

## Chapter 16: The Portal Question

The lead came from an unlikely source.

Viktor. At the clinic. After a job that had gone slightly wrong—nothing serious, just a scrape that needed tending, a moment of inattention during combat when the fragment had pushed too hard and Ace had been a fraction too slow, her katanas catching the edge of a security drone's warning shot instead of deflecting it cleanly. The kind of mistake that happened when the fragment pushed. The kind of mistake that reminded them all that the fight was never over.

The clinic smelled like antiseptic and copper. The antiseptic was familiar—sterile, clinical, the kind of smell that existed in every healing space across every world. The copper was not—Night City's particular blend of blood and chrome and things that shouldn't be in a body. The particular quality of a place where bodies were modified, repaired, enhanced, and sometimes just barely saved. The electromagnetic fields from the medical equipment buzzed against Mai's awareness, scattering her calculations the moment they entered. Diagnostic scanners. Neural interfaces. Chrome installation rigs. The equipment hummed with frequencies she couldn't filter—the particular buzz of technology designed to interface with flesh, to bridge the gap between human and machine.

"I heard something," Viktor said. His voice was gruff. The particular gruffness of someone who had seen too much and had learned to function anyway. His chrome eyes moved over Ace's arm, assessing the cut, the healing, the chrome tools he'd used to close it. The wound was clean. The fragment had pushed, but the damage was minimal. Another scar on a body that had many. Another reminder that the fight was constant. "About the portal. About how you got here."

Mai's hand pressed against the examination table. Cool. Metal. Grounding. The numbers scattered. But she could feel the surface. Solid. Real. The particular texture that grounded her when the calculations failed.

"Heard what?" Shammy's warmth flickered. Professional mode. The fixer emerging. Her voice was flat. Controlled. The kind of voice she used when she was negotiating, assessing, calculating. The mask that appeared whenever the conversation turned serious.

Viktor's hands moved over the equipment. Cleaning. Sorting. The movements were automatic, practiced—the kind of movements that came from decades of work. The kind of movements that said this is routine, this is normal, this is just another day in a clinic that sees too many injuries. His chrome eyes moved over her, then away, then back. The particular assessment of someone deciding how much to say.

"There's talk," he said. His voice was gruff. "About a way back. About a door that opens both ways." He paused. The gruffness cracked slightly. "About the possibility of going home."

Ace's shadow flickered. The purple pushed. She pushed back. Focused on the words. On the possibility. On the question that had been sitting in the back of her mind since they arrived. The question that had been there since the portal. The question that none of them had spoken aloud.

"A door."

"A door." Viktor's chrome eyes met hers. The particular quality of someone who had seen too much and had learned to recognize when people needed to know something. "I don't know if it's real. But the talk is there. In the netrunner circles. Someone's looking for a way to open a portal that goes both ways." He paused. His chrome eyes moved over all three of them. The assessment was different now.

Not just medical. Something else. “The kind of door that lets you go back. If you want.”

Shammy's warmth was gone. Professional. The wall that appeared whenever the conversation turned serious. The mask that covered whatever she was feeling. The fixer's distance that kept her functional when things got personal.

“Who's looking?”

“Names I don't know. Contacts I don't have.” Viktor's voice was gruff. But underneath, there was something else. The particular quality of someone who wanted to help but didn't know how. “But the talk is there. And if it's real—” He stopped. His chrome eyes moved over all three of them. “If it's real, you might be able to go back. To wherever you came from. If you want.” He paused again. The gruff exterior cracked further. “Some people want to go back. Some people don't. That's not my business. But if you want to know—” He stopped. “The talk is there.”

Mai's hand pressed against the table. The numbers scattered. Reforming. Scattering again. The probability of going back. The probability of a door that opened both ways. The probability of a choice that hadn't existed before. The calculations cascaded—the particular cascade that came when new variables appeared and the context shifted.

“Stop calculating.” Ace's voice was quiet. Not commanding. Not demanding. Just quiet. The kind of quiet that came from focus. “We need to find out more.”

—

Shammy made calls.

The board came alive. Strings were pulled. Contacts were reached. The network she had built over fifty years started producing results. The apartment was filled with her voice—professional, controlled, the fixer negotiating for information instead of jobs.

Names. Locations. Rumors. The talk was there. Someone was looking. Someone was researching. Someone was trying to open a door that went both ways.

Mai watched. The numbers scattered. The context was wrong. But Shammy's network—fifty years of contacts, partners, favors—started producing information. The strings on the board connected. The web expanded. The network produced.

Shammy stood by the board. Her warmth flickered. Gone. Back. The fixer's mask appeared and disappeared. Her fingers traced strings. Her eyes followed connections.

