

Chapter 9: Breaking Point

Viktor's clinic smelled like antiseptic and old blood.

At night, the blood won.

Not fresh. Not dramatic. Just residue—copper sunk into metal seams, into drainage grooves, into the invisible memory of a room where flesh and chrome had negotiated terms for decades. The antiseptic tried to cover it. The copper stayed anyway.

The clinic itself looked cleaner than the district deserved. Chrome panels. exposed cable runs. Blue-white task lights dimmed to low power. Machines breathing in standby instead of full wake. The sort of place built from equal parts competence and refusal.

Ace sat on the examination table.

Still.

Too still.

The fragment touched the edge of her vision like a bruise that had learned how to think. Violet pressure. Not pain exactly. Not thought either. Something between the two, pressing inward, asking to be let through.

Viktor's fingers moved across her temples, around her eyes, along the places where human anatomy stopped explaining what was happening.

"It's worse," he said.

Not alarmed.

Certain.

Ace didn't look at him. "Yes."

"It's pushing harder."

"Yes."

"You've been hiding how hard."

A pause.

"Yes."

That made Viktor stop.

Not with his hands.

With the part of him that still expected honesty from patients who made a living surviving without it.

Shammy stood near the door with her arms folded too tightly. The warmth had returned after Pacifica, but only in fragments. Underneath it, the flatness remained—ready, patient, practical. A second skin she had worn too long to call it temporary anymore.

Mai stood by the wall.

Hand pressed to the cool surface.

Grounding.

The clinic's systems hummed in scattered frequencies that kept tugging at her awareness—diagnostics, shielded power flow, old chrome readers, neural equipment resting with one eye open. Her numbers refused to stabilize here any more than they had stabilized anywhere else in Night City.

Viktor stepped back.

"The fragment isn't going away."

No one answered.

He looked from Ace to Mai to Shammy, taking the three of them in the way mechanics look at something broken and immediately understand the damage is structural.

"I can't fix it," he said. "Not because I'm not good enough. Because it isn't mine to fix." His chrome eyes shifted back to Ace. "I can help you endure it. That's different."

Ace nodded once.

It cost her more than it should have.

Viktor noticed. Of course he did.

"You three are out of sync," he said.

No one argued.

"The last job cracked whatever was holding." He pointed vaguely between them, not bothering to name it properly. "That thing where you move like one body with three decisions. It's gone."

"Not gone," Ace said quietly.

Viktor looked at her.

"Then hidden," he replied. "Buried. Broken. Pick a word that makes it easier to sleep."

None of them smiled.

That told him enough.

Then, because he was Viktor and pain made him practical before it made him kind, he changed subjects badly and honestly.

"My daughter came by."

Shammy's gaze shifted.

That mattered.

“Wanted money,” Viktor said. “Didn’t want me. Didn’t want advice. Didn’t want food. Just money.”

His voice never softened.

That made it worse.

“She’s running with a street gang that thinks chrome is courage. I keep waiting for the day she comes through that door on a slab or doesn’t come through at all.” He rubbed at his jaw. “I don’t know how to reach her anymore.”

Silence sat with that.

Then Viktor shook his head sharply, as if annoyed with himself for saying it aloud.

“Not your problem,” he muttered.

“It is if it becomes one,” Shammy said.

Viktor gave her a look.

That was the closest thing to gratitude he had.

Then he looked at all three of them again.

“Take care of the triad,” he said. “Whatever it is now. Take care of it before the city decides you don’t deserve one.”

That landed.

Because Night City absolutely would.

They walked back without speaking.

The city made enough noise for all of them.

Neon bled across wet pavement in colors too artificial to be called light. Drones moved in approved lanes overhead. Somewhere distant, music hit hard enough to shake windows it would never reach. A siren started, changed its mind halfway through, and died.

Watson took them back the way cities take back the exhausted—without welcome, without rejection, simply by continuing to exist.

Shammy’s warmth flickered in and out of her like bad current.

Mai kept trying not to calculate and kept calculating anyway.

Ace walked with the fragment riding the edge of her vision like a second horizon she could not look toward directly without risking everything.

By the time they reached the apartment building, none of them had gotten smaller inside themselves.

That was the real problem.

Not distance.

Compression.

Inside, the room felt too familiar.

That made it hostile.

Three chairs at the table.

The board on the wall.

The old chair in the corner, still holding fifty years of waiting in its empty shape.

Everything exactly where it had been.

As if Pacifica had failed to change anything.

As if that weren't the most insulting possibility.

Shammy crossed to the window and stopped there.

The fixer came back first.

Of course she did.

Flat voice. Straight spine. Emotion sealed behind utility.

"I know how to be alone," she said.

No preface.

No easing into it.

Just truth weaponized before anyone else could touch it.

"I've been fighting alone for fifty years. Working alone. Living alone. I know how to survive that way."

Mai opened her mouth.

"Don't calculate me."

The force in Shammy's voice stopped the sentence before it formed.

Mai pressed her hand harder against the wall.

The numbers scattered anyway.

"I'm trying to understand."

"No." Shammy turned. "You're trying to reduce. There's a difference."

That hit harder than Mai expected.

Because it was accurate.

Mai's jaw tightened.

"The numbers are loud."

