

Chapter 4: The Fixer's Trade

The Afterlife looked older in daylight.

Not gentler.

Just stripped.

The neon never truly shut off, but morning made it tired. The skull sign still burned above the entrance, only dimmer now, as if the city had turned the volume down without finding silence. The holographic dancers outside still moved through their loop, smiling at no one. Waiting for night. Waiting to matter again.

Inside, the bar held a different crowd.

Not dead. Not even quiet, really. Just reduced to essentials. Solo drinkers with bad sleep and worse nerves. Runners checking messages they pretended not to care about. Fixers in corners, speaking low enough that the room itself seemed complicit.

The smell was older than the one in Shammy's apartment.

Spilled alcohol. Stale smoke. Cheap cleaner. Sweat. Chrome. The residue of a thousand people who had come here to get paid, get lied to, get dead, or avoid it for one more week.

Mai stood near the bar.

Ace held the door line without looking like she was doing it.

Shammy sat with Rogue at the corner table.

The job from last night had gone clean.

No injuries. Payment confirmed. Message received, not escalated.

It should have felt like a win.

It didn't.

Mai's mind kept circling back to the blood.

The residue on the transport. The incomplete wipe. The rule wrapped around it like wire: don't ask.

The numbers tried to build around that. Cargo type. client profile. reason for Maelstrom contact. probability of hidden relevance.

They scattered before she could finish them.

"The next job."

Rogue did not raise her voice much.

She didn't need to.

The room bent around it anyway.

Shammy's hand shifted once against the table.

Small movement.

Enough.

"Arasaka," Rogue said.

There it was.

The word changed the air.

Not for everyone in the room.

For Shammy.

Mai saw it—just a flicker, but real. Tightness at the eyes. A brief stillness too controlled to be natural.

"The client is paying premium," Rogue continued. "Medical transport. Escort only. In and out."

"Arasaka territory is—"

"I know what it is," Shammy cut in.

Flat now.

Fixer voice.

Rogue's expression didn't move.

"What's being moved?" Shammy asked.

"Not your problem." Rogue's gaze stayed on her. "Client pays premium. You get your cut. Everything else is noise."

Shammy looked at Mai.

Then at Ace.

A calculation passed through her face that Mai couldn't map fast enough.

"We'll take it," Shammy said.

Rogue produced a datastick like it had always been part of the table.

"Route. Timing. Payment on completion." A beat. "Don't be interesting."

That was the whole briefing.

In Night City, that probably counted as generosity.

—

Heywood in the morning smelled like hot wiring and low funds.

The streets were narrow, crowded in that resigned way poor districts got when the architecture had long since given up pretending it served people. Neon existed here, but mostly for function. Repairs. Food. Ripperdocs. Pawn. Credit. Loans. Synthetic whatever-you-could-afford.

Viktor's clinic sat between a noodle place and an electronics stall whose inventory was almost certainly stolen, partially broken, or both.

Inside, it was cleaner than it had any right to be.

Metal surfaces worn smooth by repetition. Equipment old enough to be trusted. The room smelled like antiseptic and solder, with a copper undertone that never left.

Viktor worked on Shammy's arm without ceremony.

His hands were steady. His face wasn't.

"Arasaka territory," he said.

"Correct."

"You're taking a medical transport through Arasaka territory."

"That is, unfortunately, still the job."

Viktor looked up.

There it was—worry, stripped of decoration.

"Shammy—"

"Don't."

Not loud.

Immediate.

Viktor sat back slightly.

Mai watched the exchange.

Too fast to be casual. Too practiced to be new.

"Tell her," Viktor said, glancing at Mai.

"She knows enough."

"Enough for a standard run maybe."

"This is a standard run."

"No," Viktor said. "It isn't."

Shammy pulled her arm back before he was fully done checking it.

Defensive.

Body-memory defensive, not argument defensive. The kind built by repetition.

"The pay is good," she said.

Viktor let out a sound that wasn't quite a laugh.

"The pay is never that good."

That stayed in the room.

He looked at her for a long second, then went back to the arm. Nerve response. Range. Interface stability. No wasted motion.

"My daughter," he said after a while.

No one interrupted him.

"Running with a gang. Small one." His mouth tightened. "Still big enough to bury her."

Shammy didn't answer.

But her shoulders changed.

Slightly.

"I keep telling her chrome doesn't make her safe," Viktor went on. "Just makes her easier to notice."

"Is she safe?" Mai asked.

Viktor glanced at her.

"She thinks so."

"That isn't the same thing," Mai said.

"No," Viktor replied. "It never is."

Ace, by the door, finally spoke.

"Safe is relative here."

Viktor looked at her. Small. Armed. Still.

"Yeah," he said. "That's one word for it."

He finished the check.

"Arm's fine," he told Shammy. "Don't make me regret that."

She slid off the edge of the chair.

"Thanks, Viktor."

