

# INTERLUDE — Calibration

The safehouse hadn't changed.

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That mattered.

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Same walls.

Same angles.

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

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Normal.

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---

Ace stood by the window.

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Watching movement below.

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Not tracking targets—

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tracking flow.

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Mai sat at the table.

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The object—

---

resting in front of her—

---

not moving.

---

---

But not still.

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---

Shammy leaned against the wall.

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The air—

---

---

steady.

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---

For now.

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---

V moved around the room.

---

---

Not restless.

---

---

Checking.

---

---

Adjusting.

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

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Ace didn't turn.

---

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"We have gear."

---

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V snorted quietly.

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"Not for here."

---

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That landed.

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---

Mai didn't look up.

---

---

"Define."

---

---

V gestured loosely.

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"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.”

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---

Ace didn’t respond.

---

---

Because that was valid.

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Shammy tilted her head slightly.

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---

The air around V—

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---

consistent.

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“You’re stable,” she said.

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---

V blinked.

---

---

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

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---

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.

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Carefully.

---

---

Not to hold it—

---

to keep it from settling.

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---

The market wasn't organized.

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---

It didn't need to be.

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---

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.

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Nothing locked.

---

Nothing resolved.

---

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Good.

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---

Shammy exhaled slowly.

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---

The air—

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chaotic.

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Alive.

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“This place breathes,” she said.

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V smirked slightly.

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---

“Yeah.”

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---

A beat.

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“On a good day.”

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---

They stopped at a vendor.

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No sign.

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---

No branding.

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Just equipment.

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Weapons.

Interfaces.

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

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---

The vendor looked up.

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---

Didn't greet them.

---

---

Didn't need to.

---

---

"You buying or staring," he said.

---

---

Ace didn't answer.

---

---

Mai stepped forward.

---

---

"Functionality," she said.

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---

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.

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“Compatibility,” she said.

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---

A beat.

---

---

“Stability.”

---

---

The vendor snorted.

---

---

“Pick one.”

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---

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.

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---

Set it down.

---

---

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

---

---

No explanation.

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---

No pitch.

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---

Mai opened it.

---

---

Inside—

cleaner.

---

---

More deliberate.

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---

Interfaces that didn't try to overcompensate.

---

---

Weapons that balanced function—

---

and presence.

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---

"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—

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---

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.

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---

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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—

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