

Chapter 8: The Cost

The next job went wrong.

Not immediately.

That would have been kinder.

At first it looked clean—recovery work in Pacifica, stolen tech, low-profile client, fast extraction. The kind of job fixers described with a bored voice and runners accepted because rent did not care about atmosphere.

Get in.

Get the package.

Get out.

Simple.

That word again.

It should have been banned from the city.

Pacifica looked unfinished even when you weren't paying attention.

When you were, it looked abandoned by design.

Half-built towers. Dead roads that led nowhere. Corporate logos fading on concrete that had never held the future it was poured for. Neon didn't reach properly here. It arrived tired, bled out over distance, and died in static before it touched the ground.

The whole district felt like a plan someone had stopped believing in halfway through.

Mai hated it immediately.

Not emotionally.

Structurally.

The numbers refused to behave here. Electromagnetic bleed was worse than Watson, less disciplined than Arasaka, older somehow. Like the city had laid down systems and then left them to rot into noise.

Her hand found the wall.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

Not enough.

"Seventy-three percent chance the eastern approach comes down if someone breathes on it wrong," she said.

Ace, a few meters ahead, didn't turn.

"The numbers are wrong here."

"They are always wrong here," Shammy said. Professional voice. Fixer-flat. "That's why you stop worshipping them."

Mai pressed harder into the concrete.

"I'm not worshipping."

"No," Shammy said. "You're hiding."

That landed.

Ace glanced back once. Not enough to be called concern. Enough to confirm position.

"Use the sync," she said.

Not gentle.

Not harsh.

Just true.

They moved.

And for a while it worked.

Ace in depth. Mai in center. Shammy carrying pressure at the edges. Three separate shapes remembering the outline of one system. Rusty, yes. Incomplete, yes. Still enough to move through the district without stepping on each other's bones.

The first position was clear.

Old gang tag on the wall. Dead campfire in a drum. Cheap wrappers. Empty stim vials. Nobody home.

The second position narrowed into a corridor between unfinished shells of concrete and rebar, a place designed by bad planning and later adopted by people with worse intentions.

Ace went ahead.

Her shadow thinned, stretched, disappeared into bad angles and returned from different ones. No sound. No wasted motion.

"Low probability of ambush," Mai murmured.

"Then don't say it," Shammy replied.

Too late.

The third position was the room.

Central structure. Half-dressed walls. Locked case inside according to recon. Light entry resistance. Clean snatch.

Ace reached the door first.

Then the fragment touched her.

Not fully.

Not a surge.

A finger on the inside of her vision.

Purple.

Wrong.

Not invited. Not timed. Not useful.

Her shadow flickered.

Just once.

That was enough.

The sync missed a beat.

And the building answered.

The ambush didn't announce itself with shouting.

It arrived organized.

Three directions. Cross-angle entry. Staggered timing just good enough to split attention without looking too polished. Someone had done their homework. Someone had expected three vectors and designed around rupture.

Mai felt the plan collapse before she could describe why.

The numbers came up out of reflex—

engagement thirty-four

detection twelve

ambush eight

—then shattered against the district’s interference like glass under pressure.

Wrong.

All of it wrong.

Her disruptor came up anyway.

Too slow.

Too fast.

The center broke.

Gang bodies drove through the gap between her and Ace, not random, not frightened—purposeful. Built to divide. Built to isolate.

“Ace—”

But Ace was already gone.

Not physically.

Structurally.

The fragment caught hold of the edges of her movement and sharpened them into something ugly.

Shammy flattened.

Not emotionally numb.

Operationally absent.

The warmth went out of her face the way lights die in a district no one maintains. The fixer who joked, who watched, who adjusted pressure before it became pain—gone.

What remained was survival habit.

Old. Efficient. Merciless.

She drove into the nearest attacker before he finished raising his weapon. A burst of pressure snapped his aim wide. Her hand hit chrome at the elbow, twisted, broke the angle it needed to exist. Air shifted around her in short, brutal corrections—no spectacle, no storm theatrics, just local violence applied with long practice.

