

Chapter 17: The Choice

They talked about it.

Not once.

Not cleanly.

Not like people in stories who sat down, named the center of the wound, and came away with clarity because the structure of a chapter demanded it.

This happened the real way.

In fragments.

Between jobs. On stairs. At the table. In the walk back from the Afterlife. In the moments after someone said Konrad's name and no one wanted to be the next one to speak. It accumulated by pressure, not design.

Stay.

Go.

The door.

The portal.

The chance to step back through the thing that had broken their lives open and choose whether to undo it.

Or refuse.

Or fail.

Or decide that fifty years of waiting had built something too real to abandon for the sake of chronology.

The question had been there from the beginning.

Now it had a shape.

That made it worse.

The apartment held the question poorly.

It was too small for philosophy. Too practical. Too lived in. Too full of objects that had already chosen sides without asking permission.

Three chairs at the table.

The old chair in the corner.

The board.

The notebooks.

The window that framed Night City like a threat pretending to be a skyline.

Morning filtered through neon residue and smog and the afterglow of a city that never properly dimmed. The ads outside were slower now, running their daylight scripts with less desperation and more confidence. Insurance. Food. Upgrades. Credit. Desire machine-fed into language and sold back at scale.

Mai sat at the table with one hand on the metal surface.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The fields around her still buzzed with city-noise—data traffic, building systems, neighboring chrome—but she had stopped trying to silence all of it. Filter, not defeat. Let some numbers stay. Let the rest burn out in the margins.

Shammy stood by the board.

Not working it.

Just touching one of the strings like it was an anchor line and she was testing whether it would hold her weight.

Ace remained at the window, shadow close to the body, the fragment quiet enough for now to be mistaken for obedience.

“The portal brought us here,” Mai said.

Flat voice. Clean sentence. No preamble.

Shammy didn't look at her.

“Yes.”

“And if Konrad can reopen it—”

“He said he might be able to.”

“Then the probability of return—”

“No.”

Shammy turned then.

Not angry.

Firm.

“Not like that.”

Mai stopped.

Ace glanced back.

Shammy exhaled once and some of the heat left the room before it properly formed.

“The return isn’t a probability problem,” she said. “It’s a choice problem.”

That mattered.

Mai nodded once.

“The choice,” she said, adjusting, “is whether we want to go.”

“Yes.”

Ace spoke from the window.

“You’ve had fifty years here. We’ve had days.”

That sentence fell differently than most things did.

It acknowledged time without pretending time was neutral.

Shammy’s warmth flickered low but steady.

“Days for you,” she said. “A lifetime for me.”

A beat.

“And the worst part is that both are true.”

The first real version of the conversation happened that same evening.

Not because they planned it.

Because no one could think around it anymore.

The city outside had shifted into night-mode. Chrome brighter. Streets meaner. Bass climbing from below in waves that hit through the floor before they fully registered as sound. The air through the half-open vent carried hot metal, synthetic spice, damp concrete, and whatever chemical sweetness this district had decided counted as nightlife.

Ace stayed by the window.

Mai sat at the table.

Shammy did not choose either. She stood between them, which told the truth before her mouth did.

“I built a life here,” she said.

There.

Raw data first.

Not apology. Not argument.

Just fact.

“The board. The contacts. The reputation. The jobs. The people who know my name and the people who owe me and the people I owe back.” She looked toward the wall, not because she needed to check it, but because memory still sometimes required a witness. “Fifty years of becoming someone this city recognizes.”

Mai’s hand pressed harder into the table.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

“And if you go back,” she said, “you lose that.”

“Maybe.”

“You think you do.”

“Yes.”

Shammy’s answer came too fast to be strategic.

Good.

Ace turned slightly from the glass.

“What do you go back *to*?”

That was the harder question.

Not “what do you lose.”

What remains.

Shammy looked at her.

“A world where time still makes sense,” she said. “A world where I am not fifty years older than the people I love.” A pause. “A world that didn’t turn me into this version of myself.”

