

Chapter 10: The Third Chair

Three days of silence.

Not the clean kind.

Not peace.

The apartment held it the way old walls held smoke—worked into everything, impossible to scrub out completely. No one slammed doors. No one raised their voice. No one touched anything they didn't need to.

The city handled the noise for them.

Transport drones rattled past the window at uneven intervals. Bass from somewhere below climbed through the floor in dull, persistent thuds. Neon advertisements cycled across the opposite tower in colors no human nervous system had ever asked for. The air smelled of stale soycaff, recycled ozone, cheap filtration, old chrome.

Night City never stopped speaking.

That was one of its worst qualities.

Ace stood by the window and let it happen around her.

The electric blue of some ramen ad cut her into silhouette. Her violet eyes tracked the street without appearing to focus on any one thing. The fragment pressed at the edge of her vision now and then—purple, invasive, patient. She kept pushing it back. Not dramatically. Not heroically. Just constantly.

Mai sat at the table.

One hand flat against the surface.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers still came. They always would. Data bleed from nearby chrome. Surveillance chatter from the block outside. Personal networks overlapping like a room full of whispers too fast to separate. She no longer tried to tame all of it. That had stopped working days ago.

Shammy stood by the board.

Not reading it. Not really.

Just being near it.

Her warmth flickered in and out the way bad current flickered through neglected wire. The fixer mask kept trying to settle over her face—efficient, flat, survivable. Underneath it, the person kept surfacing anyway.

Three days since Pacifica.

Three days since the sync tore and failed and came back wrong.

They had still worked.

Recovery runs. Security walks. Small jobs without soul. Enough to keep the lights on and stop the room from becoming a tomb. Nothing that required trust. Nothing that demanded triad instead of mere proximity.

They moved around each other like satellites with damaged orbits.

Close.

Unstable.

Never fully colliding.

The sync was still there.

Mai could feel it sometimes under the noise, like a pattern trapped beneath broken glass.

Present.

Unavailable.

On the fourth morning, Ace made tea.

Proper tea.

Not because the apartment needed it.

Because Shammy did.

The kettle was dented copper and older than most of the building. The leaves came from the forgotten tin at the back of the cabinet. Ace handled both with the kind of precision that looked almost rude if you didn't understand what it meant.

Water just below boiling.

Not guessed.

Known.

She counted the steep in her head.

The fragment pushed once while she waited.

She ignored it.

Not now.

The cups mattered too. She chose them by weight, balance, hand-feel. Practical things. Real things.

Objects with enough honesty in them to survive the room.

When the tea was ready, she carried one cup to Shammy.

"Tea," Ace said.

Not a question.

Shammy turned from the board.

Steam touched her face. Her eyes—electric blue, stormlit even when she was exhausted—shifted to the cup, then to Ace.

Something in her expression broke before it softened.

"You remembered."

Ace held her gaze.

"I remember."

Simple.

Brutal.

True.

Shammy took the cup with both hands.

Her fingers were wrong in ways only people who truly knew her would notice. New calluses. Old burn scars. Chrome repair nicks. Fifty years written into skin she still wore like she was young enough to have no history.

"I made it wrong for thirty years," Shammy said.

Her voice had gone quieter than the room.

"I kept trying to remember how you did it. Then I remembered. Then I doubted I remembered. Then I got tired of disappointing myself every morning." A small, crooked breath. "Year thirty-one, I stopped making it."

Ace said nothing.

That was correct.

Shammy looked down into the cup.

"I kept the tin," she said. "Even after that."

The warmth in her face flickered.

Gone.

Back.

Gone again.

"I kept a lot of things I had no business keeping."

"The chair," Ace said.

There it was.

Shammy shut her eyes once.

"Yes."

The word came out in one piece. Barely.

"For fifty years," Ace said.

"Yes."

No evasion now.

No fixer language.

No professional economy.

Just yes.

Shammy's hands tightened around the cup.

"Every morning for the first twenty years, I thought maybe today." A pause. "Every morning after that, I stopped letting myself think it in words. But the chair stayed." Her mouth twitched once, not enough to become a smile. "Year twenty-three was the worst."

