



ACE & MAI — “MR FATE”

ACT 1 — SIGNAL

The first time Night City heard the name **Mr Fate**, nobody important was watching.

That mattered later.

It happened at 02:13 in the morning, which meant the city was not asleep, because Night City did not sleep. It merely changed masks. The polished towers dimmed their executive halos. The street markets warmed up their grills. The alley clinics unlocked their back doors. The clubs gave up pretending the night had structure and let the music become weather.

In Kabuki, rain came down in a thin polluted mist, soft enough to pass for atmosphere if you did not look at the oily colors collecting along the curb.

A delivery boy named Timo Alvarez was cutting across the service lane behind a closed noodle bar with a sealed shard taped under the left sleeve of his jacket. He was seventeen, wired on bad synth-caffeine, and very proud of the fact that he had been trusted with something real.

The job was simple.

Pick up from a storage locker near Charter Street. Deliver to a man in a gray coat under the old maglev overpass. Do not scan it. Do not ask. Do not mention the name of the fixer who had arranged it.

That was the kind of job that kept the lower organs of Night City moving. Not glamorous. Not famous. Just another little vein under the concrete, carrying money, fear, drugs, blackmail, chrome serials, stolen religious icons, dead men's memories—whatever somebody wanted moved quietly and quickly.

Timo made it halfway down the lane before every public screen in a two-block radius blinked out.

Not off.

Out.

Advertisements vanished. Meat substitutes stopped spinning in their simulated steam. A smiling actress froze mid-laugh with half her face dissolved into compression static. A vending machine tried to apologize in Japanese, failed, and displayed a gray field instead.

Then a black screen appeared.

White letters, plain and centered.

MR FATE IS LIVE.

No logo.

No animation.

No corporate sting.

No music.

The stream opened on a fixed camera angle from somewhere above Kabuki. Not a security cam. Too clean. Not a drone. Too still. It showed the very lane Timo was walking through, rain misting across the lens in fine, silver lines.

Timo stopped.

People did that. Even in Night City. Maybe especially there.

A voice came through every speaker at once.

Not deep. Not theatrical. Not obviously artificial.

Almost bored.

"Tonight's small lie belongs to Marrow Lane."

Timo's stomach tightened.

The camera feed zoomed in. Not smoothly, not like a professional system. It lurched in three small movements, as if someone had dragged a dirty finger across the city and landed on him.

"Courier: Timo Alvarez. Age seventeen. Carries a black-market behavioral modifier shard under his left sleeve. Destination: Tyger Claw intermediary. Origin: stolen from a Militech subcontractor clinic. Arranged through a fixer who promised the boy this was only medication."

Timo did not run immediately.

That was the part nobody clipped later, because it made him look stupid, and nobody liked stupidity unless it was someone else's. He stood there with his mouth half open and his hand already moving toward his sleeve, a boy caught between denial and instinct.

The voice continued.

"Two men are waiting for him at the overpass. They will not pay him."

From the far end of the lane, a door opened.

Timo ran then.

Not fast enough.

The first gunshot cracked off the wet brick and turned every nearby window into a mouth. Someone screamed from a balcony. A food vendor ducked behind his cart. The public screens kept broadcasting, steady and calm, as if all of this had been scheduled between lifestyle ads.

The camera followed badly. It lost Timo twice. Caught him once as a blur. Caught the men after him much more clearly.

Names appeared under their faces.

Aliases. Gang ties. Outstanding debts. One romantic betrayal. One falsified implant invoice. One murder that had never officially happened.

Night City loved a show.

By 02:18, thousands were watching.

By 02:21, a clipped version of the stream had already been reposted under fourteen different tags.

By 02:30, Marrow Lane was finished as a fixer.

By sunrise, three people were dead, six were hiding, and a teenage courier with a bullet through his shoulder had become the least interesting part of the story.

The clip ended with the same black screen.

White letters.

FATE DOES NOT GUESS.

Then nothing.

No source.

No archive.

No channel history.

No payment trail.

No trace stable enough to bite.

Just the name.

Mr Fate.

Ace watched the clip twice and disliked it more the second time.

The safehouse windows looked out over a street that had forgotten the meaning of repair. Neon spilled down cracked glass and puddled in the room in broken colors: red from a pharmacy sign that sold more ammunition than medicine, blue from a braindance bar with a dead hologram dancer twitching at the waist, green from the cheap security strip Mai had installed along the sill.

Ace sat on the edge of the couch with one knee drawn up, arms folded around it. She was small enough that the oversized couch made her look temporarily misplaced, but nothing in her posture

allowed the room to underestimate her. Her black hair fell in uneven layers around her face, violet sheen catching whenever the screen flickered. One hand rested near the hilt of a katana that was not drawn.

Not because she expected to need it.

Because Night City had taught them that expecting anything was amateur behavior.

On the screen, Timo Alvarez ran again.

The camera lurched.

The shot cracked.

The stream named a killer before the killer fired.

Ace's eyes narrowed.

"I hate him."

Mai stood behind the counter with a cup of coffee she had forgotten to drink. Silver hair tied messily back, shoulders still, gaze sharpened past the footage rather than into it. She had pulled the clip apart three different ways already—metadata, repost chains, visual layering, audio compression—and none of it had given her the satisfaction of being useful.

"That was fast," she said.

"He used a kid as bait."

"We do not know that."

Ace glanced over her shoulder.

Mai held the look without softening it.

Then she exhaled once, quiet and irritated at herself.

"We know enough to dislike him," she amended. "Not enough to understand him."

Shammy was sitting on the windowsill because chairs were apparently a suggestion rather than furniture. Tall, pale-haired, long limbs folded with impossible ease, she had one hand against the glass. The faint electric blue in her hair shifted whenever distant thunder rolled between the towers. There was no real storm outside. Not the kind weather reports understood. But the air around Shammy had its own opinions, and tonight those opinions kept making the room smell faintly of rain on hot circuitry.

"He did not sound happy," Shammy said.

Ace snorted. "That makes it better?"

"No." Shammy tilted her head, listening to something under the replay. "It makes it stranger."

Mai tapped the counter twice with one finger.

"Again."

Ace made a small noise that meant she objected to watching the boy get shot for a third time but understood why they had to. Mai replayed the audio only.

The safehouse speakers carried Mr Fate's voice without the screaming, without the rain, without the panic layered over it.

"Tonight's small lie belongs to Marrow Lane."

Silence.

"Courier: Timo Alvarez. Age seventeen..."

Mai closed her eyes.

"Stop there."

The audio froze.

Ace looked at her. "You caught something."

"Maybe."

"That means yes."

"It means maybe."

"Mai."

"It means yes, but I dislike the shape of it."

Shammy smiled faintly at the glass. "That is the same thing with more furniture."

Mai ignored that with dignity.

She replayed one sentence.

"Tonight's small lie belongs to Marrow Lane."

Again.

"Tonight's small lie belongs to Marrow Lane."

Then she muted the feed.

"That is not a threat structure."

Ace waited.

Mai's eyes stayed on the blank screen.

"A threat says: I know what you did. I can hurt you. Obey me."

"This one did hurt them."

"Yes, but not to make them obey." Mai finally picked up her coffee, remembered it was cold, and put it back down with visible disappointment. "He is not using information as leverage."

Ace's mouth tightened.

"He's using it as a blade."

"Yes."

Shammy's fingers shifted against the window. Outside, the neon pharmacy sign buzzed, flickered, and steadied again.

"Blades have hands," she said.

Mai looked toward her.

"Usually."

There it was.

The room changed a little.

Not dramatically. Nothing slammed, sparked, or whispered from beyond the walls. But Ace noticed Mai go still in the way she went still when a map stopped being a map and started being a trap. Shammy's attention sharpened, not on the screen now, but on the city beyond it.

Ace leaned forward.

"What?"

Mai pulled up another window. Then another. Streams of copied footage, comments, reaction edits, street commentary, conspiracy splinters, half-drunk net forum analysis, three fixers denying involvement, two claiming they had known Marrow was dirty for years, one anonymous post insisting Mr Fate had been active for months under different names.

Noise.

Night City produced noise the way old machines produced heat.

Mai moved through it anyway.

"Look at the timing," she said.

Ace did.

The original broadcast had started three minutes before Timo reached the overpass. Not after. Not during the handoff. Before. Enough time to make people watch. Enough time for the men waiting at the far end to panic. Enough time for someone else to interfere if they were close enough and stupid enough.

Nobody had been both.

"So he knew," Ace said.

"Or someone knew."

"Someone with the feed."

Mai's expression did not change, which meant the answer was unsatisfying.

"Maybe."

Ace stared at her.

Mai turned the screen so Ace could see a different angle. A separate repost. Same footage, lower quality, but a few seconds longer at the beginning. A reflection in the corner of a window. Not useful to most people. Barely visible.

Mai froze it.

"There."

Ace looked. "That's a camera reflection."

"Yes."

"Not helpful."

"Wrong height for the feed angle. Wrong lens distortion. The final stream was assembled."

Shammy slid down from the windowsill, landing without sound.

"From more than one eye."

Mai nodded once.

Ace looked back at the frozen image.

Her dislike did not fade. It got cleaner.

"So Mr Fate isn't watching from one place."

"Not necessarily."

"Mai."

Mai rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"I am not ready to say what he is. I am ready to say what he is not."

Ace's fingers flexed near the katana.

"Say it."

Mai looked at the black screen where white letters still hovered in the pause frame.

"He is not just streaming."

The second Mr Fate broadcast hit Northside at 20:44 the next evening and did not involve a child.

That made people more comfortable sharing it.

The stream opened on a woman in a red synth-leather coat stepping out of a clinic with a private Trauma Team policy registered under a dead man's name. The voice identified her as a broker between a minor fixer called Glass Nico and three scav groups who had been harvesting cyberware from patients sedated during illegal pain-management procedures.

Names rolled down the screen.

Dates.

Locations.

Payment amounts.

Clinic staff.

Buyers.

Where the bodies went.

No music.

No dramatic edits.

No visible moral outrage.

Just truth, sharpened until it drew blood.

The broker was killed by her own bodyguard twelve minutes later, after the bodyguard's missing sister appeared in the list of harvested patients.

By midnight, Glass Nico's operation had collapsed.

By morning, two clinics in Northside were burning, one honestly and one for insurance.

The third stream arrived before the smoke cleared.

This one targeted a Santo Domingo protection racket that had been selling the same block to two different gangs. The stream did not merely name the lie. It named the moment each side had planned to betray the other. People who had been drinking together an hour earlier started checking weapons under tables.

The fourth stream exposed a corporate middleman buying police patrol gaps around a warehouse that officially stored medical plastic and unofficially stored children.

That one spread hard.

Too hard.

By then Mr Fate was no longer a clip.

He was an event.

Night City did what Night City always did when confronted with a new predator. It tried to monetize him, worship him, imitate him, dismiss him, weaponize him, and have sex with the idea of him before

breakfast.

Reaction channels bloomed like mold. Someone made a stylized skull logo and sold shirts within six hours, even though Mr Fate had no logo and probably no skull. A betting pool opened on which fixer would be next. Three different gangs claimed they had inside ties to him. Five netrunners claimed they had almost traced him. One was found unconscious in a bathtub full of ice, which had nothing to do with Mr Fate but helped his reputation tremendously.

Fixers began bleeding trust.

Not money first.

Trust.

Money could be moved. Muscle could be bought. Reputation could even survive a scandal if the scandal was useful.

But trust was different. Trust was the invisible contract under every dirty contract. It was the belief that when a fixer said a job was clean, they had at least made sure the dirt was familiar. It was the belief that silence purchased would remain purchased. It was the belief that betrayal had a cost high enough to discourage casual experimentation.

Mr Fate made silence feel temporary.

That was worse than making it expensive.

By the fourth day, jobs started failing before they began.

Clients canceled meets because nobody knew who had leaked what. Gangers shot messengers for carrying the wrong kind of sealed bag. Two merc crews walked away from separate gigs because each had been told the other was secretly hired to eliminate them after delivery. Neither rumor was true. Both became true twenty minutes later, because frightened people loved completing shapes.

Night City was not collapsing.

Night City never collapsed. Collapse implied some former integrity.

It was twitching.

That was enough.

The summons came through a bartender at the Afterlife who did not phrase it as a summons.

"Rogue wants to see you."

That was all.

No message attachment. No location pin. No encrypted briefing packet. No little cinematic flourish for mercs who liked to think their lives had menus.

Just the bartender, a glass being cleaned with a cloth that had given up years ago, and the weight of the name.

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai looked at Shammy.

Shammy looked around the Afterlife with open curiosity, as if she could taste the old violence in the walls.

The club breathed around them.

The Afterlife did not feel like other bars in Night City. Other places sold danger in convenient shapes: neon teeth, chrome cages, dancers with knives in their boots, drinks named after famous dead people because the city mistook memorialization for intimacy.

The Afterlife did not sell danger.

It stored it.

Every shadow had a history. Every booth carried old conversations that had either made someone rich or gotten them reduced to a drink special. The air smelled of alcohol, steel, wet leather, and ambition held too long in the mouth.

Ace walked slightly ahead without meaning to.

Mai let her.

Shammy followed with the kind of calm that made people move before they knew they had decided to. A few heads turned. Most turned back quickly. Night City taught many things, and one of them was not to stare too long at women who looked like the city had failed to categorize them.