"Don't thank me." He reached for another instrument, already half turned away. "Just come back alive enough to be annoying."

—

The board took up more space the longer Mai looked at it.

At first it had seemed practical. A fixer's wall. Jobs. Contacts. Favors. Debts. A material map of survival.

It was that.

It was also far more.

Photos. Printed notes. Dates. clipped names. strings crossing strings crossing strings until the entire wall became a history too large to digest in one pass. Red. Blue. Yellow. Urgent. Active. Closed. Dead.

Dead had lines through the names.

There were more of those than Mai liked.

"Your board," she said.

Shammy, at the kitchen surface, didn't turn immediately.

"It's a board."

"It's a life."

That made her look up.

The kettle had not boiled yet. Good. Ace had fixed that habit already.

"It's work," Shammy said.

"No." Mai stepped closer. "Work doesn't spread like this."

Her eyes followed the strings. Maelstrom. Rogue. Viktor. clients. couriers. names she didn't know, faces she had never seen, all connected through a person who had spent fifty years staying alive in a city built to eat people.

"You built all of this," Mai said quietly. "Without us."

"Yes."

One word.

No apology.

No shame.

Just fact.

Mai's mind tried to model it and failed.

Not the board itself. That she could have mapped eventually. It was the scale of lived time inside it. Fifty years. Not waiting in suspension. Not paused. Lived.

“You had partners,” Mai said.

Shammy’s expression changed.

Barely.

Enough.

“Yes.”

“People you trusted.”

“Yes.”

“People you—”

“Worked with,” Shammy said. Flat now. “Start there.”

Mai’s hand found the wall beside the board.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers wanted to solve it. Quantify social density. estimate trust cycles. emotional substitution curves over long-term isolation.

Wrong tool.

Wrong task.

The board wasn’t a puzzle. It was evidence.

“You kept the chair,” Mai said.

Shammy went still.

“Yes.”

“For fifty years.”

“Yes.”

“And this.” Mai gestured to the board. “Also real.”

The next answer took longer.

“Yes.”

That mattered.

Ace spoke from near the window.

“The board is a life.”

Shammy nodded once.

“It is.”

“You didn’t stop living.”

“No,” Shammy said.

No softness in it this time.

No guilt either.

Just truth.

“Who’s Martinez?” Ace asked.

The flinch was tiny.

It still hit like an alarm.

Shammy’s hands, which had been moving without tension a second earlier, stopped.

“Someone I worked with.”

“For how long?”

“Long enough.”

“Still on the board,” Ace said.

“Contacts stay on the board.”

“Even when they matter?”

Shammy turned fully then.

Her warmth vanished all at once. Not faded. Cut.

“Martinez is dead,” she said. “That’s what matters.”

Silence.

Mai could feel her own mind trying to surge again—grief markers, avoidance pattern, vocal hardening, unresolved attachment.

She crushed it before it built.

“You had a life,” she said instead.

Shammy laughed once.

No warmth in it.

"You want the clean version?" she asked. "Fine. I got up. I took jobs. I paid rent. I kept my name worth something. I survived chrome failures and bad calls and clients who deserved worse than they got. I did that for fifty years."

"Martinez," Ace repeated.

Shammy's jaw tightened.

"That line is closed."

No room left in the sentence for argument.

Tea saved them from making one.

—

Shammy poured.

Ace took her cup without comment.

Mai wrapped both hands around hers.

Warm.

Solid.

Real.

The board remained on the wall.

The chair remained in the corner.

Both waited in different ways.

Mai looked from one to the other and finally understood that the problem was not contradiction.

It was coexistence.

A life fully lived.

A place still held open.

Both true.

"I'll study the board," Mai said. "If you want."

Shammy looked at her over the rim of her cup.

"You don't need to."

"I know." Mai kept her gaze steady. "I want to."

"Why."

There was no softness in the question. It demanded precision.

"Because it matters to you," Mai said. "And because I am not going to understand this city if I refuse to understand the life you built inside it."

Shammy held still for a moment.

Then nodded.

"It's a lot."

"I noticed."

A trace of warmth touched Shammy's mouth and vanished.

"We start after the Arasaka run," she said.

Ace looked at the wall. Then at the chair.

"Both real," she said.

"Yes," Shammy replied.

The answer came quicker now.

The tea cooled.

The city muttered through the glass.

The board waited.

The chair waited.

And somewhere between them sat fifty years of a life neither Ace nor Mai had been there to witness, but both of them would now have to learn to live beside.

That was the actual trade.

Not the jobs.

Not the routes.

Not the pay.

The real trade was this: understanding what had been built in their absence without pretending absence meant betrayal.

Shammy drank the rest of her tea.

Mai did the same.

Ace stayed by the window, watching the room instead of the street now.

Nothing resolved.

That was fine.

Some things did not need resolution on first contact.

Some things just needed to be named.

Board.

Chair.

Life.

Waiting.

Both real.

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