Mai looked up.

The room shifted with that.

Shammy kept her eyes on the tea.

"That was the year I almost threw it out," she said. "The chair. The tin. Half the apartment. The year I nearly sold the place and vanished into some other district where memory didn't know my name." Her hands shook once. "I almost did it."

"But you didn't," Mai said.

Shammy looked at her then.

"No."

"Why."

The question was clean.

No numbers hiding behind it.

Shammy laughed once.

Soft. Bitter. Tired.

"I wish I had an answer that sounded noble." She glanced toward the window, toward the city that had kept her and hollowed her in equal measure. "I didn't do it because when I put my hand on the chair, it still felt real." Her eyes came back to the room. "And if something still feels real long enough, eventually you stop calling it irrational."

Ace leaned one shoulder lightly against the wall.

"Hope isn't probability," she said.

"No," Shammy murmured. "It's worse."

"Harder," Mai corrected.

That got the smallest real warmth from Shammy so far that morning.

"Yeah," she said. "That too."

Then the warmth faltered again.

"I still don't know how to do this," she admitted. "You being here doesn't magically put me back together. It doesn't erase fifty years of being someone else." Her fingers tightened around the cup. "I know how to be a fixer. I know how to be useful. I know how to go flat when I have to. I don't know if I remember how to belong to anything that can hurt me this much."

Ace pushed off the wall.

One step.

That was all.

"You don't have to know yet," she said. "You just have to stay."

Shammy swallowed.

Nodded once.

That was the best available answer.

Mai stayed at the table while the morning stretched around them.

Her hand remained on the metal.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers still broke apart every time she reached too far into them. She had stopped pretending that would change quickly. Night City's electromagnetic filth did not care about elegance. Neither did

grief. Neither did trust.

Shammy sat across from her now, empty cup between both hands, warmth back but fragile.

Ace returned to the window.

Of course she did.

Not to leave them.

To keep the outside from crowding the room any more than it already had.

"The probability that—"

"Don't," Ace said without turning.

Mai stopped.

Not because she had been scolded.

Because she was tired of hearing herself reach for structures that failed the moment they touched something living.

"I'm sorry," she said instead.

The room stilled.

Shammy looked at her carefully.

Mai went on.

"I'm not sorry that the numbers broke. I'm sorry that I let them matter more than you when they did."

That hurt to say.

Good.

Shammy's gaze dropped briefly to the table, then came back up.

"I know," she said.

Mai exhaled slowly.

"I should have felt you breaking in Pacifica."

"You felt too much else."

"That isn't an excuse."

"No," Shammy agreed. "It isn't."

And because the morning had somehow decided honesty was mandatory, Mai nodded.

"No."

Shammy leaned back in the chair by a fraction.

The warmth didn't vanish this time.

"That still isn't the whole story," she said. "You were scattered. The city does that to you. The noise does that to you. You weren't absent." A pause. "Just late."

That was kinder than Mai thought she deserved.

She accepted it anyway.

"I am trying," she said.

"I know."

It mattered that Shammy said it without the mask.

It mattered more that Mai believed her.

The day did not become easier.

It became quieter.

Different thing.

Shammy made food. Functional, competent, unromantic—protein, vegetables, preserved staples from the unit under the counter. She cooked with warmth in her hands again, even when it flickered elsewhere.

Ace remained mostly near the window.

The fragment kept touching the edge of her sight.

She kept refusing it.

Mai stayed at the table longer than she needed to, because the physical world remained easier to trust than the mental one.

By evening the city had changed keys again. Delivery runners replaced office drones. The bass from below deepened. Ads got brighter, more desperate, more intimate in the ways only machine-targeted persuasion could manage.

That was when Ace left the room.

No explanation.

No announcement.

She came back carrying a chair.

It was ugly.

Not antique. Not symbolic. Not one of those miraculous story objects that arrive looking preordained. It was building-storage ugly—mismatched material, scratches down one leg, seat slightly off-level until you leaned on it the right way.

Which made it perfect.

She set it at the table and stepped back.

Mai looked up first.