Rogue was in her booth.

Of course she was.

She looked like she had been waiting for exactly the amount of time she intended to wait and not a second more. Her posture was relaxed, but nothing about her was soft. Age had not dulled her. It had stripped away everything decorative and left the blade in plain sight.

"Sit," she said.

Ace remained standing for half a beat.

Mai touched two fingers lightly against her wrist.

Ace sat.

Not submissive. Just practical.

Shammy sat last, folding herself into the booth with a small smile at the ceiling as a low vibration passed through the club's sound system. Somewhere distant, bass rolled like thunder under concrete.

Rogue's eyes moved over them.

"You've seen the streams."

Mai nodded. "Everyone has."

"Not everyone understands what they're looking at."

"Do you?"

Rogue smiled without humor.

"If I did, I wouldn't be wasting good bourbon time on a consultation."

Ace leaned back slightly. "Consultation?"

"Job," Rogue said.

"There it is."

"Don't get cute."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Too late."

For a second, almost against the grain of the room, Rogue looked amused.

Then it vanished.

She slid a shard across the table.

Mai did not pick it up immediately.

Rogue noticed.

"Clean," she said.

"That word has flexible meaning here," Mai replied.

"In this building, it means clean enough."

Mai accepted that, slotted the shard into a portable reader rather than herself, and let the contents bloom in a small private projection between them.

Names.

Not the streamed ones.

Fixer names.

Some minor. Some mid-tier. Two that made Ace's eyes sharpen even without context, because the reaction around them changed. Conversations nearby did not stop, but several people became more interested in their drinks.

Rogue tapped one nail against the table.

"Seven fixers hit hard. Four effectively out. Two pretending they're fine. One dead."

"Because of Mr Fate," Mai said.

"Because of what people did after Mr Fate opened his mouth."

Shammy's gaze drifted toward the room beyond the booth.

"Difference matters."

Rogue looked at her. "That's why you're here."

Ace glanced at Shammy, then back to Rogue.

"You don't think he's a netrunner."

"I think if he were just a netrunner, someone would've found a footprint by now. Or sold me a convincing lie about finding one."

Mai studied the list.

"People have tried?"

Rogue's expression hardened by one degree.

"Every idiot with an ice bath and a superiority complex has tried."

Ace muttered, "That explains the bathtub story."

"That story was unrelated."

"I know. That's what makes it very Night City."

Rogue ignored her again, but less successfully this time.

Mai scrolled through the shard contents.

"What do you want from us?"

Rogue leaned back.

"Find out what Mr Fate is. Stop the bleeding."

"Eliminate?"

"If elimination is possible and useful."

Mai looked up.

"And if it is neither?"

"Then be more creative than the problem."

The bass shifted under the floor. Shammy's hair lifted slightly at the ends, electric-blue threads catching a pulse of light from the booth display.

Ace noticed. So did Mai.

Rogue did too, but she filed it away without asking. Smart.

"Why us?" Ace asked.

Rogue gave her a flat look.

"You want the polite answer?"

"No."

"Good. Because this thing is making professional liars afraid of the truth. That means half the city is about to start shooting the other half based on whatever appears on a screen first." Rogue's eyes flicked toward Mai. "You understand structure." Then to Ace. "You understand when structure stops mattering and action has to happen." Then, after a slight pause, to Shammy. "And you..."

Shammy smiled.

Rogue did not smile back.

"You notice things before they become visible."

The booth went quiet.

Not silent. The Afterlife did not allow silence. But the conversation sank under the surface noise where only the people inside it mattered.

Mai closed the projection.

"What has he revealed about you?"

Rogue's face did not move.

Ace looked at Mai.

That had been sharp. Too sharp to be accidental.

Rogue took her time answering.

"Nothing."

Mai waited.

Rogue's fingers rested on the rim of her glass.

"Yet."

There it was.

Not fear.

Rogue did not seem built for fear in any ordinary sense.

But calculation had edges, and one of those edges was the recognition that even a legend could be turned into footage if someone chose the right angle.

Ace understood that better than she wanted to.

Shammy's gaze dropped to the table.

"The room changed when you said that."

Rogue's eyes narrowed.

"This room changes every five seconds."

"No." Shammy's voice stayed soft. "This was smaller."

Mai turned slightly toward her.

Shammy touched one fingertip to the table between the shard and Rogue's glass.

"People are listening for names now. Not words. Names."

Ace let her eyes move without turning her head.

She saw it then.

Not eavesdropping exactly. The Afterlife had too much pride for obvious hunger. But attention had shifted across the room in tiny increments. A shoulder angled wrong. A drink lifted and not sipped. A laugh arriving half a second late. Mr Fate had done something worse than expose secrets.

He had trained people to wait for exposure.

Rogue saw Ace see it.

"Now you understand," she said.

Mai's expression had gone very still.

"Yes," she said. "The stream is not the whole weapon."

Rogue lifted her glass but did not drink.

"No?"

Mai looked past the booth, past the bar, past the club full of mercs pretending not to listen.

"No. The audience is."

Ace hated him more.

Or them.

Or whatever shape the thing would have once they cut into it.

She stood.

Mai did not stop her this time.

Rogue looked up. "Taking the job?"

Ace's smile was small and not friendly.

"We're taking the problem."

Rogue's mouth curved.

"Careful. Problems bite."

Ace turned toward the exit.

"So do I."

Shammy rose after her, air pressure shifting just enough to stir the napkin under Rogue's glass. Mai removed the shard from the reader, held it for a moment, then placed it back on the table.

Rogue raised an eyebrow.

"You don't want the file?"

"I already copied what matters."

"Naturally."

Mai paused.

"One thing."

Rogue waited.

"If Mr Fate wanted money, he would be selling silence. If he wanted control, he would be issuing demands. If he wanted revenge, the pattern would be more personal."

"And?"

Mai looked toward the club doors, where Ace was already waiting under the red spill of the Afterlife sign, too small for the shadow she cast and exactly as dangerous as that contradiction implied.

"Right now," Mai said, "I think Mr Fate wants to be believed."

Rogue's face gave away nothing.

But her fingers stopped moving on the glass.

Outside, Night City kept shining like a wound that had learned to advertise.

And somewhere in the feed-choked dark, a black screen waited for its next moment.

White letters.

A name that was not yet a person.

A threat that had not yet made a demand.

MR FATE IS LIVE.

ACT 2 — FALSE PATHS

The first mistake everyone made was assuming Mr Fate had a center.

Night City liked centers. It pretended not to, because pretending was part of the local architecture, but the city's entire nervous system was built around them. Towers. Clubs. Fixers. Boards. Gangs. Markets. Black clinics. Hidden rooms. Somebody always sat somewhere and made the call.

Find the center, you found the hand.

Find the hand, you found the throat.

Find the throat, and Ace could solve several problems with one clean motion.

That was the comforting version.

Mai did not trust comforting versions.

She spent the next twelve hours in the safehouse turning Mr Fate inside out and finding nothing where a spine should have been.

The room had become less living space than temporary war-room. Empty coffee cups gathered near Mai like failed offerings. A portable reader hummed on the counter. Three stripped-down data panes floated above the table, each one carrying a different layer of the same ugly phenomenon: broadcast timings, victim lists, repost chains, copycat channels, comment spikes, physical incident reports, fixer losses, gang movement, and a separate private column Mai had labeled with one word.

Behavior.

Ace hated that column most.

Not because it was wrong.

Because it kept making sense.

"She's dead," Ace said.

The latest victim file rotated slowly in front of them. Woman. Late thirties. Unregistered trauma surgeon. Operated out of a basement clinic under a laundromat in Heywood. Patched up gang members, mercs, corpo runners, occasionally people who still had enough money to buy dignity by the hour.

Mr Fate had exposed her at 04:11.

Not for the clinic.

For selling sedated patients' biometric maps to a boutique assassination broker who specialized in clean-room organ failure.

She had been killed at 05:02 by a client whose brother had died on an elevator six months earlier after his heart decided, with surgical precision, to stop arguing.

Ace looked at the timestamp.

"Fifty-one minutes."

Mai did not look up. "Yes."

"From broadcast to execution."

"Yes."

"And Mr Fate knew that would happen."

Mai's fingers paused over the projection.

"That is the wrong statement."

Ace's head turned slowly.

Mai corrected herself before Ace could sharpen the silence.

"Or rather, it is too clean. It assumes intention at the point of consequence."

"He exposed her."

"Yes."

"She died."

"Yes."

Ace stared at her.

Mai finally met her eyes.

"If I tell you someone in this room is carrying a weapon, and someone else panics and shoots first, did I kill them?"

Ace did not answer immediately.

That was answer enough.

Shammy was standing near the open window, one hand lifted into the night air. Rain had stopped an hour ago, but the street below still steamed. Neon worked itself through puddles and exhaust haze until the whole block looked submerged in weak chemical light.

"He chooses wounds," Shammy said.

Mai looked toward her.

Shammy's eyes remained on the street.

"He does not always need to strike them. He opens them where the city will claw."

Ace's jaw tightened.

"That doesn't make him less responsible."

"No," Shammy said. "It makes him harder to reach."

Mai nodded once, almost unwillingly.

"That is the problem."

Ace turned back to the floating files. Her reflection moved across the glass, compact and edged, violet eyes bright with impatience.

"So we need a way to reach him."

Mai deleted three useless data branches with small, irritated gestures.

"Everyone is trying that."

"Everyone is bad at it."

"A comforting assumption."

Ace smiled without warmth.

"I specialize."

Mai almost smiled back. Almost. It reached one corner of her mouth and died there because another stream had appeared in the crawl.

A black field.

White letters.

No warning.

MR FATE IS LIVE.

The safehouse went still.

Ace was already standing before the stream opened.

This one did not show an alley.

It showed a conference room.

Corporate. Mid-tier. Not polished enough for Arasaka theater, too expensive for honest business. Frosted glass, matte table, four people in suits pretending their bodies were not full of expensive fear.

The feed angle came from above the center of the room.

Too clean again.

A voice entered.

Bored.

Flat.

"Tonight's respectable lie belongs to Biotechnica subcontractor ledger 9-C."

Mai's fingers moved.

"No public feed in that room," she said.

Ace did not sit back down.

On the screen, names appeared under the four faces.

Not legal names first.

Private names.

Affair handles. Internal code labels. One encrypted grief counselor alias. One illegal addiction-treatment account. Mr Fate was not merely identifying them. He was choosing which identity would hurt most.

Then the documents rolled.

Projected purchase orders. Patient transfers. Liability reroutes. A trial drug pulled from distribution after unlicensed immune responses, then resold through shell clinics as a "combat recovery enhancer" to desperate mercs and chromed workers who could not afford to heal slowly.

A man at the table whispered, "Turn it off."

Nobody turned it off.

Mr Fate continued.

"The dead are filed as noncompliant participants."

Ace's hand closed.

Mai said, very softly, "That is new."

"What?"

"He is not revealing a fixer."

The stream cut to a list of clinics.

Then to payments.

Then to signatures.

Then to an address in Rancho Coronado where the waste had been buried under a construction permit for luxury worker housing that would never be finished.

Comments exploded in side channels before the stream was over.

Merc forums. Labor boards. Gang chats. Anonymous vengeance threads. Corpo denial engines. Three different reaction hosts started talking at once and said nothing worth hearing.

Shammy's hair lifted slightly.

The air in the room became thin.

Not lacking oxygen.

Lacking trust.

Ace felt it crawl over her skin.

The stream ended after six minutes and twelve seconds.

White letters.

FATE DOES NOT PUNISH. FATE DISCLOSES.

Then black.

Mai remained frozen for three breaths.

Ace knew that stillness.

It was the moment before Mai became dangerous in the quiet way.

"What?"

Mai replayed the first thirty seconds without sound. Then froze the image before the camera settled.

"What do you see?"

Ace leaned over the table.

"Conference room. Four corpo bastards. Table. Glass. Bad taste in chairs."

"Angle."

"Ceiling."

"No camera there."

Ace looked again.

Mai highlighted the reflection on the table surface. A faint distortion. Barely anything.

Then she highlighted a second point in the chrome edge of a wall-mounted panel.

Then a third, in the glass behind one executive's shoulder.

Three fractional images.

Three slightly different angles.

Mai overlaid them.

The "single" feed collapsed into a stitched composition.

Ace's annoyance sharpened into attention.

"Multiple sources."

"Yes."

"Still could be one operator."

"Yes."

Mai said it too quickly.

Ace caught that.

"But you don't think so."

"I think the stream is edited from separate captures with different quality profiles, different timestamp noise, and different compression damage."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the source material was not collected by one system."

Shammy turned from the window.

"Different eyes again."

Mai nodded.

"Different eyes. Different access. Same mask."

Ace sat slowly this time.

"Mr Fate is taking submissions?"

Mai did not answer.

The word sat in the room anyway, ugly and useful.

Submissions.

It made Mr Fate smaller in one direction and larger in another.

Not a ghost in the wire.

Not a single unreachable genius.

Something worse.

A shape people fed.

Mai opened a new pane and pulled in every known broadcast start. She split them by visual signature, audio cadence, language artifacts, upload pathways, incident proximity, likely source access.

The table filled with patterns.

Too many.

At first glance, chaos.

At second, intention.

At third, something pretending to be intention.

