

CHAPTER 9 — Basic Survival

The place V brought them to wasn't hidden.

That was the point.

Hidden meant valuable.

Valuable meant contested.

This—

was ignored.

A narrow building wedged between two larger ones that leaned just enough to make the gap feel intentional. Concrete stained by time, patched without precision. Windows that had once meant something, now just openings filled with whatever kept the inside separate from the outside.

Functional.

V didn't stop at the entrance.

Didn't check surroundings.

Didn't signal.

Just walked in.

That told Mai everything she needed to know.

No one cared about this place.

Inside, the air changed.

Not clean.

Not filtered.

But consistent.

That mattered more.

Ace stepped in first.

Immediate scan.

Corners.

Entrances.

Sightlines.

Nothing moved.

Nothing reacted.

“Clear,” she said.

V glanced back.

“Yeah.”

A small shrug.

“Most days.”

The room was simple.

One main space.

Two smaller ones branching off.

A table that had been repaired more times than it had been replaced. A couch that didn't match anything else. A screen mounted to a wall that didn't quite hold it straight.

No decoration.

No identity.

Mai walked the perimeter.

Measured.

Not the objects—

the space between them.

Everything held.

No drift.

No correction.

Good.

Shammy stood still for a moment.

Listening.

The air didn't push.

Didn't pull.

Just—

existed.

She relaxed.

Barely.

"This works," she said.

Ace didn't respond.

She had already moved to the far wall—

checking the only window.

Not for view.

For exit.

V dropped a small case onto the table.

It made a sound.

Solid.

Real.

“Basic setup,” V said.

“Water, power, local net access. Don’t expect anything fancy.”

Mai turned.

“Cost.”

V leaned back slightly.

“You’ll pay it back.”

Not a question.

A structure.

Ace didn’t argue.

“Good.”

That was enough.

A short silence settled.

Not empty.

Waiting.

Mai broke it.

“Currency.”

V nodded.

“Eddies.”

A beat.

“Everything runs on them.”

Ace crossed her arms.

“How much.”

V let out a quiet breath.

“That depends on how long you want to last.”

Mai didn't like that answer.

“Baseline,” she said.

V thought for a second.

Not calculating—

estimating.

“Enough to not get pushed out in a week?”

A small shrug.

“Ten thousand.”

Ace didn't react.

Mai did.

Not visibly—

internally.

“Acquisition,” she said.

V smiled faintly.

“Now we’re talking.”

They moved to the table.

V tapped the screen.

The display flickered—

then resolved into a simple interface.

Listings.

Requests.

Jobs.

“Most of this is noise,” V said.

“Small-time stuff. Delivery, intimidation, cleanup.”

A beat.

“You don’t want that.”

Ace leaned slightly closer.

Not interested in the details—

interested in the structure.

“Then what.”

V scrolled.

Slower now.

Filtering.

“The ones that pay,” V said.

“Are the ones no one else wants.”

That tracked.

Mai watched the list change.

Fewer entries.

Different tone.

Less information.

More implication.

“Pattern break,” she said quietly.

V glanced at her.

A small nod.

“Yeah.”

Shammy stepped closer.

Not looking at the screen—

listening to the space around it.

Nothing reacted.

Good.

“Which one,” Ace asked.

V stopped scrolling.

One listing remained highlighted.

“Debt collection,” V said.

Ace’s expression didn’t change.

“Simple.”

V shook their head slightly.

“Not exactly.”

Mai read the details.

Minimal.

Deliberately.

“Client.”

V tapped the entry.

Voodoo Boys

That was enough to change the weight.

Mai looked up.

“Why is this still open.”

V met her gaze.

“Because they don’t pay in eddies.”

Ace tilted her head slightly.

“Then why take it.”

V’s smile didn’t reach their eyes.

“Because someone else will.”

A beat.

“And they’ll get whatever the payment is.”

That mattered.

Mai processed it quickly.

“Unknown variable.”

“Exactly,” V said.

Shammy’s voice cut in quietly.

“It’s not neutral.”

Both V and Ace looked at her.

“What,” Ace asked.

Shammy didn’t look at the screen.

“The offer,” she said.

A pause.

“It’s pulling.”

V frowned slightly.

“Yeah,” they said slowly.

“...that tracks.”

Ace straightened.

Decision made.

“We take it.”

Mai didn’t object.

Not because it was safe.

Because it wasn’t.

And that was the point.

V nodded once.

“Alright.”

A small breath.

“Then welcome to the city.”

No ceremony.

No buildup.

Just—

movement.

And for the first time since their arrival—

they weren’t just reacting.

They were choosing

where to step next.

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