Someone came in from her blind side.

She didn’t look.

Didn’t need to.

The pressure drop caught him first. His footing vanished for half a second. That was enough. She

drove him into unfinished concrete hard enough that he did not continue contributing.

No sync.

No trust.

No reach for the others.

Just a woman who had survived fifty years by continuing to do so.

Alone.

Ace's shadow was wrong.

The fragment didn't take her. Not fully.

It *leaned*.

That was worse.

Every movement arrived with extra angle, extra speed, extra possibility—paths she should not have seen, openings she had not chosen, cuts that appeared before the intent behind them had fully formed.

Useful.

Dangerous.

Her katanas came free in emerald arcs. One man went down before he understood he had been targeted. Another lost his weapon hand and then the rest of the argument. Ace moved through them like something that had stopped asking permission from physics.

But each perfect angle cost her.

The purple at the edge of vision pulsed harder.

Closer.

A shape of hurt trying to become a language.

No.

She forced herself narrower. Simpler. Blade. Step. Breath. Blade. Refusal.

The fragment pushed.

She pushed back.

Somewhere behind that struggle, she knew Mai had lost center.

Somewhere beyond that, she knew Shammy had gone cold.

The sync wasn't gone.

It was buried alive.

Mai fired twice and hated both shots.

Not because they missed.

Because they were calculated.

Badly.

The district shredded every clean prediction before it matured. Interference from dead systems, phantom net bleed, improvised chrome, unstable architecture—all of it made her usual models worse than useless. They seduced her into false confidence.

Another shot cracked past her ear.

Too close.

She dropped behind a fractured support wall and pressed one hand hard into it.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

Nothing organized.

Good.

“Stop calculating,” Ace had said.

Right.

Mai exhaled once. Let the percentages die. Let the predictive trees burn. Let the need to explain the fight fall away.

Underneath all that noise—

there.

The sync.

Faint. Broken. Real.

Not as numbers.

As orientation.

Ace pulling left through shadow.

Shammy compressing right under pressure.

A hole opening in the middle because that was where Mai belonged.

She moved.

Not toward the safest angle.

Toward the necessary one.

Her disruptor came up. Fired. Not where someone *was*—where the fight required them not to be.

A ganger toppled backward into Shammy's vector and vanished under a burst of compressed air and concrete dust.

Another turned toward Ace at exactly the wrong moment and met emerald.

Mai stopped trying to win elegantly.

The fight improved immediately.

It was ugly after that.

Not cinematic.

Not clean.

People slipped on dust and blood and broken plastic. Weapons jammed. One ganger screamed until someone on his own side shoved him down and told him to shut up. Half-finished walls turned every line of sight into a lie.

The room contracted into fragments of combat.

Ace appearing and disappearing through bad angles with violet pressure building behind her eyes.

Shammy breaking bodies with efficient, joyless precision, every motion saying *this is how I survived before you came back*.

Mai holding center only in flashes, grabbing the sync, losing it, grabbing it again.

The tech case sat where recon said it would, absurdly untouched in the middle of the room while human beings failed around it.

For a moment, that nearly made Mai laugh.

Then a burst round hit the wall above her and she chose not to.

They won because the other side got tired of paying.

Not because the triad was elegant.

Not because destiny remembered their names.

Because even broken, they were worse than expected.

Three bodies stayed down.

Several more didn't.

The rest retreated into Pacifica's dead architecture with the discipline of people who had been told not to die for stolen hardware if the math turned bad.

Silence hit in sections after that.

One dropped weapon at a time.

One ragged breath at a time.

One fragment of pressure leaving the room at a time.

The case was still there.

Mai looked at it.

Then away.

The job parameters had survived.

They had not.

Outside, the lot gave them too much space.