Ace watched Mai move pieces around until the floating display stopped looking like a search map and started looking like a disease chart.

"Say it," Ace said.

Mai's mouth tightened.

"I do not have enough."

"Mai."

"I hate saying things before they are stable."

"You're allowed to hate things while doing them."

Shammy made a quiet approving sound.

Mai inhaled once.

Then she said, "I think Mr Fate is not collecting information."

Ace waited.

"I think information is coming to him."

There.

The words did what words did when they were the right ones.

They made the room worse.

Their first field stop was a dead clinic that smelled of bleach, wet plaster, and burned plastic.

The laundromat above it still had two functioning machines. One turned slowly behind cracked glass with nothing inside, the empty drum thumping at irregular intervals like a weak heartbeat. Someone had sprayed **FATE SAW YOU** across the wall in silver paint. Someone else had corrected the grammar underneath with a knife.

Downstairs, the clinic had been stripped quickly.

Not professionally. Professionally meant calm. This place had been gutted by people with anger in their hands. Cabinets hung open. Cheap med equipment lay broken under footprints. A surgical chair sat in the middle of the room, straps cut, one armrest dark with old blood and newer rainwater leaking through a ceiling fracture.

Ace moved first.

She always moved first in rooms that might still contain decisions.

Mai followed with a scanner in one hand and her disruptor low in the other. Shammy entered last and paused on the threshold.

"What?"

Shammy looked at the room.

"Too many endings."

Ace glanced back.

"That one needs translating."

Shammy stepped inside. The overhead light flickered once, buzzed, then steadied as if deciding not to embarrass itself.

"Fear, anger, relief, shame. Not sequential. Layered." She touched the air near the broken surgical chair but not the chair itself. "People came here after the stream. Not all for revenge."

Mai looked up from a cracked wall terminal.

"Some came to retrieve evidence."

"Yes."

Ace crouched beside a pile of discarded patient bands.

"Some came to erase it."

Shammy nodded.

"And some came to see if the monster looked like a monster."

That landed harder than it should have.

Mai's scanner pinged.

"Terminal is wiped."

Ace made a soft scoff. "Of course."

"Badly."

"Better."

Mai connected a reader and let the ruined system cough up whatever it could. File fragments. Deletion scars. Payment references. Video logs corrupted into gray blocks and broken audio.

Then one file opened halfway.

A partial recording from the clinic's back hallway.

Three nights before the stream.

A person in a delivery jacket stood near the door. Face hidden under a cheap filter mask. Not unusual. Everyone in Night City had a reason to hide their face, and half of those reasons were boring.

The person handed the surgeon a shard.

No audio.

The surgeon watched whatever was on it.

Her posture changed.

Not fear first.

Recognition.

Then anger.

Then the clip broke.

Mai ran it again.

Ace leaned closer.

"That Mr Fate?"

"No."

"You sound sure."

"Not the same movement profile as any obvious broadcast operator hypothesis."

Ace looked at her.

"Sometimes I miss when people just lied with their mouths."

Mai ignored that.

She zoomed on the shard.

There was a sticker on it.

A child's sticker, old, half-peeled.

A cartoon fortune cookie with a smiling face.

Ace said nothing.

Shammy moved beside them, expression distant.

"That was before she was exposed."

Mai nodded. "Someone warned her."

"Or blackmailed her."

"Maybe."

Ace stood.

"So Mr Fate gave her a chance?"

"No," Mai said. "Someone gave her a chance. We do not know if Mr Fate did."

Ace did not like that distinction.

Which meant it probably mattered.

Mai extracted the shard image, matched the sticker through local vendor feeds, and found seventeen possible sellers in twelve districts. Useless.

Then she checked something else.

Not the sticker.

The jacket.

Delivery company. Small. Independent. Mostly used by people too paranoid for regular courier apps and too cheap for professionals.

The company had gone out of business six months ago.

Its remaining inventory had been sold in bulk.

Buyer unknown.

Ace's smile thinned.

"There's our thread."

Mai shook her head.

"There are eighty-four jackets."

"Then we pull eighty-four threads."

Shammy looked up at the ceiling fracture where rainwater fell, one drop at a time, into a steel tray someone had placed beneath it.

"No," she said.

Ace and Mai both looked at her.

Shammy's gaze lowered slowly.

"Threads want to be followed."

The clinic light buzzed again.

Mai understood first. Ace saw it in her face and disliked the delay before she did.

“You think this was planted.”

“I think the room wants us to chase outward.”

Ace’s eyes moved over the broken terminal, the partial clip, the visible sticker, the jacket logo.

Too neat.

Not clean.

But noticeable in exactly the way a desperate investigator would call luck.

Mai closed the file.

“False path.”

Ace straightened fully.

The clinic suddenly felt different.

Less like a crime scene.

More like bait that had already failed to catch something and was patiently waiting to try again.

From upstairs, the empty washing machine thumped.

Once.

Twice.

Then stopped.

Ace drew one katana halfway before the sound finished dying.

A man at the top of the basement stairs froze with both hands raised.

“Don’t shoot!”

Ace looked at the katana.

Then at him.

“Wrong warning.”

The man was maybe twenty-five, maybe forty. Night City did that to faces. He wore a patched coat, cheap eye implants, and the exhausted expression of someone who had not slept because sleep required trust. He was thin in the specific way of people who skipped meals to afford updates.

Mai’s disruptor was already aimed at his sternum.

Shammy did not move, but the air behind the man seemed to tighten.

He noticed. Swallowed.

"I'm not with them."

Ace's blade hummed faintly.

"With who?"

"The clinic. The people who burned it. The ones—" His eyes darted toward the broken chair. "Any of them."

Mai studied him.

"Name."

"Pavel."

"Full."

"No."

Ace smiled.

Pavel reconsidered very quickly.

"Pavel Orta."

Mai checked. The name existed. Too many debts. Minor data broker. No confirmed gang ties. Two arrests. One sealed juvenile record. One sister listed as deceased in a traffic accident that had too little vehicle damage and too much missing chrome.

Mai's eyes sharpened.

"You sent something to Mr Fate."

Pavel's face went gray.

That was answer enough.

Ace took one step toward him.

He flinched so hard his shoulder hit the wall.

"I didn't know it would go like this."

Ace stopped.

Not because that helped him.

Because it sounded true in the worst possible way.

Mai kept the disruptor level.

"What did you send?"

Pavel's mouth opened. Closed.

Shammy spoke softly.

“The truth will be easier before she becomes impatient.”

Ace gave her a sideways look.

“That was very polite.”

“It was.”

Pavel looked between them and decided survival lived somewhere near Mai.

“My sister. She came here after a bad install. Pain spikes, seizures. They said they could stabilize her. Then she was gone.” His voice cracked, and he hated himself for it. That was visible. “Clinic said she walked out. Police said no evidence. I found records. Parts of records. Payments. Names. I tried selling it first.”

Mai’s expression changed by one fraction.

“To whom?”

“Anyone.”

Ace’s dislike returned.

Pavel lifted both hands higher.

“I needed leverage.”

“For money?”

“For proof!” he snapped, then immediately regretted the volume. “For someone to admit she existed.”

The room did not soften.

It did adjust.

Mai lowered the disruptor one centimeter. Not enough to be mercy. Enough to be accuracy.

“How did Mr Fate receive it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wrong answer.”

“It’s the true one.”

Ace’s blade came another centimeter free.

Pavel started talking faster.

“There was a drop. Anonymous board. Not even a real board, it moved. One day a thread appears, says: *Tell the city what the city buried*. People posted. Mostly bullshit. Conspiracies. Exes. Gang lies. Corpo dirt. I uploaded what I had because—because nothing else worked.”

Mai's eyes had gone very still again.

"What happened after?"

"Nothing. For two days. Then someone contacted me."

"Mr Fate?"

"No. I don't know. No name. Text only. Asked for verification. More files. Asked how I got them. Asked what I wanted done."

Ace frowned.

"What did you answer?"

Pavel's face folded around the memory.

"I said I wanted them seen."

Silence.

Not moral.

Not clean.

Just silence.

Mai asked, "Did you provide the clinic layout?"

"Yes."

"Camera access?"

"I had two hallway cams from old maintenance credentials."

Mai looked toward Ace.

Different eyes.

Ace's hand tightened on the katana.

"And Mr Fate used them."

Pavel nodded once, barely.

"I thought they would expose the clinic. I thought police, clients, somebody would—"

He stopped.

Even he knew how stupid that sentence became when said aloud in Night City.

Ace finished for him, voice flat.

"Somebody did."

Pavel looked at the broken surgical chair.

"I didn't know she'd die."

"No," Ace said. "You just knew people would hate her."

He flinched again, but this time it was not fear.

Good.

Fear was too easy.

Mai stepped closer.

"This anonymous board. Can you find it?"

"No."

"Can you try?"

"It disappeared."

"Can you try?"

Pavel looked at Mai, then Ace, then Shammy.

Then he laughed once. A small, ugly sound.

"You're not the first."

Mai did not blink.

"Who else asked?"

Pavel swallowed.

"Fixers. Gangs. Some corpo cleaner. A woman with gold eyes who knew my mother's maiden name. They all wanted the same thing."

"The board."

"The people behind it."

Ace's eyes narrowed.

"And?"

Pavel looked toward the stairs as if expecting the city to lean down and listen.

"They found copies. Mirrors. Dead threads. Fake confession channels. Some were traps. Some were just people begging to be heard." He shook his head. "That thing is everywhere now."

Mai's voice dropped.

"That thing."

Pavel looked at her.

"It isn't one site anymore."

The basement felt suddenly smaller.

Above them, the dead laundromat sign flickered through the floor grate in broken blue pulses.

Mai said, "Explain."

Pavel rubbed both hands over his face.

"People started making their own drops. Mr Fate mirrors. Fate boxes. Truth wells. Confession markets. Half fake, half real. People submit things. Other people verify. Or claim to. Some streams use Mr Fate's name. Some copy the format. Some get taken down. Some reappear with better data."

Ace stared.

Mai's expression closed around the information like a lock finding its teeth.

Pavel kept going, because now stopping would be more dangerous than talking.

"I don't think anyone controls it anymore."

There it was.

Not the full truth.

But the first honest crack.

Shammy's hair lifted in a static breath.

Mai asked, "Anymore?"

Pavel looked miserable.

"Maybe nobody ever did."

They did not take Pavel with them.

Ace wanted to.

Not for questioning.

Mai saw it and stopped her before intention became motion.

Outside the laundromat, rain had started again, harder this time. It struck the pavement in neon flecks and turned every parked car into a blurred wound of reflected advertisements.

Pavel stood under the broken awning, shivering in his patched coat.

"You can't stop it," he said.

Ace looked at him.

He shrank slightly but kept talking.

"I'm not saying that to be dramatic. You can find one channel, ten channels, people will just make more. Everybody has something. Everybody knows something. Everybody wants somebody else dragged into the light."

Mai studied his face.

"And you?"

Pavel's laugh had no humor left in it.

"I wanted my sister back."

Shammy said gently, "That is not the same thing."

"No," Pavel whispered. "It turned into the same thing anyway."

Ace hated that too.

Night City had a talent for making different sins share furniture.

Mai gave Pavel a contact code.

He stared at it.

"What is this?"

"A way to send anything else you remember."

"I don't remember anything useful."

"You may later."

Pavel looked at the code, then at Mai.

"Will you protect me?"

Ace answered before Mai could.

"No."

Pavel's mouth opened.

Ace stepped closer, rain running down the dark edges of her hair.

"We are not going to lie to you just because you're already scared. If Mr Fate, or a fixer, or somebody who thinks you helped ruin their business decides to come for you, you are in danger."

Pavel's face drained.

Mai gave Ace a look.

Ace did not apologize.

"But," Ace continued, "if you send us useful information before someone kills you, we may become someone else's problem first."

Pavel stared.

Then, despite everything, he smiled a little.

"That's terrible comfort."

Ace sheathed the katana fully.

"It's Night City. Comfort costs extra."

They left him there under the awning with the rain and the code and whatever guilt could still be useful.

The next false path came from a netrunner named Larkspur who had never met a conspiracy she did not want to monetize.

Rogue gave them the contact with the same expression a person might use when handing over spoiled meat that still technically contained protein.

"Useful," Rogue said. "Annoying. Do not believe anything she says until she has tried to sell it twice."

Larkspur operated out of a vertical apartment stack in Japantown, thirty-four floors of cheap luxury and expensive despair. The building had a lobby fountain that had never held water and an elevator that smelled of perfume, burnt plastic, and recent panic.

Her apartment door opened before they knocked.

A camera above it rotated toward Ace.

Then toward Mai.

Then toward Shammy.

Then back to Ace, as if confused by scale, threat priority, or both.

A voice came through the speaker.

"Absolutely not."

Ace looked at the camera.

Mai sighed.

Shammy smiled.

The door closed its lock again.

Ace asked, "Was that the whole meeting?"

Mai pressed the buzzer.

The speaker clicked.

"I said absolutely not."

Mai looked up. "Rogue sent us."

"That is why I did not activate the hallway deterrent."

Ace glanced down the corridor. "What hallway deterrent?"

A panel in the wall opened two centimeters and revealed the nose of something gun-shaped.

Ace smiled.

"Oh, good."

Mai stepped slightly in front of her.

"We need information on Mr Fate."

"So does everyone."

