

## Chapter 14: Shammy's Past

The name came up again.

Martinez. Daniel Martinez. Eleven years of partnership. Twelve years since his death.

Mai found Shammy at the board. Again. Looking at the strings. The connections. The network she had built over fifty years. The apartment was dark except for the glow of the neon outside—chromatic blue shifting to copper orange as an advertisement cycled through its sequence. The strings cast shadows on the wall. Physical threads connecting physical pins. Analog in a digital city. The kind of record that survived when everything electronic failed. The kind of memory that couldn't be corrupted or deleted or sold. The kind of persistence that came from someone who had learned, over fifty years, that digital records could be lost, stolen, erased—but string on a board remained.

The board had grown since Mai first saw it. New strings. New connections. The Arasaka job had added layers—new pins, new names, new lines connecting to existing networks. But Martinez's name was still there. Crossed out. A thread that ended but didn't disappear. A story that had stopped but was still remembered. The black thread that represented a partnership that had lasted eleven years and ended twelve years ago. The particular weight of a name that still mattered, even in death.

The crossed-out name. The line through it. The memory that Mai could see in the way Shammy's hand pressed against the board. In the way her warmth flickered and died when she looked at that name. In the way her storm-gradient eyes went flat and distant. The particular heaviness of someone looking at something they couldn't change but couldn't stop looking at. The particular quality of grief that had settled into something else—not forgotten, not resolved, just carried.

Shammy's warmth flickered. Gone. The professional mask appeared—the one Mai had learned to recognize. The fixer's distance. The particular quality of someone who had learned to function while carrying something too heavy to name.

"It's on the board."

"It's crossed out." Mai's voice remained flat. Analytical. The way it always was when she was trying to understand something that resisted calculation. "He's dead. You don't need to—"

"I know he's dead." Shammy's voice was sharp. Not the warmth. Not the teasing. The professional mask shattered like chrome under impact. Underneath was something else. Something raw. Something that had been buried for twelve years. Something that had shaped every year since. "I was there when he died."

The words hung in the air. The apartment held them. The neon flickered. The strings cast shadows. The electromagnetic fields hummed at the edge of Mai's awareness. But everything seemed to pause—the particular quality of a moment that carried weight.

Mai's hand pressed harder against the wall. The numbers scattered. Reforming. Scattering again. But she could still see. Still observe. Still feel the weight in Shammy's voice. The particular heaviness of something carried alone. The particular quality of grief that had never been shared.

"You were there."

"I was there." Shammy's warmth was gone. Professional mask trying to rebuild. The fixer's distance trying to reassert itself. "Arasaka job. Year thirty-one. Something went wrong. I got out. He didn't."

“The probability that—”

“Stop calculating.” Shammy's voice was sharp. “I know the probability. Every job has a probability of going wrong. Every partnership has a probability of ending. I know. I've calculated. I've recalculated. I've—” She stopped. Her hands were shaking. The tremor that came from something held too long. Something never released. “I've done the math. It doesn't help. The numbers don't make it easier. They don't make the weight lighter.”

Mai's hand pressed against the wall. The numbers scattered. But she could see Shammy's hands. The shaking. The particular kind of tremor that came from something held too long. The particular quality of someone who had carried something alone for twelve years and was finally being asked to put it down.

“You were there.”

“I was there.” Shammy's warmth flickered. Gone. Back. “I held his hand. I watched him die. I—” She stopped. Her hands were shaking. The raw was there now. The wound that had never fully closed. “I couldn't do anything. The job went wrong. The security was triple what we expected. The exit was compromised. And Daniel—” She stopped again. The tears were close. The particular heaviness of someone who had learned to function while carrying something too heavy to name. “Daniel stayed behind. To cover my exit. He said he'd be right behind me. He said—” She stopped. “He said he'd be right behind me.”

The apartment was quiet. The city hummed outside. Transport drones. Bass from the club. The electric pulse of Night City. Inside, the silence was different. Weighted. The particular quality of a space holding something that had never been spoken.

Mai's hand pressed against the wall. The numbers scattered. Reforming. Scattering again. The probabilities cascaded—but this time, she pushed them aside. Focused on Shammy. On the shaking hands. On the rawness.

“I'm not calculating grief,” she said. Her voice was flat. “I'm calculating that you were there. That you held his hand. That you couldn't do anything.”

Shammy's warmth flickered. Gone. Back.

“Yes,” she said. Her voice was quiet. The raw was there. The buried thing. “I was there. I held his hand. I couldn't—” She stopped. “I couldn't save him. And I've been carrying that for twelve years. And I—” She stopped. “I've been carrying that alone.”

Mai's hand pressed against the wall. Cool. Solid. Real.

“Not alone,” she said. Her voice was flat. “You're not alone.”

Shammy's warmth came back. Slowly. Like something that had been buried and was now climbing to the surface.

“I know,” she said. “I know I'm not alone anymore. But for twelve years—” She stopped. Her hands were still shaking. “For twelve years, I was. And the people who understood—who knew him—who remembered—” She stopped. “They're gone. Or moved away. Or forgot. And I was the only one who carried it.”