Then Shammy.

Neither spoke.

Ace did.

“A third chair.”

Shammy stared at it.

The warmth in her face went bright, then frightened by its own brightness.

“Ace—”

“You kept the other one,” Ace said. “I’m not moving it.”

That mattered immediately.

The old chair in the corner remained where it had always been.

Not replaced.

Not rewritten.

Still waiting, in the way objects can wait when humans make them carry years they never asked for.

Ace touched the back of the new chair once.

“This one is for now.”

Not past.

Not grief.

Not fifty years of impossible hope.

Now.

Shammy’s eyes went wet before she could stop them.

Mai saw it.

Did not comment.

Good.

"For the triad," Ace added.

There it was.

No softness in the sentence. No pleading. No performance.

Just an object, placed where an absence had been.

Shammy sat down first this time.

Slowly.

As if she were approaching not furniture but a decision.

Mai followed.

Ace took the third seat.

Three chairs occupied.

The old one remained in the corner.

The room held both truths at once.

That was the point.

For a while, nobody said anything.

The city kept churning outside.

Inside, the table had become the center of something fragile enough that speaking felt dangerous.

Then Mai did what only Mai would do.

"The year twenty-three," she said. "That was when you nearly left."

Shammy nodded.

The warmth did not vanish.

Progress.

"I nearly left Night City," Shammy said. "I nearly sold everything I could sell. I nearly told myself that waiting had become stupidity and that I was too old to keep humiliating myself in private." A crooked breath. "Then morning came and I didn't."

"Because of the chair," Mai said.

"Partly."

"What else."

Shammy's eyes drifted toward the board.

"Work," she said. "Habit. Cowardice. Hope. Pick one depending on the day." Her mouth twitched. "And, eventually, Konrad."

That changed the room.

Ace's gaze sharpened.

Mai stopped moving entirely.

Shammy noticed both reactions.

"Not like that," she said. "He didn't rescue anything. Konrad doesn't do rescue." A beat. "He gave me a possibility. Once. Years ago."

Ace's voice was very quiet when it came.

"What possibility."

Shammy looked at the old chair in the corner.

"To go back."

No one moved.

The city suddenly sounded very far away.

Mai was the first to recover.

"Back where."

Shammy gave her a look that bordered on insult.

"The portal."

There it was.

Not metaphor.

Not memory.

Not hope in abstract.

A road, however cursed, still technically present in the universe.

Ace sat perfectly still.

That was never a good sign.

"What did he offer," she asked.

"A chance," Shammy said. "Not certainty. Not safety. A chance to reopen the line and step through it." Her hands folded together on the table. Tight. "I said no."

Mai inhaled once, slow enough not to show as panic.

“Why.”

Shammy’s eyes did not leave the old chair.

“Because by then I had already lived too much of this life to pretend I could walk away from it cleanly. Because if I went back and found nothing, I’d lose the thing I had left. And because if I went back and found you, I didn’t know whether I could survive asking you to choose.”

That was a harder truth than the chapter had needed.

Good.

Ace looked at her for a long time.

“You still have the option.”

It was not a question.

Shammy nodded once.

“I think so.”

“Konrad.”

“Yes.”

The name sat between them like a blade no one had yet decided to pick up.

Mai’s hand pressed harder against the table.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers tried to come screaming back.

She forced them down.

Not now.

Not like this.

Not before the shape of the choice existed.

Shammy finally looked at both of them.

“I’m not saying we do it,” she said. “I’m saying the door might not be as dead as we thought.”

Ace leaned back slowly in the chair.

The fragment pressed at the edge of her vision.

She ignored it.

For once, even violet had less immediate claim on her than this.

“We decide together,” she said.

Not today.

Not no.

Together.

That mattered more than any answer would have yet.

Shammy nodded.

Mai nodded too, a second later.

The table held.

Three chairs.

One old absence.

One new presence.

One impossible future quietly placed on the table like it had been waiting there all along.

Outside, Night City kept insisting on itself.

Inside, the silence was no longer empty.

It had become a choice.

And for the first time in days, that felt stronger than grief.

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