"We are less likely to die stupidly with it."

A pause.

The speaker crackled.

"That is the best pitch I've heard this week."

The door unlocked.

Larkspur looked exactly like someone who sold fear professionally. Thin, bright-eyed, hair shaved on one side and braided with optic threads on the other, wearing an oversized shirt that read **I WAS RIGHT TOO EARLY** in peeling letters. Her apartment was a shrine to digital paranoia: monitors, cables, signal dampeners, cheap charms, blackout curtains, three dead drones hanging from the ceiling like warnings.

She stared at Shammy for half a second too long.

Shammy stared back pleasantly.

Larkspur stopped staring.

"Shoes off or don't touch anything."

Ace looked at the floor, which was covered in cables, food wrappers, and what might once have been socks.

"No."

"Fine. Then touch nothing."

Mai accepted that as a workable treaty.

Larkspur had built a map.

Not a good map. Not clean. But dense enough that Mai's attention sharpened despite herself.

Mr Fate channels, mirrors, repost clusters, dead drops, suspected original feeds, false flags, copycats, monetized hoaxes, real leaks misattributed to Fate, Fate-branded revenge edits, gang propaganda wearing Fate's format like a stolen jacket.

The wall was full of them.

Lines everywhere.

Red, yellow, white, blue.

Ace looked at it and immediately wanted to cut the wall in half.

"This is not one thing," Mai said.

Larkspur smiled.

"Congratulations, you have reached level two."

Ace glanced at her.

Larkspur's smile weakened but survived. Brave. Or stupid. Night City often used the same packaging.

Mai stepped closer to the map.

"How far have you traced the first broadcast?"

"You mean the first first, or the first one people cared about?"

Mai turned her head slowly.

Larkspur pointed at a cluster near the lower left.

"Marrow Lane was not first. It was first clean hit. First viral hit. First time the voice and format lock together."

"What came before?"

"Ugly stuff. Broken uploads. Local exposes. Revenge dumps. Some random black screens using the word fate, lowercase. At least two were probably unrelated. One was a dead man's scheduled confession. One might have been AI sludge. One was a preacher with a voice filter and too much confidence."

Ace folded her arms.

"Useful part?"

"That was the useful part."

Mai did not look away from the wall.

“Pattern formation.”

Larkspur snapped her fingers.

“Yes. The myth did not arrive complete. It assembled.”

Mai’s eyes moved from cluster to cluster.

“Who assembled it?”

“That is the expensive question.”

Ace said, “We’re not paying.”

“No, Rogue is paying. Different emotional texture.”

Mai ignored the exchange.

“What is your answer?”

Larkspur walked to a screen and pulled up three audio waveforms.

“Everybody asks who owns the channel. Wrong question. The channel is not stable. Broadcasts jump infrastructure. Some hijack ad networks. Some piggyback local emergency crawls. Some use compromised security feeds. One came through a children’s educational holo-board in Watson, which was frankly upsetting.”

Ace’s expression went flat.

Larkspur lifted both hands.

“Not my doing.”

Mai leaned in.

“The voice?”

“Now that is interesting.”

She played three clips.

Mr Fate’s voice in Marrow Lane.

Mr Fate’s voice in Northside.

Mr Fate’s voice in the Biotechnica stream.

Same general tone. Same dead cadence. Same lack of emotion.

But separated, stripped, cleaned—

Ace heard it.

She wished she had not.

"They're not the same."

Mai nodded.

Larkspur grinned.

"Voice model. Or rather, models. Different bases, same target profile. Somebody built a mask and people keep approximating it."

Shammy moved closer to the waveform display.

"A chorus pretending to be a single throat."

Larkspur pointed at her.

"Yes. Creepy, but yes."

Mai's gaze did not leave the waveforms.

"So why has nobody published that?"

Larkspur's grin vanished.

For the first time, she looked away.

Ace noticed.

So did Mai.

Shammy did not need to notice. The air did it for her.

Mai said, "You found this already."

Larkspur crossed her arms.

"I found enough."

"And?"

"And I enjoy breathing."

Ace took a step forward.

Larkspur's defensive sarcasm failed to load.

Mai spoke before Ace could apply pressure.

"Someone threatened you."

"No." Larkspur swallowed. "Worse."

She pulled up another file.

A black screen.

White letters.

Not public.

Private message.

LARKSPUR IS EARLY.

Under it, a list.

Her real name. Her building. Her accounts. Her mother's care facility. A childhood photo. One medical diagnosis. Two lies she had told people who loved her. A timestamp for a scheduled stream that had never aired.

Ace went very quiet.

Larkspur closed the file quickly, but not quickly enough.

"They didn't threaten," she said. "They demonstrated."

Mai's voice was cold.

"When?"

"Two days ago."

"And you stopped investigating."

"I paused surviving."

Fair.

Unpleasant, but fair.

Shammy looked toward the covered window.

"The system protects itself."

Larkspur laughed once.

"No. Systems protect themselves when they have boundaries. This thing does not have boundaries. That is the problem."

Mai turned back to the map.

"You believe Mr Fate is decentralized."

"I believe Mr Fate is a brand war wearing a moral crusade wearing a ghost story."

Ace stared.

Larkspur shrugged.

"What? You wanted poetry?"

"No," Ace said. "I wanted someone I could hit."

"Then you are going to be disappointed and possibly very busy."

Mai studied the private threat again.

"Who sent this?"

"Unknown."

"Same infrastructure as public streams?"

"No. Direct. Clean. Personal."

"That implies someone with access to Fate submissions or monitors."

"Or someone pretending to have access."

"Do you think it was real?"

Larkspur's eyes flicked to the list of private details.

"Yes."

Mai accepted that.

Ace looked at the wall map.

"How many people feed this thing?"

Larkspur did not answer right away.

That was answer enough, but she gave numbers anyway.

"Thousands if you count reposts. Hundreds if you count active submitters. Dozens if you count verifiers, editors, mirror operators, people who shape raw leaks into Fate format. Maybe five to ten capable of producing clean broadcasts."

Mai's mouth tightened.

"And none in charge."

"Maybe one was at the beginning. Maybe not. Doesn't matter now."

Ace looked back to the private message.

"It matters to her."

Larkspur's face flickered.

For a second she looked less like a conspiracy vendor and more like someone who had seen the thing under her bed look back.

"Yes," she said. "It matters to me."

Mai copied the waveforms, the map, and the private threat packet. Larkspur complained about proprietary analysis until Shammy asked, with sincere curiosity, whether fear became less frightening when formatted as invoice language.

Larkspur stopped complaining.

At the door, she caught Mai's sleeve.

"Listen. Whatever Rogue wants, whatever you think the solution is—do not just expose people behind it."

Mai looked at her.

"That seems ironic."

"It is practical." Larkspur's eyes were too bright now. "Some of them are victims. Some are grieving. Some are liars. Some are predators. Some are all four depending on the hour. If you show Night City a list, Night City will not sort them. It will eat them."

Ace said, "Mr Fate didn't care."

Larkspur met her eyes despite how clearly that cost effort.

"Then be better than Mr Fate."

Ace did not answer.

Mai did.

"That is the goal."

Larkspur's grip loosened.

"Good. Goals are adorable. Night City loves eating those too."

By the time they returned to the safehouse, the city had learned a new behavior.

People had started staging confessions before Mr Fate could expose them.

Not real confessions. Not most of them.

Preemptive narrative control.

A fixer in Westbrook released a polished statement admitting to "past misjudgments" without naming a single crime. A gang lieutenant livestreamed himself burning payment records and called it purification. A corpo liaison blamed a dead assistant for procurement fraud that had not yet been revealed and might not have existed. Three mercs publicly denied betraying crews nobody had accused them of betraying, which immediately convinced everyone they had.

Mai watched the feeds in silence.

Ace lasted nine minutes.

"This city is stupid."

"No," Mai said. "This city is trained."

Ace paced once across the room. The safehouse was too small for her mood. Most rooms were.

"By him."

"By itself first. Mr Fate is accelerating the reflex."

Shammy sat cross-legged on the floor, a bowl of noodles balanced in one hand. She had added enough spice to make the air near her faintly dangerous.

"People fear being seen," she said. "Then perform visibility to control the fear."

Ace stopped pacing.

"That was disturbingly clean."

Shammy considered. "The noodles help."

Mai pulled up Larkspur's map next to their own.

The combined image was worse.

Not because it showed more.

Because it showed less where more should have clarified.

Marrow Lane. Northside. Santo Domingo. Biotechnica. Private threats. Submission drops. Mirrors. Voice models. Reposts. Copycats. The map refused to become a single line.

Mai split it into human roles.

Submitters.

Verifiers.

Editors.

Broadcasters.

Amplifiers.

Opportunists.

Victims.

Predators.

Audience.

Then she placed Mr Fate over all of them.

The label looked wrong.

Too small.

Too singular.

Ace noticed the same thing.

“That name is lying.”

Mai nodded.

“Yes.”

Ace leaned against the wall, arms folded.

“So stop using it.”

Mai looked at the display for a long moment.

Then she deleted the central label.

The map did not collapse.

That was the point.

Shammy’s chopsticks paused.

“The room feels better.”

Ace frowned.

“It does?”

“A little.”

Mai stared at the empty center of the map.

“He is a compression trick.”

Ace waited.

“Mr Fate takes many actions, many motives, many crimes, many wounds, and compresses them into one identity people can understand.”

“And fear.”

“And follow.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed.

“And feed.”

Mai nodded.

“There is no stable Mr Fate without an audience.”

Shammy set the bowl down.

“Then the audience is not separate.”

"No."

Mai began moving labels again.

The map changed shape.

Not a spiderweb now.

A weather system.

Pressure zones. Currents. Heat pockets. Storm fronts. A pattern that did not have a heart but still had direction.

Shammy leaned forward.

That got Ace's attention.

Mai noticed too.

"What?"

Shammy touched one part of the display, not physically, but close enough that static snapped softly between her finger and the projection.

"This region changes before each stream."

Mai followed the point.

Comment clusters.

Speculation surges.

Anonymous hinting.

Not the stream itself. The air before it.

Mai expanded the data.

Shammy watched.

"There," she said.

Ace looked between them. "I am going to need this in words that do not require being either of you."

Mai's expression sharpened with unwilling excitement.

"Before each major broadcast, there is a rumor-pressure increase."

Ace blinked.

"Rumor pressure."

"I am naming it badly because this is annoying."

Shammy smiled.

"It is not bad."

"It is terrible."

"It is accurate."

Mai accepted the compliment by ignoring it.

She highlighted the pre-stream clusters.

In each case, a small set of rumors had surfaced hours before the broadcast. Not enough to expose the truth. Enough to attract people with missing pieces. Enough to make submitters and verifiers converge around a target.

Not coordination.

Aggregation.

Ace leaned closer.

"So Mr Fate does not choose from nothing."

"No. Targets become visible inside the network before the stream."

"And then someone turns them into a broadcast."

"Or several someones."

Shammy's gaze stayed on the currents.

"A storm forms where heat gathers."

Mai looked at her.

Then at the map.

Then, slowly, she smiled.

Not happily.

Predatorily.

Ace liked that smile much better than the tired one.

"We cannot trace Mr Fate from the broadcast," Mai said. "Too late by then."

Ace understood.

"We trace the pressure before it becomes one."

"Yes."

"Can we?"

Mai looked at the map.

"For the next stream, maybe."

As if the city had been waiting for the line, every screen in the safehouse went black.

Ace drew both katanas before the letters appeared.

White.

Centered.

MR FATE IS LIVE.

But this time there was no public stream.

No citywide feed.

No alley.

No clinic.

No conference room.

Just black.

Then text.

ACE. MAI. SHAMATERAZU.

The room lost temperature.

The letters remained.

Then the voice.

Same cadence.

Not the same throat.

"Some lies carry weapons."

Ace stood very still.

Mai's face went empty in the way that meant everything inside had accelerated.

Shammy rose slowly. The bowl of noodles rattled once on the floor as the air pressure shifted.

The screen changed.

A blurred image appeared.

The Afterlife booth.

Rogue's table.

Their meeting.

Not full audio. Not enough context. Just fragments.

Rogue saying: **Find out what Mr Fate is.**

Ace saying: **We're taking the problem.**

Mai saying: **Mr Fate wants to be believed.**

Shammy looking toward the room.

Then black again.

White letters.

THEY ARE LOOKING FOR FATE.

A pause.

FATE IS LOOKING BACK.

The stream ended.

Not citywide.

Not archived.

Private.

Inside their safehouse.

For one second nobody moved.

Then Ace smiled.

It was not friendly.

It was not even angry in the ordinary way.

It was the expression of something small and sharp discovering the wall had made the mistake of touching her first.

Mai whispered, "That was not a threat."

Ace looked at her.

Mai's eyes were fixed on the dead screen.

"That was recruitment pressure."

Shammy's hair rose around her shoulders in pale electric threads.

"They want the city to know we are part of the shape."

Ace's smile vanished.

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

Outside, the block's neon flickered all at once.

Somewhere far above street level, thunder rolled through a sky with no storm in it.

Ace sheathed one katana.

Kept the other out.

"Good."

Mai looked at her.

Ace's voice was low.

"If they want us in the story, we write back."

ACT 3 — FORCING THE REVEAL

Mai did not answer immediately.