Cold air slid through concrete gaps carrying rot, wet dust, dead electricity, old things growing where they had not been invited. Neon from somewhere else painted the rubble red-blue-red like a wound trying on colors.

No one spoke at first.

Ace stood nearest the exit.

Too still.

Her katanas were sheathed again, but the shadow around her wouldn't settle. Violet kept touching the edge of her vision. Not a flood. A pressure. Persistent. Intimate. Bad.

Shammy stood apart from both of them.

That was the part Mai hated most.

Not that she had fought flat.

That she was already defaulting back into distance as if separation were the safest shape available.

Mai pressed one hand into the wall behind her.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

Still not enough.

"The fragment," she said.

Ace did not pretend not to understand.

"Yes."

"It's getting closer."

"Yes."

"It wasn't invited."

"No."

Mai nodded once.

The wall vibrated faintly under her palm with some dead remnant of Pacifica's infrastructure trying and failing to still matter.

"The sync broke."

Ace looked at her.

"For a moment," she said.

"That was enough."

"Yes."

Honesty again.

Good.

"What do we do?"

Ace's answer came too fast.

"We rebuild."

Mai stared at her.

"That's not a plan."

"It's the only one I've got."

Also honest.

Also not enough.

“Shammy.”

The name hung there.

Shammy turned her head, not the rest of herself.

Flat eyes.

Operational face.

“I’m fine.”

“No,” Mai said.

No softness. No delay.

“You went cold.”

“That kept me alive.”

“It kept you alone.”

That hit.

Visible.

Small crack at the mouth. Tiny shift in the shoulders.

The professional mask held anyway.

“I have been alone in combat for fifty years.”

“I noticed.”

Shammy’s gaze sharpened.

Mai didn’t look away.

“You’re not wrong,” Mai said. “That’s the problem.”

For the first time since the fight ended, Shammy’s expression changed.

Not warmth.

Pain.

Quick. Nearly hidden. Real.

“The sync vanished,” she said quietly. “I couldn’t feel either of you.”

Ace pushed off the wall and moved closer.

Not too close.

Enough.

“I couldn’t feel you either,” she said.

That mattered more than comfort would have.

Shammy laughed once.

No humor in it.

“Great. Then we all failed evenly.”

“We still won,” Mai said.

“That is the least comforting possible metric.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Mai let the line sit.

Then: “It is still something.”

Shammy rubbed one hand over her face.

The fixer's mask thinned.

Not gone.

Thinned.

“No,” she said. “It isn’t enough. But it is something.”

That was the first true thing she had said since the fight ended.

They delivered the case.

No one looked inside in front of them. No one asked questions. No one commented on blood, dust, or the fact that the package had cost more than the posted fee suggested it should.

That was Night City.

If the object arrived, morality was considered bad bookkeeping.

Payment cleared.

No one celebrated.

The walk back to Watson felt longer than the way in.

Pacifica bled into poorer streets, poorer streets into familiar ones. Interference eased but didn’t vanish. Mai’s numbers still came apart if she touched them too directly. Ace still moved like someone negotiating with an invisible knife. Shammy’s warmth returned in pulses—small, involuntary, exhausted.

Not restored.

Just no longer absent.

By the time they saw the apartment building again, all three of them looked like they had survived something they had not yet agreed to name.

The chairs waited inside.

So did the board.

So did the life Shammy had built alone.

And now the cost of trying not to be alone anymore had started to show.

That was the real damage.

Not bruises.

Not bodies.

Not the job.

The price was this:

the triad had remembered itself just long enough to know exactly how much it still hurt to fail as one.

Ace paused at the door.

Shammy behind her.

Mai last.

No one moved for one second too long.

Then Ace opened it.

Because someone had to.

Because that was still her role.

Because if they waited outside any longer, the city might decide to keep them.

Inside, nothing had changed.

Which made it worse.

Three chairs.

One board.

One room trying to hold far more than its square footage allowed.

The triad entered anyway.

Broken.

Present.

Not enough.

Still here.

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