

## Chapter 15: Year Twenty-Three

Shammy finally told them.

Not the outline.

Not the version built for survival.

Not the cleanly shaped report a fixer could give without bleeding into it.

The real thing.

Year twenty-three.

The year she almost stopped waiting.

They were in the apartment.

Three chairs at the table.

The old chair still in the corner.

The board on the wall carrying fifty years of names and threads and damage too organized to call chaos.

And now—

the notebooks.

Boxes of them.

Stacked, worn, handled, saved.

The room felt different at night. During the day the neon outside was background radiation—bright, constant, easy to dismiss if you had enough grief already. At night it came forward. Red from body-mod clinics. Blue from insurance lies. Orange from food that had never been food. Violet from entertainment designed to blur appetite and loneliness into one purchasable thing.

The colors moved across the walls in slow sequences.

A city breathing through ads.

Mai could hear the electromagnetic filth beneath it all—the low hum of neighboring implants, the data chatter from surrounding apartments, the infrastructural throb of a place built on badly cooperating systems and called efficient because no one had a better word left.

But tonight even that sat further back.

Because the notebooks were on the table.

And Shammy was ready.

“Year twenty-three,” Shammy said.

Her voice was quiet enough that the city had to work to interrupt it.

Ace stood near the window, shadow held close by force, the fragment pressing at the edge of vision and being denied again and again with the kind of stubbornness that had become indistinguishable from identity.

Mai sat at the table with one hand flat against the surface.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

Shammy sat in her own chair.

Not the old waiting chair in the corner.

The one at the table.

That mattered.

“Daniel was alive then,” she said. “We were still working together. Still partners. I was still doing jobs, still building contacts, still pretending that waiting and functioning were not in direct conflict.” Her mouth shifted once, not enough to become humor. “I had turned hope into routine because routine hurts less.”

The room stayed quiet.

Good.

No one rushed her.

“No one knew about the chair except Daniel,” she said. “Not really. People knew I kept old things. People knew I was strange in ways Night City could tolerate because I was useful. But Daniel knew I was waiting.”

Ace’s voice came low from the window.

“And he let you.”

Shammy looked at her.

“Yes.”

Not defensive.

Not embarrassed.

Just true.

“He never told me to stop,” she said. “Never told me to move on. Never asked me to choose between being his partner and being haunted.” A pause. “That was one of the reasons I trusted him.”

Mai listened without reaching for numbers.

That too mattered.

Then Shammy said the thing that changed the room.

“One morning I woke up and I couldn’t remember your faces.”

No one moved.

The city outside kept happening.

Inside, the sentence held.

“I knew there had been two of you,” Shammy said. “I knew I was waiting. I knew the chair meant something. But when I tried to picture you—nothing clear. Fragments. Motion. Color. Impressions.” Her hands tightened against the arms of the chair. “Not faces.”

Ace did not speak.

Her shadow tightened once against the wall.

Mai’s fingers pressed harder into the table.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

“I thought memory had finally won,” Shammy said. “Or time. Or this city. Pick a poison.”

The warmth in her face flickered, but did not vanish.

“That was the year I almost stopped,” she said. “Not because I stopped loving you. Because I stopped being sure I had any right to keep loving something I could no longer see clearly.”

That one hurt.

Good.

It should.

Mai almost spoke.

Stopped herself.

Shammy noticed.

And went on.

"I panicked," she said.

No elegance. No self-protection. No fixer polish.

"I went to the chair. Stood over it like it had personally betrayed me. I remember thinking: if I can't remember them, then this is insanity. This is ritual without object. Grief without body. Waiting without destination."

Her laugh came out small and rough.

"I nearly sold the apartment that week."

Ace turned from the window fully now.

"You nearly left."

"Yes."

"Night City."

"Yes."

"The chair."

"Yes."

Shammy looked at the old chair in the corner as she said it.

That made the sentence heavier.

"I nearly threw the chair out," she said. "Not because I stopped caring. Because I thought if memory had gone, then keeping the object was just vanity. A performance no one would ever witness."