Ace’s shadow shifted once.

The fragment touched the edge of her vision, curious rather than aggressive.

“And do you want that,” she asked, “or do you just want relief from the comparison?”

That one hit clean.

Shammy went still.

Mai looked down briefly, not out of retreat but because she knew the sentence had gone in deep enough to change what came next.

"I don't know," Shammy said at last.

There it was again.

The most honest sentence in the room.

The conversations spread after that.

They happened in transit.

Night City was good for walking when you wanted to discuss something impossible and needed the city to take part of the pressure off your faces. The motion helped. The constant incoming data, the bodies passing, the vendor lights, the traffic drift—all of it gave the eyes somewhere to go when the subject got too sharp.

In Heywood, under a wall-sized ad for body sculpting that kept flashing a new jawline every six seconds, Mai said, "Home is where the numbers work."

Then stopped.

Because even she heard how insufficient it sounded.

Shammy glanced at her, warmth low but present.

"Is it."

"It was."

Ace walked just ahead of them, then dropped back without speaking.

Mai corrected herself.

"It was the last place where I could trust my own thought structure without building compensation layers first."

That was more precise.

More honest.

Still incomplete.

"And now?" Shammy asked.

Mai touched the wall of a shuttered kiosk as they passed.

Warm from lines running beneath.

Real enough.

“Now I don’t know if home is a system or a people-problem.”

Ace’s mouth moved.

A smile by accident.

“Good,” she said.

Mai gave her a flat look.

“That wasn’t supposed to be comforting.”

“It still was.”

Shammy laughed softly.

That mattered too.

Ace’s version took longer.

Not because she lacked an answer.

Because she distrusted any answer that came too fast from the part of her that was already overfamiliar with irreversible action.

They were in the apartment when she finally said it.

Late.

The city mostly reduced to thinner noise—distant engines, lower bass, ad-cycles winding into their most predatory hours.

The fragment had been pressing all evening, not enough to take, enough to irritate. She kept one hand on the window frame until the metal held more of her attention than the violet at the edge of sight.

“If we go back,” she said, “the fragment goes with me.”

No one interrupted.

“It doesn’t care about worlds. It doesn’t care about chronology. It doesn’t care whether I’m standing under magic or chrome.” Her gaze stayed on the reflection rather than the city beyond it. “That part doesn’t change.”

Mai nodded once.

Shammy remained very still.

Ace continued.

"If we stay, maybe there are tools here that didn't exist there. Maybe not answers. But different kinds of pressure. Different ways to fight it." A pause. "I don't trust those ways. But I can't pretend they don't exist."

"The technology," Mai said.

"Yes."

Shammy leaned back in her chair.

"And if we go back?"

Ace's shadow tightened.

"Then I go back with the same war and fewer unknowns."

"That sounds like you've already decided."

"No." Ace's answer was immediate. "It sounds like I know the cost of both."

That was not the same thing.

And everyone in the room knew it.

Shammy's answer changed depending on the hour.

That was probably the clearest sign she was telling the truth.

In the morning she said, "I built this and I don't know if I can bury it."

In the afternoon she said, "It isn't burying if I'm just choosing a different future."

At night she stood by the window with one hand on the sill and admitted, "Sometimes I think if I stay, I'm betraying the version of me that waited. Sometimes I think if I go, I'm betraying the version of me that survived."

That was the closest any of them got to the core for a while.

Not choice between worlds.

Choice between selves.

The waiting self.

The surviving self.

The impossible demand that they become the same person again just because fate had finally looped back on itself.

Ace answered that one in the dark.

"You don't owe either version dominance."

Shammy looked at her.

Ace kept going.

“You owe both of them honesty.”

No one spoke for a while after that.

Sometimes the correct line ended the room for the night.

Mai surprised them.

That became almost a habit now—her best moments arriving only after she had stopped trying to make them elegant.