“There's a netrunner,” she said. Her voice was flat. Professional. “Goes by the name of Alt. She's been researching portal technology. Arasaka technology. Something about dimensional interfaces.”

“Alt.” Mai's voice was flat. “The probability that she has—”

“I don't know the probability.” Shammy's warmth flickered. “But she's the one who might have answers. She's the one who's been looking.”

Ace moved from the window. Her shadow flickered. The fragment pushed. She pushed back. Focused on the sync. On the triad. On the question that had been sitting in the back of her mind.

“When do we meet her?”

"Tonight." Shammy's voice was steady. "If we want answers. If we want to know if there's a way back."

—

The meeting was in a club in Pacifica.

The district was different from Watson. More damaged. More desperate. The buildings were half-reclaimed, their original purposes lost to time and necessity. What had once been a corporate housing complex was now a stacked shantytown, floors repurposed by people who had nowhere else to go. The streets were filled with people who had fallen through the cracks of Night City's economy—runners who couldn't run anymore, fixers who had lost their networks, workers who had been replaced by automation or cheaper chrome.

The electromagnetic fields scattered Mai's calculations more than usual—the club was packed with chrome and neural interfaces and things that hummed with frequencies she couldn't filter. The bass from the music hit her chest like a physical weight. The lights strobed in patterns that made her scatter worse—the frequencies designed to capture attention, to override higher processing, to make people buy drinks they didn't need or stay longer than they intended.

She pressed her hand against surfaces. Cool. Solid. Real. The numbers scattered. But she was learning to let them scatter. To find the signals in the noise.

Ace stood near the entrance. Her shadow flickered. Her violet eyes tracked the room. The exits. The threats. The positions. The fragment pushed. She pushed back. Focused. The room was crowded—bodies pressed together in the heat of the dance floor, chrome and flesh mixing in the strobing lights. Potential threats in every corner. But she was learning to track without the fragment. Without the purple touching the edge of her vision.

Shammy moved through the crowd like she belonged. Fifty years of navigating Night City. Fifty years of knowing where to go, who to talk to, how to move. Her warmth flickered. The professional mask was in place. The fixer.

The club itself was a converted industrial space—exposed pipes, concrete walls covered in holographic projections, the remains of machinery repurposed as seating and platforms. The bar was a long counter of salvaged metal, lit from beneath by strips of neon that cycled through colors. The drinks were synthetic, alcoholic, designed to alter perception. The people were chrome and flesh and desperation, moving to the music, looking for something—connection, escape, a moment where the weight of the city didn't press quite so hard.

Alt was a presence. Not a body—something in the net. A hologram. A voice that came from everywhere and nowhere. The projection flickered in the center of a private booth. Blue light. Static. The particular quality of digital presence that said this is not human, this is something else.

"You're the ones who came through," Alt said. Her voice was synthetic. Filtered through systems Mai couldn't calculate. The frequencies were wrong. The patterns didn't hold. "From the other side."

"We are." Shammy's warmth was gone. Professional. "We need to know about the portal."

"The portal." Alt's hologram flickered. The blue light cast shadows on the walls. "There's a door. It opens both ways. But—" The voice stopped. The static increased. "There's a cost."

"What cost?"

“Choice.” Alt's hologram moved. The lights flickered around her. The club's bass pulsed through the walls. “The door opens. But you have to choose. Stay or go. One way or the other. Not both.”

Mai's hand pressed against the wall. The numbers scattered. The probability of going back. The probability of staying. The probability of choice. The variables cascaded. The context was wrong. The calculations failed.

“The probability that—”

“Stop calculating.” Ace's voice was quiet. “What do we need to do?”

“Find the door.” Alt's hologram flickered. “It's in Arasaka tower. The dimensional interface. It opens both ways—but only for a moment. And then you have to choose.”

Shammy's warmth flickered.

“Choose what?”

“Stay or go.” Alt's voice was synthetic. “You can go back to where you came from. Or you can stay here. But you can't do both. The door only opens once.” The hologram flickered again. “And you have to choose. All of you. Together or apart. Stay or go. Once the door closes, it doesn't open again.”

—

They walked back through the city.

The neon pulsed. The electromagnetic fields scattered. The fragment pushed. The numbers scattered. The bass from the clubs faded as they moved through the district.

But underneath, something else was forming.

A choice.

“Stay or go.” Mai's voice was flat. Her hand pressed against the wall. Cool. Solid. Real. “The probability that we all choose the same—”

“Is not the point.” Shammy's warmth flickered. “The point is: we have a choice.”

“A choice.” Ace's shadow flickered. The purple pushed. She pushed back. “Go back. Or stay.”

“Yes.” Shammy's warmth came back. “We have a choice. For the first time since you arrived, we have a choice.” Her voice was steady. “We can go back. Or we can stay. But we have to choose. All of us. Together or apart.”

