

Chapter 12: The Probability Gap

The numbers were getting worse.

Mai stood with one hand against the apartment wall and let the failure happen.

Cool metal.

Solid frame.

Real surface.

The grounding still worked.

The calculations didn't.

In her world, the numbers had moved like water down carved channels. Threat into geometry. Geometry into probability. Probability into action. Clean cascades. Elegant compression. A system she trusted because it had earned trust by behaving.

Night City did not behave.

Its electromagnetic filth sat on everything. Chrome ghosts in the walls. Data bleed from nearby apartments. Neural traffic from strangers she would never meet and could not stop feeling. Surveillance systems layered over consumer systems layered over black-market patchwork, each one screaming in a different language, none of them designed to coexist except by brute force and indifference.

The result was noise.

Not beautiful noise.

Not natural chaos.

Ugly, engineered interference.

Every time she tried to force a cascade, the numbers broke into fragments and scattered before they could become useful.

Ace watched her from the window.

"You're doing it again."

Not accusation.

Observation.

Mai pressed harder into the wall.

"The numbers are wrong."

"They've been wrong since we got here."

"That doesn't fix them."

"No," Ace said. "It doesn't."

The fragment pressed at the edge of Ace's vision while she spoke—violet pressure, familiar now in the way recurring danger became familiar. Her shadow flickered once along the glass and she forced it still again.

Mai stared at her hand.

Microscopic grooves in the alloy. Heat from internal lines behind the wall. The building's systems breathing through the material.

Real.

That mattered.

"The probability that I can function with incorrect models—"

"Stop."

Ace turned from the window at last.

Not dramatic.

Just enough.

"You keep trying to turn this city into something legible," she said. "It isn't. Not to you. Maybe not ever."

Mai's jaw tightened.

"I need a working framework."

"You have one."

"The numbers are failing."

"The numbers are," Ace agreed. "You aren't."

That landed harder than it should have.

Mai looked away first.

The numbers tried again. Structural integrity of the building. power-load variance. signal density in adjacent units. probability that Shammy was in the other room listening even if she pretended not to be.

She let them scatter.

That still felt wrong.

Good.

Wrong was becoming useful.

"I don't know how to stop," she said.

"You don't." Ace's voice softened by half a degree, which for her counted. "You let them be wrong

and move anyway.”

Mai exhaled slowly.

“The probability that I can do that—”

Ace’s mouth moved like she almost smiled.

“Is one.”

Shammy was at the board again.

She had been there more often lately, as if the wall could absorb tension just by accepting her hands against it. The strings and pins had stopped looking like a system to Mai and started looking like a scar map. Fifty years made visible only because Shammy had refused to let them dissolve into memory.

When Mai stepped into the room, Shammy did not turn.

“You’re worried,” Mai said.

Shammy gave a short laugh.

“I’m a fixer.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“No.” Shammy’s warmth flickered. “It isn’t.”

She kept one hand against the board, fingertips resting near a cluster of Arasaka markers Mai had stopped pretending not to notice.

“All Arasaka jobs are complicated,” Shammy said. “Even the ones that arrive looking stupid. Especially those.”

“The probability that this one connects to something older is high.”

Shammy didn’t answer immediately.

That was answer enough.

Mai shifted closer, keeping one hand on the wall as she moved.

“The probability that you’re worried because you recognize the shape of it—”

“Stop calculating me.”

The warmth vanished.

Fixer-flat.

Professional.

A wall where a person had been two seconds earlier.

Mai went still.

The old instinct would have pushed. Clarified. Refined the question until it cornered the truth.

She didn't.

Good.

After a moment, Shammy exhaled and some of the warmth came back.

"Sorry," she said.

"You aren't."

"No," Shammy admitted. "Not really."

They stood in that honesty for a moment.

Then Shammy turned from the board and leaned against the edge of the window frame instead.

"Year thirty-one," she said.

Mai looked at her.

There it was again—the number that kept surfacing whenever Arasaka's shadow lengthened in the room.

"I had a job then," Shammy said. "Transport. Easy on paper. Experienced crew. Clear route. Decent intelligence. Everything a clean model would call survivable." Her mouth flattened. "It still almost killed us."

"What changed."

"Someone made a decision that no sane model would have predicted," Shammy said. "Someone panicked. Someone lied. Someone tried to save themselves by altering one small thing in motion and that small thing spread through everything else."

Mai listened.

No probabilities. No interruption.

"The numbers were fine," Shammy said. "Reality was not."

The sentence hit somewhere deeper than analysis.

Mai felt it settle into the same place the sync lived when it wasn't broken.

"You survived."

"Yes."

"The team survived."

"Most of it."

Shammy's warmth flickered low and grim.

"That taught me something useful," she said. "Not that planning is worthless. Planning matters. But the gap between plan and event? That's where people either trust each other or die trying to replace trust with math."

Mai looked down at her own hand against the wall.

Cool. Solid. Real.

The probability gap.

She hated how quickly the phrase formed.

She hated even more that it was correct.

"You're saying the failure point is not the model," she said quietly. "It's the distance between model and contact."

Shammy looked at her for a long moment.

Then nodded once.

"Yeah," she said. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

That night, the apartment felt smaller.

Not claustrophobic.

Charged.