That, more than the private broadcast, made Ace careful.

Mai could think fast. Frighteningly fast, when the shape of a problem had finally given her enough hard edges to cut against. Usually her silence meant calculation. Sometimes it meant restraint.

This silence meant both.

The safehouse screens were dark again, each one reflecting the three of them in different distortions.

Ace looked smallest in the widest screen, which was a lie the room should have known better than to tell.

Shammy stood near the window, hair still faintly lifted around her shoulders, pale strands carrying little electric fractures in the green-blue spill from the street. Her expression had gone distant, but not absent. She was listening below the audible layer again, where the city existed less as sound and more as pressure.

Mai stood in the middle of the room with her hands open at her sides.

No coffee.

No scanner.

No pistol lifted.

No visible motion.

That was bad.

Ace waited three seconds.

Then four.

Then she gave up.

“Mai.”

Mai blinked once.

“They made a mistake.”

Ace smiled a little. “I noticed the part where they picked a fight.”

“No. That was not the mistake.”

Shammy turned from the window.

Mai raised one hand and brought the private broadcast back up from the local capture buffer. She froze the first frame with their names.

ACE. MAI. SHAMATERAZU.

There it was. Their names, clean and centered, wearing the same aesthetic that had made half the city start checking over its shoulder.

Ace looked at her own name and felt an unpleasant little twist in her chest.

Not fear.

Recognition.

Names mattered. In Night City, names were currency, weapons, bait, memorials, lies. A name on a screen was never just a name. It was a targeting system pretending to be text.

Mai zoomed in.

Not visually. Structurally.

She pulled the stream apart and spread it across three analysis panes: delivery route, voice pattern, content selection.

“The public streams are built to look inevitable,” she said. “They reveal something already under social pressure, then let the city complete the damage. But this was not public.”

“Obviously,” Ace said.

Mai glanced at her.

Ace lifted one hand. “I am being emotionally supportive.”

“You are being Ace.”

“Same thing, local dialect.”

Shammy’s mouth curved faintly despite the tension.

Mai continued.

"This message was not meant to expose us yet. It was meant to move us."

"Toward what?"

"Participation."

Ace's expression flattened.

"No."

"I agree."

"Good."

"But agreement is not strategy."

Ace hated when Mai was right before she was useful. It made arguing inefficient.

Mai replayed the voice.

"Some lies carry weapons."

She cut the audio there.

"That sentence is aimed at the audience Mr Fate assumes exists."

"There was no audience."

"There is always an audience in the logic of this system. Even if the audience is only future-facing. A clip can be released later. A private message can become evidence. A threat can become a story."

Ace looked at the frame from the Afterlife booth.

"They want footage of us reacting."

"Yes."

"To make us part of the myth."

"Yes."

Ace's hand tightened around the katana hilt.

"Then we give them nothing."

Mai's eyes sharpened.

"No."

Ace paused.

Mai turned the projection around so the three of them stood inside the pale light of their own reflected names.

"We give them too much."

Rogue took the news better than most people would have, which meant she looked only mildly interested in murder.

They met at the Afterlife again because Rogue did not change working habits just because a citywide exposure cult had learned to whisper into private rooms. That was either discipline or stubbornness. In Night City, the practical difference was often timing.

This time, Rogue's booth felt different before they reached it.

Not visibly.

The same table. Same dim glow. Same bottle untouched for exactly long enough to be decoration and warning. Same nearby mercs pretending their attention did not have a direction.

But the air had learned something since last time.

Shammy felt it first and slowed half a step.

Ace noticed because Shammy never slowed unless the room had changed its teeth.

Mai noticed because Mai noticed everything that mattered and several things that only became important later out of spite.

Rogue looked up.

"You were pinged."

Ace sat down. "Your information hygiene is adorable."

Rogue's eyes moved to Mai.

Mai placed a compact recorder on the table and played the private message once.

No one at the booth spoke during it.

A merc two tables away laughed at something too loudly and too late.

When the recording ended, Rogue's fingers rested lightly against the glass in front of her.

"They named you."

"Yes," Mai said.

"That means they have eyes close enough to know who matters."

"Or access to someone who does."

Rogue looked at the frozen image of the Afterlife booth.

"My place?"

Mai nodded. "Likely."

Rogue's expression did not change.

The air around the booth did.

Shammy glanced upward. Not at cameras. At attention.

Rogue saw that too.

"Say it."

Shammy leaned back slightly, eyes unfocused.

"The room is holding its breath in pieces."

Ace murmured, "That is somehow creepy and accurate."

Mai looked around the Afterlife without turning her head much.

"Mr Fate pressure has entered this room."

Rogue gave a low, humorless laugh.

"Everything enters this room eventually."

"No," Mai said. "This is different. People are not listening for a deal. They are listening for a leak."

The words settled across the table like dust from a ceiling fracture.

Rogue lifted the glass, finally drank, and set it down with controlled care.

"What do you need?"

Ace smiled.

"Permission to lie."

Rogue looked at her.

Mai, to her credit, did not sigh.

"Not broadly," Mai said. "Precisely."

"People always say that right before broadly."

"This will work better if it is precise."

Rogue's gaze stayed on her.

Mai brought up the pressure map she and Shammy had built: rumor spikes, submission drops, verification chatter, and pre-stream convergence clusters. Rogue watched with the face of someone who understood enough to be more annoyed than confused.

"Mr Fate is not choosing targets from the top down," Mai said. "Targets form when enough people feed compatible pieces of information into the system. Someone, or several people, then formats the result into a Fate broadcast."

Rogue looked at the map.

“So crowd-sourced blackmail with branding.”

“Blackmail implies a price for silence. Fate does not sell silence.”

Ace leaned back.

“It sells the feeling that silence is already dead.”

Rogue’s eyes flicked to her.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

Rogue studied the map another few seconds.

“And you want to poison the well.”

“No,” Mai said.

Rogue’s mouth curved. “You’re going to tell me poisoning the well is morally unacceptable?”

Mai’s face stayed still.

“I am going to tell you it is structurally insufficient.”

Ace looked pleased.

Rogue looked at Ace.

Ace said, “She does that.”

Mai expanded the map.

“If we inject false information, Mr Fate either ignores it, verifies around it, or exposes the falsehood and becomes more credible. Lying badly helps him. Lying well risks hurting people who are not the target.”

“So not poison.”

“Pressure.”

Rogue leaned back.

“Explain.”

Mai placed three markers on the map.

“One false job. Three incompatible leak vectors. Each plausible. Each ethically contained. Each damaging to a different group if believed.”

Rogue’s eyes narrowed.

"Contained how?"

"No civilians. No real victims. No actual cargo. No actual client. No real betrayal. The damage exists only if someone turns fragments into Fate-shaped certainty."

Ace added, "Which they will."

Rogue looked at her.

Ace's smile was not nice.

"That is the point."

Mai continued.

"We do not want Mr Fate to expose one fake job. We want multiple Fate nodes to activate around the same fake job and produce incompatible truths."

"Make the mask argue with itself."

"Yes."

Rogue was quiet.

That meant she liked it more than she wanted to admit.

Shammy touched the edge of the projection, and the pressure map shifted into moving currents.

"If the storm thinks one warm place is three different fires, it pulls itself apart trying to gather."

Rogue stared at the map.

Then at Shammy.

"I'm choosing not to ask whether that was metaphor."

"Wise," Ace said.

Rogue ignored her.

"What kind of job?"

Mai's jaw tightened slightly. She had already built the answer and disliked it.

"A fixer transfer."

Rogue did not move.

Ace watched her.

That was enough.

Mai continued anyway.

"A sealed archive allegedly containing proof that multiple fixers collaborated with a corporate cleanup

after the Biotechnica stream. Enough to attract Fate submitters. Enough to worry the right people. Not enough to start an actual war if handled correctly.”

Rogue’s voice went flat.

“You want to fake evidence of fixer collusion.”

“Yes.”

“In my ecosystem.”

“Yes.”

“Using my name?”

“No.”

Rogue waited.

Mai met her eyes.

“Using the fear of your name.”

That one landed.

Not visibly. Rogue was too practiced for that.

But the booth lost two degrees.

Ace almost smiled.

Rogue looked at Mai for a long time.

“You are either getting better at Night City or worse as a person.”

Mai’s answer came without hesitation.

“Both are possible.”

Rogue laughed once. Brief, low, real enough to startle one nearby merc into pretending he had coughed.

Then she pointed one finger at Mai.

“No actual names.”

“No actual names.”

“No real fixer ledgers.”

“None.”

“No one dies because your trap gives some twitchy idiot an excuse.”

Ace and Mai exchanged the smallest look.

Rogue caught it.

"No one dies unnecessarily," she amended.

Ace said, "That is a sentence Night City can understand."

Rogue finished her drink.

"What do you need from me?"

Mai answered.

"A room people think is important. A job people think is real. Three leak paths. And enough visible tension to make Mr Fate hungry."

Rogue's smile returned.

This time it had teeth.

"I can do tension."

The fake job was born in a room that did not officially exist under a warehouse that officially stored imported ceramic tiles.

Night City loved official stories almost as much as it loved watching them rot.

The room had concrete walls, two exits, one visible security camera, three hidden ones, and a table scarred by years of negotiations that had ended in agreements, betrayals, or blood depending on whether everyone remembered which order those were supposed to happen in.

Rogue provided the room.

Mai provided the architecture.

Ace provided the part of the plan everyone trusted least and needed most.

Shammy provided weather.

Not actual rain. Not lightning. Nothing dramatic enough to make the trap look like a trap. She changed the room by millimeters: making stale air feel heavy before certain sentences, letting pressure settle in corners, sharpening the almost-sound around pauses until anyone watching would feel significance where there was only bait.

"Is this manipulative?" Shammy asked while adjusting the room's atmosphere with the thoughtful expression of someone seasoning soup.

"Yes," Mai said.

Ace said, "Beautifully."

Mai looked at her.

Ace shrugged. "What? It is."

The false archive sat in a matte-black case in the middle of the table.

It contained no evidence.

Not exactly.

Mai had built a shell of implications. Financial pattern fragments with no real accounts attached. Partial location pings for vehicles that did not exist. Synthetic message headers that could not survive deep verification but would look suggestive enough to people eager to be first. Three different versions of the supposed truth, each planted along a separate leak path.

Version one suggested the archive implicated several mid-tier fixers.

Version two suggested the archive cleared those fixers but exposed a corporate blackmail operation targeting them.

Version three suggested Rogue had orchestrated the whole leak to identify disloyal crews.

All three could not be true.

All three were baited with enough emotional flavor to appeal to different parts of the Fate ecosystem.

The outraged.

The opportunistic.

The paranoid.

Night City had many flavors of hunger. Mai was setting a table.

Ace inspected the black case for the fourth time.

"It still looks fake."

Mai did not turn from the monitor wall.

"To you, yes."

"To anyone with sense."

Mai did turn then.

Ace paused.

Then corrected herself.

"Right. Night City."

"Also, it does not need to survive expert analysis. It needs to attract pre-broadcast aggregation."

"Rumor pressure."

Mai made a pained face.

"I regret naming it."

Shammy smiled from near the ventilation shaft.

"I do not."

Rogue's hired intermediaries began arriving at 21:00.

Not real participants. Not fully fake either. That was the important part. Rogue had used people who understood they were performing a controlled fiction but did not know all three versions of the lie. Each believed they were carrying one piece of a confidential maneuver designed to flush out Mr Fate.

That belief made them credible.

Partial truth was always the strongest seasoning.

Ace hated the number of variables.

Mai loved them only in the abstract.

Shammy watched the room settle around the deception like a lung learning a borrowed rhythm.

The first leak path opened at 21:17.

A merc named Cinder, paid to look like he had been poorly paid, stepped out into the alley behind the warehouse and made a call on a compromised line. He mentioned the archive, fixer names that did not exist, and the phrase "Rogue is cleaning house."

Within four minutes, the phrase appeared in two private channels.

Within nine, somebody changed "cleaning house" to "executing fixers."

Within twelve, a Mr Fate mirror account reposted a black screen with no video and the words:

HOUSE CLEANING STARTS WITH BLOOD.

Ace watched it appear on Mai's side monitor.

"That is fast."

Mai's eyes moved, measuring.

"Too fast to be central command. Opportunistic mirror."

"Node one?"

"Maybe."

The second leak path opened at 21:29.

This one came through a staged argument between two broker-adjacent figures in a garage where three surveillance systems were known to be dirty. One accused the other of selling the archive to a corporate cleanup team. The other denied too much, too loudly, and used the phrase Mai had planted:

"Biotechnica bought the fixers first."

That phrase hit a labor forum, then a merc retaliation board, then a verified Fate submission drop that

Larkspur had helped them watch without touching.

At 21:46, a different Fate-branded account posted:

FIXERS WERE NOT TARGETS. THEY WERE ASSETS.

Mai marked it red.

"Node two."

Ace leaned over her shoulder.

"Different voice?"

"No voice yet. Different formatting pattern."

Shammy's head tilted.

"The air is splitting."

Mai looked at the pressure map.

It was.

Rumor clusters were forming around both incompatible versions. Not merging. Not resolving. Feeding themselves separately.

The third leak path was the dangerous one.

Because it had to smell like Rogue.

Not actually be Rogue.

Smell like her.