"They are always loud," Shammy snapped. "That has never once made them more important than the people in front of you."

Ace moved then.

Just enough.

Shadow sliding off the wall and into the room's center.

"Shammy."

No command.

No comfort.

Just a name, spoken by someone who meant to stay until it stopped being thrown like a weapon.

Shammy laughed once.

Short. Bitter. Tired.

"I went flat," she said. "In the fight. I felt the sync go and I dropped straight back into what kept me alive before you got here."

She looked away.

"That should tell you everything."

"It tells us what you learned," Ace said.

"And?"

"And that you learned the wrong lesson because it was the only one available."

That made Shammy go still.

Not angry.

Hit.

"I don't know how to do this anymore," she said, quieter now. "Not like before. Not like you want. I'm not that person."

"We know," Ace replied.

"You don't."

"We know you're different."

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No,” Ace said. “It isn’t.”

That honesty took some of the fire out of the room.

Mai felt it happen before she understood why.

Ace kept going.

“We don’t know what fifty years alone did to you. We don’t know what it cost. We don’t know who you had to become to survive this city.” A pause. “But that isn’t the same as saying we shouldn’t be here now.”

Shammy stared at her.

The warmth flickered.

Went out.

Returned halfway.

Failed.

“I can’t be what I was.”

No one argued.

Good.

“I can’t just step back into some old shape because you miss it.” Her hands shook once, very slightly, then clenched to stop it. “I’ve built a life here out of bad decisions, useful contacts, and the ability to cut feeling out of a situation before it kills me. That’s real. That is who I am.”

Mai finally spoke.

“We’re not asking you to undo that.”

Shammy looked at her sharply.

Mai pushed through before the numbers could ruin it.

“We’re asking whether that version of you still allows for us.”

There.

The right question.

No percentages. No matrices. No structural shortcuts.

Just that.

Shammy looked at her long enough for the city noise to change shape twice outside.

Then she sat.

Not gracefully.

Not theatrically.

Like something inside her had simply stopped agreeing to remain standing.

"I don't know," she admitted.

The room changed around the sentence.

Not because it was dramatic.

Because it was clean.

"I don't know if I can trust the same way. I don't know if I remember how. I don't know whether what you're calling triad still fits around who I had to become." She looked at the board. At the chairs. At everything she had arranged to survive around absence. "I don't even know if I want to find out and that makes me hate myself more than I can explain."

Ace crossed the distance then.

Not fast.

Not hesitant.

She stopped beside Shammy's chair. Close enough to matter. Far enough not to corner.

"You don't have to want the whole thing right now," Ace said. "You just have to not run."

Shammy let out a breath that almost became a laugh.

"Your standards are low."

"They're realistic."

That, somehow, nearly worked.

Mai pushed off the wall and came closer too, slower than Ace, more visibly deliberate.

"I can't stop the numbers," she said. "I can try not to let them speak first."

Shammy looked up at her.

That mattered too.

Mai held the gaze.

"I was there in Pacifica," she said. "But you were right. I was not fully *with* you. I felt the sync breaking and I still reached for explanation instead of presence." A beat. "I do not like being wrong in that direction."

A tiny, involuntary sound came out of Shammy.

Not a laugh.

Not not a laugh.

"I believe that," she said.

"Good."

Silence settled again.

Less violent this time.

Ace looked between both of them.

"We rebuild small," she said. "Not by pretending none of this happened. Not by pretending fifty years is a bruise." Her eyes flicked once toward the window, violet darkening at the edges as the fragment pressed and was denied. "We rebuild by staying in the room when it would be easier not to."

That was the chapter in one sentence.

No one said it aloud.

No one needed to.

Later, they did not fix anything.

That was important.

No breakthrough. No clean emotional landing. No sudden restoration of trust through sheer sincerity and convenient timing.

They just remained.

Shammy at the table eventually, warmth coming back in damaged pulses.

Mai sitting opposite, one hand around a cup she had not touched for several minutes because the heat gave her something non-abstract to hold.

Ace by the window first, then at the table too, because standing apart had started to feel too much like surrender.

The fragment kept touching the edge of her vision.

She kept pushing it back.

Neither side won.

Not tonight.

Outside, the city moved through one more cycle of appetite and exhaustion.

Inside, the three of them occupied the same room without mistaking that for solution.

That, too, mattered.

When they finally spoke again, it was practical on purpose.

“We train tomorrow,” Ace said.

Shammy nodded once.

“I’ll try not to go flat.”

Mai looked down at the cup in her hands.

“I’ll try not to treat presence like an equation.”

Ace’s mouth shifted by half a degree.

A smile in her language.

“I’ll try not to let the fragment pick the angles.”

That got the closest thing to real warmth Shammy had managed since Pacifica.

“Ambitious,” she said.

“Reasonable,” Ace corrected.

The warmth held for almost five full seconds.

Progress.

Tiny. Real. Inadequate. Necessary.

The night stretched around them after that.

Not peaceful.

Not kind.

Just survivable.

And for now, that had to be enough.

Because the truth Viktor had smelled on them was still true:

they were not healed.

they were not synchronized.

they were not okay.

But they had not scattered.

Not yet.

In Night City, that counted as a form of love.

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