"You didn't," Mai said.

"No."

"Why."

Shammy looked down at the notebooks.

For a long moment it seemed she might not answer.

Then she reached out, rested one hand on the top one, and said:

"Because I found myself trying to describe you before I lost more."

The sentence took a second to unfold properly.

Mai looked at the boxes.

Ace did too.

"The notebooks," Ace said.

"Yes."

Shammy nodded once.

"I couldn't hold your faces," she said. "So I started writing everything else. The way Ace moved. The angle of Mai's shoulders when she was about to tell me I was wrong. The kinds of silence you kept. The weapons. The rhythm. The things memory was dropping one edge at a time." Her voice lowered further. "I wrote because I was afraid that if I didn't, then one morning I'd wake up and have nothing left but a chair and a feeling."

Mai's hand shifted from the table to the nearest notebook.

The cover was worn soft.

Handled often.

Kept.

"You wrote all of that."

"I wrote everything I could reach." Shammy swallowed once. "Even when I wasn't sure it was accurate anymore. Even when I thought maybe I was rebuilding you from longing instead of memory. I wrote it anyway."

Ace stepped closer to the table now.

The fragment pressed once.

She pushed back without looking away from Shammy.

"You kept us alive in language."

Shammy laughed again.

This time the sound almost broke.

"I kept trying."

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Mai opened the nearest notebook.

The pages were dense with careful handwriting. Not ornamental. Not diary-pretty. Functional, almost clinical in places, until it wasn't. Descriptions. Fragments. reconstructed details. Observations written by someone terrified that observation might be all she had left one day.

Mai traced a line with one fingertip.

Not reading out loud yet.

Just seeing.

“You wrote the way I think,” she said after a moment.

Shammy nodded.

“I wrote the way you arranged a room before the room knew it was dangerous.”

Mai turned another page.

“You wrote the way Ace stands when the fragment is pushing.”

Ace stilled.

Shammy’s warmth flickered.

“I wrote everything that looked like it might matter later.”

Later.

Fifty years of later.

Mai kept turning pages.

There were sketches too. Rough, unfinished, good enough to pin memory in place when words failed. Angles of posture. Notes in margins. Corrections made years apart in different inks. Entire sections where Shammy had obviously argued with herself across time about whether a remembered detail was true or wanted.

That hit Mai harder than the grief had.

Not because grief was smaller.

Because this was method.

Persistence.

Memory under siege refusing to surrender cleanly.

“The probability of memory accuracy after—”

She stopped.

Closed her eyes once.

Started again.

“It doesn’t matter if every detail is exact,” she said.

Shammy looked at her.

“No,” she said quietly. “It doesn’t.”

“What matters is that you kept trying to preserve us.”

There.

No percentages.

No model.

Just that.

Shammy's expression changed in a way Mai had stopped trying to categorize.

"Yes," she said.

That was enough.

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Ace picked up another notebook.

Her movements were precise, almost gentle, as if the pages might become hostile if handled carelessly.

She read in silence for a while.

Then:

"You wrote about the fragment."

Shammy didn't look away from her.

"Yes."

Ace turned the notebook slightly.

There, in Shammy's hand from years ago:

*Violet at the edge again. Not weakness. Warning. She gets quieter when it's bad.*

Ace stared at the line longer than she should have.

The fragment pressed, sensing attention.

She pushed back.

"You noticed more than I thought."

"I noticed everything I was afraid to lose."

The room held that sentence carefully.

Ace closed the notebook.

Not fast.

Not slow.

"I was fighting it even then."

“Yes.”

“And you knew.”

“Yes.”

“And you stayed.”

At that, Shammy’s face went raw again.

“Yes.”

No explanation attached.

None needed.

Ace set the notebook down and leaned both hands on the table, looking not at the pages but at Shammy herself.

“You were waiting for us,” she said. “And at the same time trying to preserve us from your own forgetting.”

Shammy nodded once.