At 22:03, Rogue walked into the warehouse room with two people who looked disposable and were not. She did not know exactly what the cameras would catch. That was deliberate. She only knew the broad shape, because Rogue acting with incomplete knowledge was more convincing than any actor pretending to be Rogue with complete instructions.

Ace watched from the secondary room and disliked how good Rogue was at becoming a problem just by entering.

Rogue glanced once at the black case.

"Is that it?"

One of the intermediaries nodded.

Rogue said nothing for three seconds.

Shammy, unseen in the ventilation crawl above the room, let the air tighten.

The visible camera glitched once.

Good.

Not enough to look caused.

Enough to become meaningful later.

Rogue said, "Then whoever opens it first had better be worth burying."

Then she left.

That was all.

The clip hit the first private channel at 22:11.

By 22:20, it had mutated.

By 22:31, a third Fate node produced a stripped black-screen post:

ROGUE KNOWS WHO BETRAYED HER.

Ace exhaled through her nose.

"Congratulations. We started a cult argument."

Mai's face was intent, almost luminous in the projection glow.

"Not enough."

Ace looked at her.

Mai expanded the map.

The three rumor systems had formed cleanly. Too cleanly. They were still separate, each feeding its own audience, each gathering submitters, verifiers, watchers.

But Mr Fate proper—the major broadcast format, the one with the citywide punch—had not activated.

The mask was watching.

Or waiting.

Ace's hand flexed.

"What does it need?"

Mai's eyes tracked the flow.

"Contradiction is not enough. It thrives on contradiction. We need urgency."

Rogue's voice came over the private comm, dry as old smoke.

"I dislike sentences that begin that way."

Mai did not answer immediately.

Ace knew why.

She had that look again.

The bad-good one.

Mai turned toward Ace.

"No."

Ace smiled.

"You have not heard my idea."

"I heard its posture."

Shammy's voice entered softly through the comm.

"I heard it too."

Ace looked offended.

"You are both becoming very difficult."

Mai's eyes narrowed.

"You want to become the catalyst."

"Not become. Appear to become."

"That distinction has a short life expectancy here."

Ace pointed toward the pressure map.

"They just named us. They want us in the story. So use that. Make them think I am moving on the archive."

Rogue said, "Moving how?"

Ace's smile sharpened.

"The way people expect me to move."

Mai hated it.

Not because it was wrong.

Because it would work.

Shammy came back from the ventilation crawl three minutes later with dust in her silver-white hair and the expression of someone who had just watched a storm decide whether to become weather or weapon.

"You are sure?" she asked Ace.

"No."

"Good."

Mai closed her eyes briefly.

"That is not reassuring."

"It is honest."

Ace stepped into the room with the black case at 22:44.

No announcement.

No speech.

Just the door opening, a short woman in dark clothes walking in with violet light caught in her eyes and one emerald-frequency katana bare in her right hand.

The intermediaries reacted beautifully because they had not been told this part.

One backed away.

One reached for a weapon and thought better of it when Ace looked at him.

The third said, "What the hell are you doing?"

Ace placed the edge of the katana on the black case.

"Ending the argument."

The room's visible camera caught everything.

So did the hidden dirty feeds.

So did three surveillance systems they knew about and two they did not, because Night City always brought extra parasites to dinner.

Ace lifted the blade.

The case was empty of real evidence, but nobody watching knew that.

Mai watched the rumor pressure spike.

It did not rise.

It tore upward.

Shammy's fingers curled slightly in the secondary room, and the air in the warehouse groaned around the ducts.

Mai whispered, "There."

The Fate nodes converged.

Not into agreement.

Into panic.

ACE HAS THE ARCHIVE.

ACE IS DESTROYING THE ARCHIVE.

TRIAD WORKS FOR ROGUE.

TRIAD IS SILENCING FATE.

MR FATE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THEM.

MR FATE LIED ABOUT THEM.

STREAM NOW.

STREAM NOW.

STREAM NOW.

Then every screen in the warehouse went black.

The room lights died.

The monitor wall in Mai's control room died.

The public ad boards outside the warehouse died.

Four blocks of Night City inhaled.

White letters appeared.

MR FATE IS LIVE.

Ace smiled in the dark.

"Hello."

The stream opened on her from three angles at once.

Then five.

Then eight.

Different feeds. Different qualities. Dirty cams. Drone peeks. Security reflections. A shaky handheld from somewhere outside. A partial thermal image from an unknown source.

Mr Fate's voice entered.

But it was wrong.

Not obviously.

Not to most people.

To Mai, it was a fracture.

"Tonight's armed lie belongs to the ones who came hunting truth."

Mai's eyes snapped to the waveform.

"First voice base."

A second voice overlaid half a beat late.

"They carry silence on a blade."

Mai marked it.

"Second base."

The screen split.

One Fate broadcast showed Ace threatening the archive.

Another showed Rogue's earlier line.

Another showed Cinder's staged call.

Another showed the garage argument.

Too much.

Too fast.

No curator had chosen cleanly.

The system was producing itself under pressure.

Shammy whispered, "It cannot decide which storm it is."

Ace heard none of that directly.

She stood in the dark warehouse room with the katana above the case and felt attention gather against her skin like insects under glass.

Mr Fate's voice continued.

Voices.

"Rogue's chosen blade—"

"—corporate archive—"

"—fixer betrayal—"

"—Biotechnica assets—"

“—truth suppression—”

“—public judgment—”

The intermediaries were terrified now.

Real terror.

Good and bad.

Useful and dangerous.

Ace lowered the katana without striking the case.

The feed caught that too.

Somewhere in the city, thousands of viewers watched the blade stop.

That pause became meaning before anyone could explain it.

Mai said into Ace’s comm, “Hold.”

Ace held.

The Fate broadcast stuttered.

A human system pretending to be inevitable had encountered a withheld action it had already interpreted.

It needed the strike.

It needed Ace to become the story.

Ace did not move.

The voices fractured further.

“Destroying evidence—”

“Protecting evidence—”

“Refusing—”

“Waiting—”

“Fate sees—”

“Fate demands—”

Mai’s fingers moved across the control surface.

“Now.”

Rogue’s counter-broadcast hit the same compromised ad network Mr Fate had used.

Not with a message.

With mirrors.

Every public screen in the four-block radius split into side-by-side feeds.

Mr Fate's current broadcast.

And the raw sources feeding it.

Dirty camera one.

Dirty camera two.

Garage audio.

Cinder's call.

Rogue's staged clip.

The fake archive shell.

The three incompatible leaks.

The timestamps.

Then Mai released the second layer.

Not names.

Structures.

Submission paths.

Verification clusters.

Voice model differences.

Mirror accounts.

Editing delays.

Contradictory Fate posts.

No private victims.

No grieving submitters.

No list for Night City to eat.

Just the machinery.

A mask shown from behind.

Across the city, Mr Fate continued speaking for three more seconds.

Then another Fate voice contradicted it.

Then a mirror node tried to correct.

Then a third account accused the first of being compromised.

Then someone pushed a black-screen announcement:

FALSE FATE DETECTED.

Another answered:

FATE CANNOT BE FALSE.

Another:

WHO CONTROLS THE STREAM?

Then the question began repeating.

Not from Mai.

Not from Rogue.

From the audience.

That was the turn.

Mai saw it happen in the pressure map. The current changed direction. Rumor pressure no longer gathered toward Mr Fate's chosen target.

It gathered around Mr Fate.

Ace saw it in the warehouse screens. Not data, not map, not theory. Just hesitation.

The voice had lost its inevitability.

The black screen still looked the same.

The white letters still looked clean.

But now they looked designed.

That was enough.

Shammy stepped into the warehouse room through the side door, tall and pale and calm, air moving around her as if the building had begun breathing with her lungs. Cameras caught her. Of course they did.

Mai's voice entered the counter-broadcast.

Not distorted.

Not dramatic.

Hers.

"Night City."

Ace glanced toward the nearest screen.

Mai did not like public declarations. That made this one matter.

"You are watching a system pretend to be a person."

The broadcast showed the three leak paths again.

"You are not seeing fate. You are seeing submissions, edits, mirrors, panic, revenge, grief, opportunism, and verification theater compressed into one name."

The Fate channels scrambled.

Some tried to cut away.

Rogue's network kept the mirrors open.

Rogue had been right.

She could do tension.

Mai continued.

"Some of the information released under this mask was true. Some of it exposed real crimes. Some of it got people killed. Some of it protected predators. Some of it used victims as fuel."

The warehouse went very still.

Even Ace held her breath that time.

"This is not justice. It is not prophecy. It is not one voice."

Mai paused.

Then said, each word clean enough to cut:

"There is no Mr Fate."

On the screens, the structure map replaced the black field.

Nodes.

Submissions.

Mirrors.

Voice models.

Contradictions.

No names.

No easy targets.

No mob list.

Just enough truth to ruin the myth and not enough to feed it.

"There are only people who want the power of exposure without the responsibility of judgment."

The Fate feeds fought back.

One voice said, "She lies."

Another voice said, "They fear disclosure."

A third, delayed and poorly mixed, said, "Fate is not a person."

That was the fatal one.

Ace heard it and smiled.

Mai heard it and closed her eyes for half a second.

Shammy heard it and the air in the room softened like a storm front losing heat.

Across Night City, thousands of viewers heard Mr Fate admit what Mai had just proven.

Not intentionally.

Not coherently.

But publicly.

And in Night City, public incoherence was often more lethal than confession.

The comment streams detonated.

WAIT WHAT

DIFFERENT VOICES

WHO THE FUCK IS RUNNING THIS

FATE IS A BRAND

FAKE

NO IT EXPOSED BIOTECHNICA

DOESN'T MEAN THIS ISN'T FAKE

WHO SENT MY DATA

WHO VERIFIED MARROW

WHO CHOSE THE KID

SHOW THE NODES

SHOW THE NAMES

NO NAMES? WHY NO NAMES?

BECAUSE THAT'S HOW FATE WORKS YOU IDIOT

The audience turned into teeth facing every direction.

Dangerous.

But no longer singular.

Mr Fate tried to gather itself.

The main screen went black again.

White letters appeared, less centered this time. Or maybe Ace imagined that.

FATE DOES NOT NEED A FACE.

Mai answered before the voice could.

"No," she said.

Her voice carried through Rogue's counterstream, calm and merciless.

"But it needed you to think it had one."

Ace brought the katana down.

Not on the case.

Beside it.

The blade cut through the table, through the staged archive lock, through the cable conduit hidden under the floor, and severed the physical bridge Mai had marked as the local aggregation relay.

The warehouse screens screamed into static.

Not all of them.

Just enough.

Mr Fate's broadcast fractured into nine separate feeds, each one trying to finish a sentence the others had already abandoned.

For four seconds, Night City saw the chorus without the mask.

Different voices.

Different edits.

Different agendas.

Different mistakes.

Then the major stream died.

Not dramatically.

No explosion.

No final message.

No ominous promise.

It simply stopped being one thing.

The public screens filled with error messages, reposts, mirrored counterfeeds, reaction clips, arguments, accusations, prayers, threats, jokes, and advertisements desperately trying to reclaim the surface of reality.

Night City exhaled and immediately started selling shirts.

Ace sheathed her katana.

In the warehouse room, one of the intermediaries sank slowly into a chair and whispered, "Holy shit."

Rogue's voice came through Ace's comm.

"Elegant."

Ace looked at the ruined table.

"Mine or Mai's?"

"Yes."

Ace grinned despite herself.

Mai entered the room a minute later with the expression of someone who had won an argument and disliked the cost.

Shammy met her near the broken table.

"The storm is not gone."

"No," Mai said.

Ace looked at the screens, where Mr Fate fragments were already being clipped, mocked, defended, dissected, worshipped by three idiots, condemned by seven hypocrites, and misunderstood by everyone else.

"But it broke shape," Ace said.

Mai nodded.

"For now."

That was when the private screen in the corner came back on.

Not black.

Not white letters.

A live camera feed.

Low quality.

A room somewhere else.

A person sitting in front of a cheap terminal, face hidden by shadow, hands shaking.

Another feed appeared beside it.

Then another.

Then another.

Nine little windows.

Different rooms. Different people. Different levels of fear.

One was crying.

One was laughing.

One had a pistol on the desk.

One looked barely older than Timo Alvarez.

One wore a trauma clinic badge.

One had gold eyes.

Ace stepped forward.

Mai whispered, "No."

Not denial.

Recognition.

The system was not attacking now.

It was shedding skin.

The people behind pieces of it were surfacing in panic, betrayal, fury, or desperation. Some had been exposed by rival nodes. Some had exposed themselves first. Some were being doxxed by the audience they had trained.

Larkspur's warning came back.

If you show Night City a list, Night City will not sort them. It will eat them.

Mai had not shown a list.

Mr Fate was becoming one anyway.

Rogue's voice cut in, colder now.

"We have a problem."

Ace's eyes moved from window to window.

"No," she said.

Mai looked at her.

Ace drew one katana again.

"We have nine."

ACT 4 — EXPOSURE

Nine windows.

Nine rooms.

Nine human beings suddenly visible to a city that had been trained to mistake visibility for guilt.

Ace saw the pistol first.

Not because it was the most dangerous object on the screen. Because it was the simplest.

One of the windows showed a cramped bedroom lit by a single blue monitor. A man sat hunched in front of it, shaved head, hollow cheeks, one hand over his mouth. The pistol lay on the desk beside a half-empty cup of instant noodles and three data shards arranged like evidence or prayer.

