” they muttered.

“...you’re going to be a problem here.”

Mai ignored the noise.

Her eyes moved—

tracking density.

Nothing locked.

Nothing resolved.

Good.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air—

chaotic.

Alive.

“This place breathes,” she said.

V smirked slightly.

“Yeah.”

A beat.

“On a good day.”

They stopped at a vendor.

No sign.

No branding.

Just equipment.

Weapons.

Interfaces.

Modded hardware that had been rebuilt too many times to count.

The vendor looked up.

Didn't greet them.

Didn't need to.

"You buying or staring," he said.

Ace didn't answer.

Mai stepped forward.

"Functionality," she said.

The vendor paused.

Looked at her—

longer than necessary.

"...You're not local."

Mai didn't deny it.

“No.”

The vendor shrugged.

“Doesn’t matter if you pay.”

That tracked.

V leaned slightly toward the counter.

“They’ll pay.”

The vendor nodded.

“Then what do you need.”

Mai didn’t look at the items.

She looked at the system.

“Compatibility,” she said.

A beat.

“Stability.”

The vendor snorted.

“Pick one.”

Ace stepped forward.

“Both.”

The vendor met her gaze.

For a moment—

something in his posture shifted.

Then—

he reached under the counter.

Pulled out a case.

Set it down.

“This is as close as you get,” he said.

No explanation.

No pitch.

Mai opened it.

Inside—

cleaner.

More deliberate.

Interfaces that didn't try to overcompensate.

Weapons that balanced function—

and presence.

"This will work," she said.

Ace nodded once.

"Take it."

The vendor named a price.

High.

Mai didn't react.

She activated the interface.

Transfer.

Confirmed.

The vendor blinked.

"...Fast."

Mai closed the case.

"Efficiency."

That was enough.

As they turned to leave—

Shammy paused.

The air—

shifted.

Subtle.

But wrong.

“Wait,” she said.

Ace stopped immediately.

“Where.”

Shammy didn’t point.

She didn’t need to.

The object—

in Mai's hand—

tightened.

Not aligning—

reacting.

Mai's gaze sharpened.

"...That shouldn't happen here."

V frowned.

"...What shouldn't."

Mai didn't answer.

Because the answer was already forming.

Somewhere in the noise—

in the chaos—

in the unaligned mess of the market—

something had just—

for a fraction—

almost—

agreed.

Ace's expression didn't change.

"Good," she said.

V groaned quietly.

"...You really need a new word."

But no one corrected her.

Because they all knew what it meant.

Not relief.

Not success.

Just—

the next point
where something
was about to go wrong.

And this time—

it wasn't isolated.

It was already
inside the noise.

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