The three chairs at the table made the room more honest than it wanted to be. The old chair still sat in the corner, carrying its impossible years. The board watched from the wall. Outside, the city kept layering noise on noise until silence became a decision instead of a default.

Mai sat at the table with both hands around a ceramic cup.

Warm.

Solid.

Real.

Gunpowder green this time. Not soycaff. Shammy had made it without comment and set it in front of her like an instruction.

Drink. Ground. Stay.

The numbers still moved through her head in broken pieces. Probability of success. Probability of betrayal. Probability that Shammy knew more about the intercept than she intended to say. Probability that Ace's fragment would press harder under pressure. Probability that the sync would hold long enough to matter.

Useless.

Not false.

Just useless.

Shammy sat across from her.

Ace stayed at the window until the last possible second, then came to the table too. That mattered more than if she had spoken.

"The job is tomorrow," Shammy said.

Not briefing voice.

Not entirely.

Close, but not fully hidden behind it.

Mai nodded once.

"The numbers are still wrong."

"I know."

"I don't trust them."

"Good," Ace said.

Mai looked up.

Ace met her gaze directly.

"If you still trusted them here, *that* would worry me."

That might have been the first actually helpful thing anyone had said to her about the problem.

Shammy saw the shift in her face and leaned forward slightly.

"You're not losing your gift," she said. "You're losing your old environment. Different thing."

Mai stared at her.

The tea cooled slightly between her hands.

"I don't know if that makes it better."

"It makes it true."

Silence.

Then Mai said the thing she had been resisting for days.

"I am losing confidence."

No numbers attached.

No percentage.

No shield.

Shammy's expression changed immediately.

The warmth didn't flicker out this time. It moved closer.

"Yeah," she said. "I know."

That almost undid Mai on the spot.

Almost.

"The calculations don't hold," Mai said. "They fail halfway through. I can't complete structures I used to build instinctively. I keep reaching for certainty and getting fragments back."

"The city is dirty," Shammy said. "Systemically. Electromagnetically. Socially. Morally. Everything here bleeds into everything else." A tiny shrug. "Maybe your numbers aren't failing. Maybe they're refusing to lie to you."

That settled hard.

Ace spoke without looking away from the table.

"The sync isn't clean either."

No one missed the comparison.

Mai's fingers tightened around the cup.

"No."

"But it's there."

"Yes."

"Then work with that."

Mai let out a breath she had not realized she was holding.

Work with the incomplete.

Work with the distorted.

Work with what remained true when the formal structures failed.

That was uglier than she wanted.

It was also probably real.

She did not sleep much.

When she closed her eyes, the city kept happening inside her skull—signal noise, phantom frequencies, fragments of thought from systems she could feel but not parse. Probabilities rose and collapsed before they reached completion. Every time she tried to force them into order, the gap opened again.

The probability gap.

The place where model ended and contact began.

Sometime after midnight she stopped trying to solve it and simply pressed her hand against the bed frame until the metal pressed back.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

That was enough for that hour.

Across the apartment, Ace remained awake at the window, fragment pressure rising and falling in rhythms only she seemed to hear. Shammy moved once in the kitchen, once in the hall, once near the board, and then went still again.

Three people not sleeping.

Three people still in the room.

The triad was not functioning properly.

But it had not scattered.

That had to count for something.

Morning came with neon pretending to be dawn.

The city never really reset. It only changed masks. Night workers going home, day workers pretending they had chosen their own schedules, vendors opening, ads brightening, surveillance systems shifting into new traffic patterns.

Shammy stood at the board making final adjustments that probably mattered and maybe didn't. Ace stood by the window pushing the fragment down each time it rose. Mai sat at the table with one hand flat against the surface.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

"The numbers are still wrong," she said.

Shammy didn't look at her.

"I know."

"I don't think they'll be right by the time we leave."

"No."

Mai waited.

Shammy turned then.

The warmth was there.

Tired, but there.

"Today is not about right," she said. "It's about present. We go in with what holds. If the numbers hold, use them. If they break, let them break. Use the sync. Use your eyes. Use us."

Mai nodded slowly.

Not because she liked the instruction.

Because she believed it.

Ace moved off the window and came to the table.

The fragment pushed once, briefly visible in the darkening violet at the edge of her gaze.

She pushed back.

"What matters," Ace said, "is not whether your model survives contact. What matters is whether *you* do."

Mai almost corrected the structure of that sentence.

Didn't.

More progress.

Shammy gave a small, tired nod.

"That too."

Mai looked at both of them.

The numbers tried one last time—success, failure, injury, trust, Arasaka, unknown client, compromised truth, incomplete disclosure.

She let them scatter.

Underneath them, something simpler remained.

The triad.

Here.

Together.

Not elegant.

Not solved.

But present.

“I’m ready,” she said.

No percentages.

No caveat.

Shammy’s warmth sharpened into something like pride.

“I know.”

Ace took that answer as sufficient.

So did Mai.

They stood.

Three chairs pushed back from the table.

The old chair still waiting in the corner.

The board still holding its half-century of names.

The city still offering noise where clarity should have been.

None of that changed.

But something had.

Mai no longer needed the numbers to be clean before she moved.

She hated that.

It was still growth.

They left the apartment together.

And the probability gap came with them.

Not as failure.

As terrain.

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