Mai's hand pressed against the wall. The numbers scattered. Reforming. Scattering again.

“The probability that—”

“Stop calculating.” Shammy's voice was warm. “We have time. We have information. We have—” She stopped. “We have a choice. And we don't have to make it yet.”

Ace's violet eyes were steady. The purple pushed. She pushed back.

“We have time,” she said. “But we'll have to choose.”

"Yes." Shammy's warmth settled. "Eventually. But not tonight. Tonight, we go home. We think. We decide together."

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

"Together," she said. "The probability that—"

"Is one." Shammy's voice was warm. "We decide together."

—

The apartment was quiet.

Three chairs. The board. The empty chair in the corner. The third chair that Ace had brought. The arrangement that was becoming familiar.

But now there was a choice. Stay or go.

Shammy sat at the table. Her warmth flickered. The professional mask was gone. Underneath was something else. Something Mai couldn't calculate. The weight of fifty years. The life she'd built. The contacts. The reputation. The network. The empty chair she'd kept. The notebooks in the back room. The waiting.

Ace stood at the window. Her shadow flickered. The fragment pushed. She pushed back. But underneath, there was something else. Something Ace wasn't saying. The fragment that had been part of her for so long. The fight that was hers. The purple that touched the edge of her vision.

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 buzzed at the edge of her awareness. The context was wrong. The probabilities failed. But she was learning to hold on anyway.

"We have a choice," Mai said. Her voice was flat. "Stay or go. The probability that—"

"Is not what matters." Shammy's warmth came back. "What matters is what we want."

"What do we want?" Ace's voice was quiet. Her violet eyes were steady. "The fragment pushes. The numbers scatter. The warmth flickers. But—" She stopped. "But we have to choose. Stay or go. Together or apart."

"Together." Shammy's warmth settled. "Whatever we choose, we choose together. That's what matters."

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

"The probability that we all choose the same—"

"Is not what matters." Shammy's voice was warm. "What matters is that we choose together. Whatever we choose."

Ace's shadow flickered.

"Together," she said. "Yes."

Mai's hand pressed against the table.

"Together," she said. "The probability that—"

"Is one." Shammy's warmth was back. "That I know."

—

The night passed in fragments.

Shammy lay in bed. Her warmth flickered. The professional mask was gone. Underneath was something else. The weight of fifty years. The life she'd built. The network on the board. The contacts. The reputation. The empty chair in the corner. The notebooks in the back room. The waiting.

And now she had a choice. Stay or go.

If she went back, she would have to give up everything she'd built. The contacts. The reputation. The life. The fifty years of experiences that had made her who she was. She would go back to being the person she was before—the person she hadn't been for fifty years.

If she stayed, she would keep everything. But Ace and Mai would have to choose to stay too. Or they would have to leave. Without her.

The warmth flickered. Gone. Back.

She didn't know what to choose.

—

Ace stood at the window. The fragment pushed. She pushed back. The purple touched the edge of her vision. The shape of break. The shape of hurt.

If she went back, the fragment would go with her. The violet that touched her vision. The shape of break. The shape of hurt. It would be the same. Different world, same fragment. The fight would continue. The struggle would continue. Nothing would change.

But if she stayed, there was technology here. Chrome. Modifications. Things that might help manage the fragment. Neural interfaces that could suppress. Cyberware that could regulate. Things that might make the fight easier.

Or not.

She didn't know what to choose.

—

Mai sat at the table. Her hand pressed against the surface. The numbers scattered. The electromagnetic fields buzzed. The context was wrong.

If she went back, the numbers would cascade again. The probabilities would work. The context would be right. She would be able to calculate. To predict. To understand. The world would make sense again.

But if she stayed, the numbers would scatter. The context would be wrong. The probabilities would fail. She would have to learn to filter. To ground herself. To let the numbers be wrong. To find the signals in the noise.

She didn't know what to choose.

—

Morning came.

The apartment was quiet. The three chairs. The board. The empty chair in the corner. The third chair at the table. The arrangement that was becoming familiar.

But now there was a choice. Stay or go.

“We have time,” Shammy said. Her warmth came back. “We don't have to choose yet. We have the job first. We have the information. We have—” She stopped. “We have time.”

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

“We have time,” she said. “But we'll have to choose.”

“Yes.” Shammy's warmth settled. “Eventually. But not today. Today, we prepare. Tomorrow, we do the job. And after—” She stopped. “After, we choose.”

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

“Together,” she said. “The probability that—”

“Is one.” Shammy's voice was warm. “We choose together.”

—

They had a choice. Stay or go.

But not today.

Today, they prepared.

Tomorrow, they did the job.

And after, they would choose.

Together.

—

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Last update: **27/03/2026 19:37**