Another window showed a young woman in a trauma clinic uniform, eyes wide, badge still clipped crookedly to her chest. She looked at a second screen off-camera and shook her head over and over, as if refusing something nobody else could hear.

Another showed gold eyes.

That one did not shake.

The woman with gold eyes sat in a dark apartment with no visible clutter, no personal objects, no panic. She watched her own exposure with the calm of a professional who had always known the mirror might turn.

Mai's hands moved before Ace could speak.

"Rogue, lock public amplification."

Rogue answered immediately. "Trying."

"Do not cut every feed."

"I know."

Ace looked at Mai.

Mai's face was tight, lit by nine little disasters.

"If we cut everything, Fate fragments claim suppression. If we leave everything open, the city eats them."

"So we choke the teeth without closing the mouth."

"Yes."

Ace hated how good that sounded.

The warehouse screens flickered. Rogue's counter-network began placing a buffer layer over the nine

windows. Faces blurred. Addresses smeared. Metadata stripped in real time. Not hidden completely. Enough to prevent instant mob targeting. Not enough to make the exposures vanish.

A brutal compromise.

Night City's least favorite kind.

The comment channels reacted instantly.

WHY BLUR THEM

SHOW THE NAMES

PROTECTING FATE NOW?

COWARDS

LET US SEE

THEY SHOWED US EVERYBODY ELSE

THEY'RE VICTIMS TOO YOU FUCKING GONKS

NO THEY'RE FATE

FATE IS EVERYONE

THEN BURN EVERYONE

Ace read the last line and felt something inside her go very cold.

Shammy stepped closer to the screens. The air around her tightened into stillness, not forceful, not yet. Her hair lifted in pale strands. Blue charge rippled faintly along the edges, soft enough to be mistaken for reflected light by anyone who did not know better.

"The audience is turning hungry."

Mai did not look away from the feeds.

"It was already hungry. Now it lost its leash."

Rogue's voice cut in.

"Fixer channels are lighting up. Some want names. Some want blood. Some are trying to hire protection for anyone exposed before the mob does it cheaper."

Ace gave a short, humorless laugh.

"Almost civic-minded."

"No. Risk management."

"Same thing, local dialect."

The pistol man moved.

His hand left his mouth and went toward the weapon.

Ace saw it.

So did Shammy.

So did Mai, but Mai was in twelve systems at once and already half a second behind the human motion.

Ace pointed. "That one."

Mai snapped the window larger.

No address. Face blurred. Room distorted.

But enough remained.

A cheap devotional charm hanging from a cracked wall panel. A delivery label on the noodle cup, half-visible. Reflection of an exterior sign in the monitor's black edge.

Ace leaned in.

"Where?"

Mai extracted the reflection.

"Watson. Maybe Little China. No—wait."

The man's hand closed over the pistol.

Shammy placed her palm flat against the warehouse floor.

The lights flickered.

Not only in the warehouse.

Somewhere else, inside the pistol man's room, the desk lamp surged and died.

The man startled.

His hand slipped.

A second of life purchased with darkness.

Mai found the sign.

"Little China. North block. Building name starts with 'Jade'."

Rogue was already talking over comms to someone else.

"Got it. Sending nearest crew."

Ace turned.

Mai said, "No."

Ace stopped at the door.

"You do not know what I was going to do."

"You were going to run into Night City with a sword and solve distance personally."

"That is a very biased summary."

"It is a correct summary."

The pistol man picked up the weapon again.

Ace's voice dropped.

"Mai."

Mai's eyes flashed.

"I know."

Shammy's hand remained against the floor. Her breathing had slowed, deep and careful, as if she were matching pressure through pipes no one else could feel.

"I can keep his room uncomfortable," she said. "Not forever."

On the enlarged feed, the pistol man tried to put the barrel under his chin.

His hand shook too badly.

That shaking saved him.

Ace stepped closer to the screen, helpless and furious in a way she despised.

"Talk to him."

Mai's head turned.

Ace looked at her. "You're already in the stream."

Mai understood, and hated that too.

She opened a direct channel into the buffered counter-broadcast.

Her voice entered the pistol man's room with no drama, no filter, no command tone.

Just clean.

"Do not do that."

The man froze.

The pistol stayed where it was.

Mai continued.

"I do not know your name. I am not going to ask for it. Put the weapon down."

The man looked toward his dead lamp, then toward his screen.

His voice came through as broken audio.

"They'll find me."

"Yes," Mai said.

Ace looked at her sharply.

Mai did not soften it.

"Some will try. Not everyone will succeed. Put it down."

The man laughed once. It came out like coughing.

"I helped verify Marrow."

The warehouse went silent.

Even Rogue stopped speaking.

Ace's face changed.

Timo Alvarez ran again in her memory. The alley. The shot. The boy stopping before fear caught up to him. The camera naming him before the bullet did.

The pistol man began crying without making much sound.

"I didn't know he was seventeen. I mean—I saw the file, but I thought—" His breath hitched. "I thought if the fixer burned, someone would stop using kids."

Ace's hand found the katana hilt.

Mai's voice stayed level.

"You were wrong."

The man flinched as if struck.

Good, Ace thought.

Then immediately hated herself for how cleanly that good had arrived.

Mai continued.

"You were wrong, and a boy was hurt. Other people died. That is still true if you die now. It does not become accountability. It becomes another clip."

The pistol trembled.

Shammy whispered, "Careful."

Mai heard.

Her voice lowered.

"Put the weapon down. Then tell the city how the verification worked."

The man stared.

"You want me to confess?"

"I want you to become evidence without becoming meat."

That sentence hit the stream harder than any slogan could have.

The comments fractured again.

EVIDENCE WITHOUT MEAT

THAT'S A LINE

HE VERIFIED MARROW

LET HIM TALK

NO, NAME HIM

HE'S TRYING TO TALK YOU ANIMALS

The pistol lowered one centimeter.

Then another.

Then clattered onto the desk.

Ace exhaled.

She had not noticed she was holding her breath until it hurt.

Rogue's voice returned.

"Crew two minutes out."

"Good," Mai said.

The man folded forward, shaking.

Mai did not let the stream linger on him. She shrank that window, kept it buffered, and moved to the trauma clinic woman.

The woman was not holding a weapon.

That did not make her safe.

Her feed showed two incoming messages on a side screen. The blur layer masked the text partially, but not enough.

OPEN THE DOOR.**WE KNOW YOU HELPED THEM.**

She was whispering, "I didn't. I didn't. I didn't."

Mai opened the audio.

The woman startled.

Mai said, "Did you submit data?"

"No."

"Did you verify data?"

"No."

"Did you broadcast?"

"No!"

Ace frowned.

"Then why is she in the feed?"

The woman answered before Mai could ask.

"I flagged the clinic stream as incomplete. I told them the patient list was missing consent records. I told them some files were planted. They ignored me."

Mai went still.

Ace looked at the screen.

"You tried to slow them down."

The woman nodded rapidly.

"They said I was protecting butchers. Then someone put my badge in the node logs." Her voice cracked. "I never aired anything. I swear. I swear."

Shammy's expression darkened.

"There are antibodies in the storm."

Mai nodded once.

"And the storm eats them too."

Rogue said, "Her building?"

Mai was already working.

"South Heywood. Clinic dormitory. Sending coordinates."

"On it."

Mai opened the counter-broadcast wider.

This time she did not speak only to the woman.

She spoke to the city.

"You are seeing why names are not being released."

The comment flow surged.

Mai pushed the trauma clinic woman's blurred feed beside a visual breakdown of the Fate node that had exposed her. No name. No address. Just role mapping.

Submission contested.

Verification dispute.

Dissenting reviewer flagged context risk.

Reviewer later included in exposure bundle.

Mai highlighted the final step.

"Mr Fate did not only expose criminals. It exposed people who questioned the exposure process."

A pause.

Then:

"That is not truth. That is immune response."

The phrase landed.

Hard.

Even Night City understood immune response. Half the city was trying to survive chrome, infection, corporations, bad drugs, worse doctors, and its own systems misidentifying people as disposable tissue.

The Fate fragments reacted badly.

Several mirror channels tried to overwrite the counterstream.

One pushed a black screen:

TRUTH HAS NO IMMUNITY.

Another:

CONTEXT IS HOW THE GUILTY HIDE.

Another, seconds later:

REVIEWERS ARE FATE.

Wrong.

Too much.

Too naked.

Mai seized it.

“Again,” she said.

Rogue understood without asking.

The three messages were displayed side by side.

Then the trauma woman’s disputed flag.

Then the pistol man’s verification confession.

Then the structure map.

The audience watched the mask attack its own machinery.

For the first time since Marrow Lane, the crowd hesitated.

Not because it became kinder.

Because the story became harder to consume.

That was enough.

Gold Eyes moved during the hesitation.

Ace saw the window flicker.

The woman with gold eyes had not spoken, had not panicked, had not called for help. She simply reached toward something below camera level and the feed went black.

Not dead.

Covered.

Mai’s head snapped toward the window.

“No.”

Ace was already moving.

This time Mai did not stop her.

“Where?” Ace asked.

“Not enough.”

“Guess.”

"I do not guess."

"Mai."

Mai looked at the data edges. Gold Eyes' feed had been cleaner than the others. Too clean. No room clutter. No reflection. No useful noise. A controlled exposure space. Either she had expected to be watched, or she had arranged to be watchable under limited conditions.

Mai expanded the last frame before the feed died.

A blank wall. A desk. Hands. Gold eyes. A cup.

The cup had a logo.

Barely visible.

Not a chain. A private lounge. Westbrook.

Rogue said, "I know that cup."

"Of course you do," Ace muttered.

Rogue gave coordinates.

Ace was out the door before the sentence finished.

Shammy followed.

Mai stayed.

That hurt a little.

Not emotionally. Practically. The shape of the night had split them, and Mai hated split operations almost as much as she hated preventable stupidity.

But someone had to hold the stream.

Someone had to keep Night City from turning nine windows into nine addresses.

Someone had to talk while Ace ran.

So Ace ran.

Night City at street level was all consequence.

The counter-broadcast had not calmed the city. It had changed the direction of its violence. Screens flashed conflicting feeds across intersections. People stood under awnings with mouths open, watching blurred faces argue with diagrams. Gang lookouts shouted into comms. Corpo security drones rose from rooftops like insects smelling fire. Somewhere distant, sirens began and stopped abruptly when someone decided the siren was the wrong kind of announcement.

Ace cut through alleys and service stairs, across a rooftop slick with old rain, down the side of a

parking stack where a maintenance ladder complained under her weight for half a second before remembering she was not heavy enough to deserve drama.

Shammy did not follow like a runner.

She followed like weather given intention.

By the time Ace reached the Westbrook lounge, the front entrance was already locked and pretending it had always been that way.

The place had no sign visible from the street. Just smoked glass, a narrow door, and a security panel expensive enough to imply the crimes inside wore perfume.

Ace looked at the lock.

Then at Shammy.

Shammy tilted her head.

“Subtle?”

Ace drew one katana.

“No time.”

“Subtle no, then.”

The lock became two locks.

The door opened inward with a sad little metallic sigh.

Inside, the lounge was dark except for floor-level lighting and the glow of wall screens showing Rogue’s counter-broadcast with the sound muted. The air smelled of expensive liquor, ozone, and someone else’s fear pretending to be money.

Two guards turned.

Ace was already between them.

The first reached for a gun and lost interest when the flat of Ace’s blade struck his wrist hard enough to make the weapon fall and his knees reconsider employment.

The second was smarter and backed away.

Shammy entered behind Ace, tall and calm, and the room pressure changed.

The second guard sat down without being asked.

Good survival instinct.

Ace pointed her blade toward the rear hallway.

“Gold eyes.”

The seated guard lifted one shaking finger.

"Private room three."

Ace moved.

Shammy paused beside the guard.

"You should leave before deciding loyalty is cheaper than breathing."

The guard nodded.

Fast.

Private room three had a biometric lock, a reinforced frame, and acoustic damping.

Ace kicked it once.

The frame held.

She smiled.

"Good door."

Second kick.

The frame stopped being a door in the philosophical sense.

Gold Eyes was inside.

Not alone.

A man lay on the floor beside the desk, alive but unconscious, blood running from his nose. A terminal burned through a purge sequence, screen filling with deletion progress. Gold Eyes stood beside it with one hand on a compact pistol and the other on a shard drive.

She was maybe forty. Maybe older. Designer coat. Military stillness. Gold implants not decorative; ocular suite, high-grade, probably recording in three spectra and lying in all of them.

She looked at Ace and did not raise the gun.

Interesting.

"You are fast."

Ace stepped into the room.

"You are exposed."

Gold Eyes smiled faintly.

"No. I am retired."

Shammy ducked slightly through the broken doorway behind Ace.

The woman's eyes flicked to her.

For the first time, her composure changed by one hairline crack.

“Ah,” she said. “You are the impossible one.”

Shammy considered that.

“I have heard worse descriptions.”

Ace’s blade angled toward the terminal.

“Stop the purge.”

“No.”

Ace moved.

Gold Eyes fired.

Not at Ace.

At the terminal.

Shammy’s hand lifted.

The bullet curved one finger-width too low as pressure snapped sideways in the room. It hit the desk, shattered composite, and sent black fragments into the air.