“That was the worst year,” she said. “Not because I almost threw the chair out. Because I realized love doesn’t stop memory from decaying. It just makes the decay crueler.”

Mai inhaled slowly.

The city outside washed the room in blue, then red, then blue again.

Shammy’s voice stayed quiet.

“I thought if I forgot your faces, maybe the waiting would become easier.” A short, humorless smile. “It didn’t. It just became uglier.”

Ace’s shadow shifted once against the wall.

“But you stayed,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You kept the chair.”

“Yes.”

“You wrote.”

“Yes.”

“And now we’re here.”

That finally broke something.

Not violently.

Not theatrically.

Just enough.

Shammy bent forward, one hand over her eyes, the other pressed against the notebook as if it were the only thing keeping her in the chair.

“Yes,” she said, and her voice gave out on the word. “Yes.”

---

Mai moved first this time.

Not because she had solved anything.

Because presence had become more important than elegance.

She rose, crossed around the table, and put one hand on Shammy’s shoulder.

Not analysis.

Not an experiment in comfort.

Just contact.

Shammy did not flinch away.

Ace came next, slower, and stopped beside them.

No touching.

Her version of closeness remained calibrated differently.

Still, the triad gathered around the sentence none of them needed spoken again:

*I almost forgot your faces and kept waiting anyway.*

That was the core of it.

Not the chair.

Not the notebooks.

Not even year twenty-three itself.

The core was this:

Shammy had remained loyal to a reality she could no longer fully picture.

And that was both beautiful and terrible enough to hurt everyone in the room.

After a while Shammy lifted her head.

Her eyes were wet. She did not try to hide it.

"I kept waiting," she said. "Even when I couldn't remember clearly. Even when I thought I was humiliating myself. Even when I thought hope had rotted into ritual." She looked between both of them. "And now you're here, and I don't know what to do with the fact that I was right."

Ace answered that one.

"You don't have to do anything with it tonight."

Shammy let out a breath that almost became a laugh.

"Convenient."

"True."

Mai's hand remained on her shoulder.

"The probability that—"

She stopped herself.

Shammy actually smiled then. Small, but real.

"Go on."

Mai looked at both of them.

Then said, "The fact that we came back is not the point. The point is that you endured the gap."

Shammy stared at her.

That landed exactly where it needed to.

"Yes," she said after a moment. "Yes. That."

---

They stayed at the table long after the city shifted into its later, thinner night.

The notebooks remained spread out between them.

Page after page of resistance against erasure.

Page after page proving that waiting had not been passive. It had been labor. Quiet, humiliating, stubborn labor.

Ace read until the fragment pushed hard enough that she had to set the pages down and return to the window for a while.

Mai kept one notebook open in front of her, fingers resting lightly on the margin, not because the page grounded her physically but because the act of touching the record made the history harder to dismiss as abstraction.

Shammy sat between them with the strange, unsteady calm of someone who had finally taken a weight off one shelf of herself and was waiting to find out what collapsed without it.

Nothing collapsed.

That was the surprise.

The room held.

Three chairs.

The old chair still in the corner.

The board on the wall.

The notebooks on the table.

The triad, not fixed, not clean, but together inside the truth instead of circling it.

And for the first time in fifty years, Shammy did not have to be the sole witness to her own waiting.

That changed everything.

Not by healing it.

By sharing it.

---

When she finally slept, she slept without defending the memory.

That alone made the room feel different.

Mai stayed awake a while longer, one notebook open in front of her.

Ace stood at the window, fragment pushing, refusing it in measured breaths.

The city kept cycling through its lies outside.

Inside, the pages remained.

Fifty years of notes.

Fifty years of descriptions.

Fifty years of refusing to let forgetting become surrender.

And now they were no longer relics.

They were evidence.

Of love.

Of damage.

Of endurance.

Of a girl who had waited so long that memory itself had tried to bargain her out of it.

Morning would still come.

The job would still remain.

The fragment would still press.

The numbers would still scatter.

The warmth would still flicker.

None of that disappeared.

But the weight was no longer singular.

And that, for now, was enough.

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