They were at the table. Three chairs occupied. The old chair still in the corner like witness testimony no one could redact.

Shammy had been speaking about the board again. About contacts. About how many strings were not names so much as consequences. About the fact that leaving would not only mean leaving a city. It would mean abandoning obligations with edges, debts measured in more than money, and the entire architecture of a self she had built under pressure.

Mai listened.

Really listened.

Then said, “You are describing infrastructure.”

Shammy blinked.

“I am describing my life.”

“Yes,” Mai said. “But structurally. Supports. load-bearing links. Reinforcement points. Failure cascades. If you leave, you are not just exiting a location. You are collapsing an operating system.”

Shammy stared at her for a second.

Then laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was right in a language she hadn't expected.

“That,” she said, “is the most Mai possible way to tell me you understand why this is hard.”

Mai took the hit cleanly.

“Yes.”

Ace leaned back slightly.

“Do you.”

Mai looked at both of them.

“The numbers do not work here the way they used to,” she said. “But structure still does.” She touched the edge of the table. Cool. Real. “And this is structure. The board. The contacts. The apartment. The work. These are not sentimental decorations. They are load-bearing.”

That sharpened the question usefully.

Shammy’s voice went quieter.

“And if I go back?”

Mai answered without hesitation.

“Then we design for collapse or transfer. We do not pretend there is no cost.”

Silence.

Then Ace said, “Good.”

Mai looked at her.

“That was not approval-seeking.”

“I know.”

The fragment brushed the edge of Ace’s vision then, almost amused.

She ignored it.

Eventually the three of them said the thing that had been underneath every version of the conversation.

Not “stay.”

Not “go.”

This:

Whatever they chose, they would choose together.

It happened at the table.

Of course it did.

That table had become the only honest machine in the room.

Shammy had been halfway through saying, “The final choice is mine,” when Ace cut in, not hard, just precise:

“No.”

Shammy looked up, stunned more by the certainty than the disagreement.

Ace's eyes stayed steady.

"The final consequence will be all of ours."

That reset the whole equation.

Mai added, "Which means the choice cannot belong to only one vector."

There.

Spoken in their own languages.

Same answer.

Shammy looked from one to the other.

The warmth in her face came back slowly, like something returning to a place it had tested for safety first.

"You're both impossible."

Ace's mouth shifted.

"Yes."

Mai said, "Statistically supported."

That almost became laughter for all three of them.

Almost was enough.

Shammy looked down at the table.

Then nodded.

"Together," she said.

No one decorated the word.

It did not need help.

The night before the job, they stood in the apartment and let the choice rest where it belonged:

not avoided.

not answered.

waiting.

The board on the wall.

The notebooks stacked nearby.

Three chairs at the table.

The old chair in the corner.

Night City outside—alive, electrical, hungry, persistent.

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

Mai at the table, one hand on metal, letting the numbers scatter and choosing to remain anyway.

Shammy between the board and the window, between fifty years and tomorrow, between the life she had built and the door that might still exist.

“Whatever happens with the job,” she said quietly, “we don’t decide after shock. We don’t decide after adrenaline. We don’t decide because something frightened us into wanting certainty.”

Ace nodded once.

Mai nodded too.

“We decide when we are clear,” Mai said.

“As clear as we get,” Ace corrected.

Shammy smiled at that.

A real one.

Small.

Tired.

Present.

“Fair.”

The city outside shifted phases again. Ads changing tempo. Traffic routing. A drone passing too close to the building and rattling the glass for one ugly second before moving on.

Inside, the room held.

The triad was still rusty.

The sync was still imperfect.

The fragment still pushed.

The numbers still broke.

The warmth still flickered when old survival habits got there first.

None of that changed.

But one thing had.

The choice was no longer a private wound each of them carried separately.

It had become shared terrain.

And when the time came to answer it—

they would answer it as one system.

Not because they were healed.

Because they were real.

That was enough.

For tonight.

Tomorrow belonged to the job.

After that—

the door.

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