—

Ace moved from the window.

Her shadow flickered against the neon. The fragment pushed at the edge of her vision—purple, the shape of break, the shape of hurt—and she pushed back. Focused on the sync. On the triad. On Shammy's hands shaking.

The apartment smelled like stale soycaff and copper. The board cast shadows. The strings caught the light.

"Twelve years is a long time," Ace said. Her voice was quiet. Imperative. The kind of voice that cut through noise.

"Fifty years is longer." Shammy's warmth flickered. "But the twelve years after Daniel—" She stopped. Her hands pressed against the board. "The twelve years after Daniel were harder than the thirty-eight before. Because I had someone. And then I didn't. And the hole—" She stopped. "The hole was bigger than the years before."

Mai's hand pressed against the wall. The numbers scattered. But she held on.

"The probability that grief—"

"Stop." Shammy's voice was quiet. "Stop calculating. Just be here."

Mai's hand pressed against the wall.

"I'm here," she said. "The probability that—"

"I know." Shammy's warmth settled. "I know you're here. I know you're trying. I know—"

"We're here." Ace's voice was quiet. Her violet eyes were steady. "All of us. The triad."

Shammy's warmth came back. All the way. The mask was down. The professional distance was gone.

"The triad," she said. Her voice was quiet. "Rusty. Imperfect. But here."

"Yes." Mai's voice was flat. "The probability that we're here—"

"Is one." Shammy's voice was warm. "I know."

—

The kitchen was small. Functional. A fixer's kitchen. Shammy made tea. Not proper tea—not like Ace made—but the kind of functional soycaff that kept you awake during long stakeouts.

The steam rose. The neon flickered outside. The city hummed.

They sat at the table. Three chairs. Three people. The triad.

Shammy's warmth was back. Settled. The raw was still there, underneath, but the warmth was covering it now. Like a wound that had been opened and was now being carefully bandaged. Not healed. Not forgotten. But acknowledged.

Mai's hand pressed against the table. The numbers scattered. But she could feel the surface. Cool. Solid. Real.

Ace's shadow flickered. The purple pushed. She pushed back.

"Tell us about him," Ace said. Her voice was quiet. Not a question. A statement. The kind of imperative that invited rather than demanded.

Shammy's warmth flickered. The mask tried to rise. She pushed it down.

"Daniel," she said. Her voice was quiet. "He was a fixer too. We worked together for eleven years. He was—" She stopped. The warmth flickered. "He was good at the parts I was bad at. The networking. The talking. The—" She stopped. Her hands wrapped around the soycaff. "He made friends everywhere. I made contacts. He found jobs. I ran them. We were—" She stopped. "We were partners."

The neon flickered outside. An advertisement for body modification clinics cycled through its sequence. Chrome enhancements. Neural interfaces. The promise of becoming something more than human. The city pulsed with its endless promise of transformation, of improvement, of becoming something other than what you were.

"He laughed a lot," Shammy continued. Her voice was quieter now. The raw underneath. "He made jokes during jobs. During stakeouts. During—" She stopped. Her hands tightened around the cup. "He made everything feel lighter. Even in Night City. Even when things were hard." Her warmth flickered. "I was always the serious one. Always focused on the job. Always—" She stopped. "He balanced me. Made me remember that there was more than work. More than survival."

Mai's hand pressed against the table. The numbers scattered. But she pushed them aside.

"The probability that—"

"Stop calculating." Shammy's warmth was back. "I know the probability. I know partnerships end. I know—" She stopped. Her voice caught. "I know the numbers. I just—" She stopped. "I just miss him. And I've been missing him alone for twelve years."

The apartment held the weight. The neon flickered. The strings cast shadows.

Mai's hand pressed against the table. Cool. Solid. Real.

"You don't have to miss him alone anymore," she said. Her voice was flat. "We're here."

"I know." Shammy's warmth settled. "I know you're here. But—" She stopped. "But missing someone doesn't stop just because people are here. It just—" She stopped. "It just becomes less lonely."

Ace's shadow flickered. The purple pushed. She pushed back.

"Year thirty-one," she said. Her voice was quiet. "What happened?"

Shammy's warmth flickered. Gone. Back. Her hands tightened around the cup.

"Arasaka job," she said. Her voice was quiet. The raw underneath. "We were supposed to intercept something. Simple. Standard. A data shard. In and out." She stopped. "It wasn't simple. It wasn't standard. The security was triple what we expected. The exit was compromised. Daniel—" She stopped. Her hands were shaking. "Daniel stayed behind to cover my exit. He said he'd be right behind me. He said—" She stopped. "He said he'd be right behind me."

Mai's hand pressed against the table. The numbers scattered. But she focused on Shammy's voice. On

the shaking hands. On the raw underneath.

“He wasn't right behind you.”

“No.” Shammy's warmth was gone. “He wasn't right behind me. He was—” She stopped. “He was dead before I cleared the perimeter. I didn't know. I thought he was behind me. I thought—” She stopped. The tears were close. She blinked them back. “I thought he was behind me.”

