

## Chapter 3: First Blood

Rogue's packet was thin.

Three pages. Route, time, payment.

Nothing else.

That told its own story.

Mai held the paper flat against the table while Ace watched the door. Shammy stood near the kitchen surface, already wearing that other face again—the one Night City got instead of the woman who had kept an empty chair for fifty years.

Professional. Flat. Useful.

The apartment smelled like solder, old chrome, hot wiring buried in bad walls. Fixer air. Work air. The kind of smell that stopped belonging to rooms and started belonging to lives.

"The job is simple," Shammy said.

Ace glanced at her.

Shammy corrected herself immediately.

"No," she said. "The job is *supposed* to be simple. That's different."

Better.

Mai's eyes tracked the route on the page. Kansas loading dock to Kabuki distribution point. Standard streets. Standard timing. Standard payout. The paper had been folded enough times that the center line was almost soft. Someone else had run this route. Probably more than one someone.

"No questions," Shammy continued. "You escort the transport. You make yourselves look expensive. You discourage curiosity."

"And if curiosity persists?" Ace asked.

"Then you make it regret the decision."

Mai's fingers pressed harder against the paper.

The numbers were there again. Route risk. urban density shifts. exit vectors. interference windows. cargo value estimates based on escort pay versus route length—

They started branching.

She stopped them before they could spread.

"The probability of complications—"

"Exists," Shammy cut in. "Always. Don't try to wish it smaller just because you can put numbers on

it.”

It wasn't harsh.

That was almost worse.

It sounded practiced.

Night City had taught her that tone.

Ace moved through the apartment while Shammy talked. Door. Window. Kitchen angle. Sight lines. Reflexive. Her katanas caught a little green along the edge whenever the neon outside hit them right.

Mai reorganized the packet mentally. Fixed points. Unfixed points. Known unknowns. Unknown unknowns. She hated that phrase. It was still useful.

From the other room, Shammy made two short calls.

Her voice changed for those too.

Lower. Cleaner. Less human.

The chair in the corner stayed where it was.

Mai did not look at it.

—

Kansas Street smelled like oil, rust, and old rain that had never really left.

Industrial district. Functional light only. Sodium-yellow lamps, tired signage, buildings that looked less built than stacked. The street had the deadened feel of a place that moved cargo at all hours and pretended none of it mattered.

The transport was matte black, square-backed, ugly on purpose. No display chrome except where it helped function. Heavy suspension. Diesel-hybrid growl. Built to move through attention by refusing to deserve any.

Three people waited beside it.

Two were muscle. Chrome arms, bad eyes, scar tissue around implants that hadn't been installed gently. The third was smaller and nervous in a very disciplined way—trying to hide it, failing in pulses.

He checked his datapad.

Then the street.

Then the datapad again.

Pattern.

Mai almost followed it into probability.

Stopped herself.

"Shammy's people," one of the chrome men said.

"Mine for tonight," Shammy replied.

That landed differently.

Not ownership. Liability.

The chrome man looked at Ace first. Sensible. Then Mai. Less sensible, but still not stupid. He was reading posture, weapon weight, readiness. Trying to decide if Shammy had brought professionals or just fresh meat with unusual packaging.

Mai tracked their positions automatically.

Ace at the front angle. Rooftop visibility. Left approach coverage.

Mai at rear. Secondary lane. Blindside response.

Shammy offset from both, near extraction path.

Not discussed.

Still there.

Rust on the sync, but not absence.

"New," the chrome man said.

"Paid," Shammy answered.

That got a laugh.

Short. Mechanical at the edges.

"We roll in ten," he said. "Stay close. Stay useful. Don't improvise unless the street asks nicely."

Shammy stepped back toward the loading dock shadows.

"You've got this," she said.

It wasn't comfort.

It was assessment in advance.

Ace moved to the front of the transport. Mai took the rear without looking at her. The old pattern fit badly, but it fit.

The nervous man checked his datapad again.

Forty-seven seconds.

There it was.

Mai pressed her hand against the transport's rear frame.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers steadied—not clean, never clean here, but usable enough.

Engine on.

Route live.

They moved.

—

The first stretch was quiet.

Not empty. Never empty. Just quiet by Night City standards.

Mai walked near the rear wheel. Ace ranged ahead in short arcs, then dropped back, then moved forward again. Old vector patrol. Old instincts wearing new streets.

Watson shifted around them in layers.

Industrial gave way to commercial. Functional signage turned into ads, then holo-ads, then walls screaming product hunger in colors no one had asked to see. The crowd thickened. Workers, scavengers, chrome-burned half-insomniacs, people negotiating under dead signs and under brighter ones.

The city smelled different every half block.

Oil.

Burned sugar.

Fried protein.

Body heat.

Ozone.

Old garbage under new perfume.

Mai catalogued by reflex, then made herself stop. The interference patterns were already trying to become equations. She let them stay background instead.

The transport turned down a narrower street.

Wet pavement.

Closer buildings.

More neon.

The whole block felt like it had been dipped in reflected color and left there to rot.

Ace's hand moved.

Signal.

Pause. Observe.

The transport slowed.

Four people in the street.

Not random.

Not drunk.

Not decorative.

Positioning too clean, stance too deliberate. Their chrome was better than street junk—military-adjacent, or something bought from someone who should not have sold it.

The lead was broad-shouldered, with arms built for force and eyes that reflected too much. Low-light hardware, probably. Thermal too, maybe.

"Shammy's transport," he said.

"We're not here for the cargo."

"Then you've made a bad choice about where to stand," Ace replied.

She'd shifted right without spectacle, taking an angle that gave her rooftop sight, side lane sight, and enough room to break hard if the street detonated. Mai adjusted automatically, covering the rear axis. The chrome escorts moved to the transport doors.

The nervous man stayed inside.

Good instinct.

"Maybe we're here for a message," the lead figure said.

"Messages are cheap," Mai answered. "Street obstruction is less so."

The numbers tried to surge again. Conflict curve rising. Injury probability widening. Client stress reading linked to—

"Stop."

Ace didn't look at her when she said it.

Mai's palm hit the wall beside her.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The lead man kept his eyes on Ace now.

“We’re here to let Shammy know her new people have been seen. That’s all. No violence.”

Ace’s voice stayed level. “That’s either a threat or a test.”

“Neither.”

Lie.

Or half-lie.

Mai saw it in the pause before the answer, the way the others held alignment. Disciplined. Gang, but not chaotic. Structure inside the noise.

“A courtesy,” he finished. “Next time won’t be.”

He stepped aside.

The others followed in sync.

The transport rolled through.

Maelstrom.

Not from symbol, not from color—movement, chrome pattern, the specific wrongness of bodies modified past sanity and still pretending they were strategic.

Night City had noticed them.

That was the message.

Not attack.

Not yet.

Visibility.

Shammy’s crew existed now, and someone had written it down in blood-red ink somewhere invisible.

—

The rest of the route held.

Kabuki waited at the end of it like a cleaner lie.

Warehouse loading bays, workers who had trained themselves not to remember faces, paperwork completed with the blankness of people who intended to stay alive by remaining forgettable.

The nervous man emerged with a briefcase.

He did not thank anyone.

That also told its own story.

The transport cleared out.

Job done.

On paper.

Shammy waited outside under Kabuki neon that painted her face red, then gold, then red again. She looked like she belonged here more than she had in the apartment. That stung in a way Mai didn't have numbers for.

"Message delivered," Ace said.

"Message received," Shammy answered. "Maelstrom. They're telling me you've been seen."

"You expected something," Ace said.

"I expected *someone*." A flicker of warmth crossed Shammy's face and was gone. "That's how this place works. First you work. Then the city notices. Then it decides whether you are worth cutting open."

Mai shifted her hand.

Something dark marked her palm.

Ace saw it first.

"Blood."

Mai looked down.

Residue.

Not fresh, but not old enough to be history either. Dark along the lines of her hand where she'd grounded herself against the transport frame. Metallic at the edge. Different. Blood mixed with chrome dust or cleaning solvent or something else this city had taught its violence to wear.

Not hers.

"From the vehicle," Mai said quietly. "Old trace. Partial clean. Incomplete removal."

Shammy's face changed.

Flat again.

Fixer-flat.

"We don't ask."

Mai rubbed her thumb against it. The smear shifted differently than blood should have. Less organic memory, more machine contamination. The mark of work done badly, or done often enough that no one bothered finishing the cleaning.

"We don't ask," Shammy repeated. "You got paid. Learn the rule."

Mai wiped her palm against her coat.

The stain dulled.

Did not disappear.

“The next job?” Ace asked.

“Tomorrow, if you want it.”

“You say that like it matters.”

“It does.” Shammy looked between them. “The city sees people who come back.”

That, too, landed.

—

They walked home through shifting districts and shifting light.

Ace kept moving ahead, then back, then ahead again. Not restless. Patrol rhythm. The body remembering before trust fully did.

Shammy walked in the middle.

Mai watched the city without trying to own it.

That was new.

The streets changed faces every few blocks. Industrial hunger gave way to commercial theater, then apartment towers, then strange strips of urban nothing that seemed to exist only to connect one kind of desperation to another.

At the apartment, the chair was still there.

Mai didn't look at it.

Ace took the window.

Shammy made tea.

Properly this time.

Water controlled. Leaves measured. Steep time respected.

No one said blood.

No one said Maelstrom.

No one said that the city had already started circling them.

They drank.

The next job was tomorrow.

That meant the first one had worked.

It did not mean it had been clean.

Mai could still feel the texture of the residue against her palm even after washing it. Chrome-blood. Street-blood. Cargo-blood. Blood that belonged to a world where violence had become industrial enough to leave specialized traces.

Different world.

Different rules.

Same old price.

Outside, the neon kept pulsing.

Ace watched the street.

Shammy handed Mai her cup without meeting her eyes.

The warmth came back to Shammy in fragments now. In gestures. In the exactness of the tea. In small things that didn't survive translation into words.

The triad was working again.

Not whole.

Not smooth.

But working.

For tonight, that was enough.

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