Ace's shadow flickered.

“You couldn't have known.”

“I should have known.” Shammy's warmth flickered. “I should have calculated. I should have—” She stopped. Her hands were shaking. “I should have done something different. I don't know what. But I should have—”

“The probability that—” Mai started.

“Stop calculating.” Shammy's voice was quiet. “I know the probability. I know I couldn't have known. I know—” She stopped. “I know it wasn't my fault. But knowing doesn't help. Missing him doesn't stop just because I know the probability.”

Mai's hand pressed against the table. The numbers scattered. But she could feel the surface.

“Missing someone isn't about probability,” she said. Her voice was flat. “It's about—” She stopped. The numbers scattered. “It's about being here. Even when the probability doesn't make sense. Even when the numbers are wrong. Even when—” She stopped. “It's about being here.”

Shammy's warmth came back. All the way.

“Yes,” she said. “It's about being here.”

—

They sat in silence.

The three chairs. The board. The crossed-out name. The empty chair in the corner—still there, still waiting, still holding fifty years of hope and doubt and the particular weight of keeping something for people who might never come back.

But now there was a third chair at the table. Mismatched. Different. Present.

Shammy's warmth was back. Settled. The raw was still there, but it was shared now. Not buried alone. Not carried in silence.

Mai's hand pressed against the table. The numbers scattered. But she could feel the surface. Cool. Solid. Real.

Ace's shadow flickered. The purple pushed. She pushed back.

“He sounds like he was good,” Ace said. Her voice was quiet.

“He was.” Shammy's warmth settled. “He was good. And I miss him. And—” She stopped. “And now you're here. And I don't have to miss him alone.”

Mai's hand pressed against the table.

“The probability that grief is shared—”

“Is not about probability.” Shammy's voice was warm. “It's about being here. It's about—” She stopped. “It's about sharing. Even when the sharing doesn't change anything. Even when the grief is still there. It's about not being alone.”

Ace's shadow flickered.

“We're not alone,” she said. Her voice was quiet. “The fragment pushes. The numbers scatter. The warmth flickers. But we're not alone.”

“No.” Shammy's warmth settled. “We're not alone.”

Mai's hand pressed against the table.

“We're not alone,” she said. Her voice was flat. “The probability that—”

“Is one.” Shammy's voice was warm. “I know.”

—

The night passed in fragments.

Shammy slept. For the first time in days, she slept. The raw had been shared. The buried thing had been opened and bandaged. Not healed. Not forgotten. But acknowledged. Held.

Mai sat at the table. Her hand pressed against the surface. The numbers scattered. But she could feel the surface. Cool. Solid. Real. The electromagnetic fields of the city buzzed at the edge of her awareness—but she was learning to filter. To let the noise be noise. To find the signals that mattered.

Ace stood at the window. Her shadow flickered. The fragment pushed. Purple. The shape of break. She pushed back. Focused on the room behind her. On Shammy sleeping. On Mai at the table. On the three chairs. The board. The crossed-out name.

The empty chair in the corner.

But now there was a difference. The empty chair wasn't empty anymore. There was a third chair at the table. Three chairs. Three people.

Together.

—

Morning came.

The neon had faded to gray. The city was waking. Transport drones rattled past. The bass from the club had stopped. The morning light was diffuse, filtered through smog and chrome and the particular quality of Night City air.

Shammy stood by the window. Her warmth was back. Settled. The raw was still there, underneath, but the surface was calmer now. She looked at the city. The life she'd built. The network on the board. The contacts. The strings.

"Daniel would have liked you," she said. Her voice was quiet. Warm. "He would have—" She stopped. Her hands were still. "He would have said you were too serious. Too focused. And then he would have made a joke. And you would have—" She stopped. "You would have pretended not to laugh. But you would have. Eventually."

Ace's shadow flickered. The fragment pushed. She pushed back.

"He sounds like he was good at the parts you were bad at."

"He was." Shammy's warmth settled. "He was. And I was good at the parts he was bad at. That's why we worked." She stopped. "That's why it hurt when he—" She stopped. "That's why I missed him. We fit. And then we didn't. And the hole—" She stopped. "The hole was shaped like him."

Mai's hand pressed against the table. The numbers scattered. But she held on.

"The probability that—"

"Stop calculating." Shammy's voice was warm. "But I know. The probability doesn't matter. The missing matters. The sharing matters. The—" She stopped. "The being here matters."

Mai's hand pressed against the table.

"I'm here," she said. Her voice was flat. "The probability that—"

"I know." Shammy's warmth settled. "I know you're here."

—

The day began.

The job was tomorrow. The triad was still broken. The sync was still rusty. The fragment was still pushing. The numbers were still scattered. The warmth was still flickering.

But Shammy wasn't alone anymore.

And for the first time in twelve years, she didn't have to carry it alone.

The crossed-out name on the board. The memory of a partner who stayed behind. The weight of fifty years.

It was shared now. Not erased. Not fixed. Just held by more than one person.

And for now, that was enough.

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