Ace crossed the distance and cut the pistol in half before Gold Eyes could fire again.

Gold Eyes released the broken grip immediately.

Smart.

Too smart.

Ace put the blade edge against her throat.

“Purge.”

The woman looked down at Ace.

Most people made the mistake of looking too far down.

Gold Eyes did not. Her gaze adjusted exactly to Ace’s height without condescension, as if measuring threat instead of stature.

“The purge is not mine.”

Mai’s voice came through Ace’s comm.

“Confirmed. Remote wipe. Thirty-two seconds.”

Ace did not look away from Gold Eyes.

“Can you stop it?”

Mai answered, "Maybe."

Gold Eyes smiled.

"Maybe is expensive."

Ace pressed the blade a breath closer.

"So is blood."

Shammy moved to the terminal. Electricity crawled faintly over her fingers, not touching the machine yet. The room's lights dimmed.

Mai spoke faster now.

"Ace, I need her access phrase."

Ace looked at Gold Eyes.

"You heard her."

Gold Eyes said nothing.

Ace's expression emptied.

Not rage.

Not threat theater.

Decision.

Gold Eyes saw it and, to her credit, understood before the blade moved.

"Heliotrope witness, sevenfold debt."

Mai repeated the phrase under her breath, fed it into the capture, and hit the purge with three layers of countercommand.

The terminal froze at ninety-three percent.

Then rolled back to eighty-nine.

Then locked.

Mai exhaled.

"Got it."

Ace did not move the blade.

Gold Eyes looked almost amused.

"You think that makes you the good side?"

Ace answered instantly.

"No."

That seemed to interest her.

Shammy touched the unconscious man's shoulder and checked his breathing.

"Who is he?"

Gold Eyes did not look.

"A verifier."

"Yours?"

"Tonight? No."

Ace's eyes narrowed.

Gold Eyes continued.

"He came to me when the mask broke. Wanted protection. Or leverage. He had node keys."

"And you were deleting them."

"I was preventing him from selling them to people less selective than me."

Ace almost laughed.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I do not care what you believe. I care what your structural friend can prove before the city finds his name."

Mai's voice cut in coldly.

"She is not lying cleanly."

Ace said, "That is unhelpful."

"She is telling a partial truth."

"Better."

Mai was silent for half a second.

Then: "The recovered files include node access, verifier logs, dispute flags, broadcast format templates, and several private exposure bundles that have not aired."

Gold Eyes' eyes shifted.

Ace caught it.

"Private bundles."

Mai's voice hardened.

"Yes. Including one on Rogue. One on Larkspur. One on Pavel. One on us."

Ace's blade kissed skin.

A thin line of blood appeared on Gold Eyes' throat.

Shammy said softly, "Ace."

Ace stopped.

Barely.

Gold Eyes did not flinch.

Mai continued.

"But also bundles marked suppression."

Ace frowned.

"Meaning?"

"Targets flagged not to air."

Gold Eyes finally spoke.

"Because raw exposure is not strategy."

Ace looked at her.

There was the shape.

Not Mr Fate.

Not one of the hungry children feeding the mask scraps of grief and rage.

Something colder.

A curator who had thought she could ride the system without becoming part of it.

Mai reached the same conclusion.

"You shaped broadcasts," Mai said through the comm.

Gold Eyes did not deny it.

"You were one of the clean nodes."

"One of," Gold Eyes said.

Ace's hand tightened.

"How many?"

"Enough that killing me gives you a corpse and a worse problem."

Ace hated that answer because it was true-shaped.

Shammy's gaze moved from Gold Eyes to the frozen terminal.

"You believed you were controlling the storm."

Gold Eyes glanced at her.

"I was controlling damage."

Mai's reply was immediate.

"No. You were choosing damage."

Gold Eyes smiled again, thinner now.

"That is what control is."

Ace almost cut her then.

Not because the sentence was shocking.

Because it was familiar in the way Night City kept making evil sound administratively efficient.

Mai spoke before Ace's restraint ran out.

"Ace. Bring her in."

Gold Eyes laughed.

That was a mistake.

Ace smiled.

"Gladly."

They did not bring Gold Eyes to the Afterlife.

Rogue vetoed that with two words that contained enough murder to qualify as legal argument.

"Absolutely not."

So they brought her to the warehouse, bound but walking, with the unconscious verifier carried by one of Rogue's crews and watched by Shammy as if breathing itself had become a negotiated treaty.

Gold Eyes gave her name on the way.

Not legal.

Not fake either.

"Vesper."

Mai filed it as a handle with high confidence and no trust.

By then the nine windows had become twenty-three attempted exposures, fourteen false identifications, six protective blurs, three confirmed Fate verifiers, four unrelated opportunists trying to frame ex-lovers as Mr Fate nodes, and one extremely confused food blogger whose channel had used black-and-white title cards since 2075 and who was now threatening legal action against half the city.

Night City, in other words, was healing badly.

Mai kept the counter-broadcast alive with Rogue's infrastructure and Larkspur's reluctant assistance, who joined the channel under protest and immediately began calling people idiots with surgical precision.

"I leave you alone for one hour," Larkspur snapped over audio, "and the exposure cult becomes recursive. This is why I charge consultation fees."

Mai did not look up.

"You are helping."

"I am invoicing emotionally."

"Fine."

Ace dragged Vesper into frame.

Not fully.

Blurred. Masked. Voice altered live.

Vesper noticed the protections and raised one eyebrow.

"How principled."

Ace leaned near her ear.

"Do not mistake restraint for affection."

"I would never."

Mai opened a private channel to Vesper while keeping the public stream on the system map.

"You were a clean node."

Vesper sat with her hands bound in front of her, posture elegant enough to be irritating.

"I was a corrective layer."

"Those are not synonyms."

"They are in practice."

Mai brought up the recovered files.

"You received raw submissions, verified authenticity, selected broadcast candidates, shaped the release format, and suppressed targets that would damage your interests."

"My criteria were broader than interest."

Mai's eyes lifted.

"Prove it."

Vesper looked at her for a long moment.

Then smiled with less amusement than before.

"You are very young to sound that tired."

Ace moved.

Mai lifted one finger.

Ace stopped.

Barely.

Mai repeated, "Prove it."

Vesper looked toward the screens, where Mr Fate fragments were still fighting, where audience channels demanded names, where the pistol man had begun explaining Marrow's verification process under protective blur and the trauma clinic woman had confirmed the existence of dispute flags.

"Release the suppression bundles."

Rogue's voice entered.

"That sounds like a terrible idea."

"It is," Vesper said. "It is also the only way to show the distinction."

Mai's expression did not move.

"Explain."

Vesper leaned back.

"Some submissions were revenge garbage. Some were true but context-poisoned. Some exposed people whose only crime was proximity. Some would have triggered gang retaliation across residential blocks. Some would have made excellent entertainment."

The last sentence came out colder.

Honest.

Mai hated honest monsters less than sentimental ones. That did not make them better. Only easier to map.

"You suppressed them."

"When I could."

"And aired others."

"When I chose."

Ace said, "There it is."

Vesper looked at her.

"Yes. There it is."

No apology.

No theatrics.

No "you do not understand what I had to do."

Just the naked arrogance of selection.

Mai turned back to the stream.

"We do not release the bundles."

Vesper's expression sharpened.

"You need evidence."

"We release the decision structure."

"That will not satisfy them."

"No."

Mai looked at the comment streams.

The city wanted names. Faces. Rooms. Door codes. Blood with labels attached.

It wanted the thing Mr Fate had trained it to want.

Mai spoke into the broadcast again.

"You are not getting a list."

The reaction was immediate and ugly.

She let it wash for three seconds.

Then she continued.

"That is how this system fed you."

The structure map changed.

Suppression bundles appeared as categories, not contents.

Rejected revenge submissions.
Context-contested exposures.
Civilian proximity risk.
Retaliation cascade risk.
Verified crimes selected for broadcast.
Verified crimes suppressed by node discretion.
Node self-protection.
Node rivalry.
Post-exposure retaliation.

Mai highlighted the contradiction.

“Mr Fate claimed disclosure as inevitability. These files show selection.”

She added Vesper’s altered voice, clipped from two minutes earlier.

When I chose.

Then again.

When I chose.

The words repeated across the city.

Not a confession to a crime.

Something worse for a myth.

Editorial agency.

Mai said, “Every broadcast you saw was not fate. It was curation. Someone chose timing. Someone chose context. Someone chose what you were allowed to know and what would make you angry enough not to ask why.”

The Fate fragments tried to fight back.

One black-screen mirror shouted:

SELECTION IS NECESSARY FOR TRUTH.

Larkspur’s voice entered the public stream before Mai could stop her.

“Congratulations, you have invented journalism and immediately made it worse.”

Ace blinked.

Even Rogue went silent for half a second.

The comments shifted.

Not kindly.

But humanly.

Laughter entered the stream.

Sarcasm. Mockery. Memes in embryo. Mr Fate had survived fear, outrage, even contradiction.

Ridicule cut differently.

Someone clipped Vesper's altered **When I chose** and looped it over the original Mr Fate title card.

Someone else overlaid multiple Fate voices arguing with one another.

Another labeled the brand:

MR EDITORIAL DECISION

Then:

MR FAKE

Then, inevitably and stupidly:

MISTER FART

Ace stared at the comment flow.

"No."

Shammy smiled.

Mai closed her eyes.

Rogue said, "Night City remains undefeated."

The myth began losing altitude.

Not because people became wise.

Because reverence is fragile once laughter gets its hands around the throat.

Mr Fate fragments kept posting. Some still believed. Some doubled down. Some accused the counter-broadcast of being the real conspiracy. Some tried to pivot and claim Mr Fate had always been decentralized and anyone saying otherwise had misunderstood the doctrine.

That one got mocked fastest.

The mask was not destroyed.

But it was no longer clean.

It had become something people could argue with, parody, distrust, exploit badly. It had lost the one thing that made it dangerous at scale:

Inevitability.

Vesper watched the comment streams and, for the first time, looked genuinely disturbed.

Ace noticed.

“What?”

Vesper’s mouth tightened.

“You think this is better?”

Mai answered from beside the projection.

“Yes.”

Vesper looked at her.

Mai’s face was pale with exhaustion, but her voice held.

“Not good. Better.”

“That is a very small word.”

“It is the only honest one.”

Shammy moved behind Mai, close enough that the air around them steadied.

Ace saw Mai’s shoulders drop by a fraction.

Good.

Rogue’s comm crackled.

“Pistol man secured. Clinic woman moved. Two other exposed nodes under protection. One dead.”

The room went quiet.

Not shocked.

Not enough energy left for shock.

One dead.

The cost arrived like all costs in Night City: late, blunt, and already irreversible.

Mai asked, “Which?”

Rogue answered, “Mirror operator. Bad one, from what we can tell. Still dead.”

Mai absorbed that.

Ace knew better than to tell her it was not her fault.

Fault was not the point.

Consequences were.

Vesper said, softly enough that only the room heard, “There will be more.”

Ace turned.

Vesper met her eyes.

"You broke the mask. You did not break the appetite."

Ace stepped close.

"No."

The katana came up, not to Vesper's throat this time, but between them, a vertical line of emerald hum.

"We exposed the appetite."

Vesper looked at the blade.

"Same city."

Ace smiled without warmth.

"Different wound."

Mai turned back to the public stream for the last time.

She let the structure map remain visible.

No faces.

No addresses.

No list.

Only machinery.

Then she spoke.

"Mr Fate is over as a singular source. Anyone using the name after this is asking you to trust a mask that has already been shown from behind."

A pause.

"Some future leaks will be true. Some will be false. Some will be useful. Some will be revenge wearing public interest as clothing."

The comment flow slowed.

Not stopped.

Never stopped.

Mai continued.

"Ask who benefits from timing. Ask who chose context. Ask who is missing from the exposure. Ask why you are being made angry before you are being made informed."

Rogue's voice cut in privately.

"That is too thoughtful for this city."

Mai did not answer her.

She finished:

"Truth without responsibility is just another weapon."

Then she cut the broadcast.

This time, the screens did not go black.

Advertisements came back.

Cheap food.

Expensive chrome.

A dating app for people with military-grade trauma.

A cheerful insurance mascot promising partial limb replacement under approved circumstances.

Night City resumed selling things over the fresh outline of its wound.

For a while, nobody spoke.

Then Larkspur's voice, still connected somewhere in the system, said:

"So who gets my invoice?"

Rogue said, "Send it to Mr Fate."

Larkspur laughed.

A little too hard.

A little too relieved.

Then she disconnected.

Vesper did not go to the police.

No one suggested it, which was how everyone in the room confirmed they still understood the setting.

Rogue took custody in the practical Night City sense of the word, meaning Vesper would be alive, contained, interrogated, leveraged, and possibly regretting several philosophical choices before breakfast.

The unconscious verifier went to a clinic Rogue trusted enough to threaten personally.

The pistol man became a protected witness for exactly as long as his information remained valuable and his guilt remained politically useful. That was not justice. It was not mercy either.

It was survival with paperwork.

The trauma clinic woman disappeared into a safe relocation chain that Mai did not ask too many questions about because the answers would either be ugly or insufficient.

Pavel sent one message before dawn.

I remembered something. The first drop did not say Fate. It said: tell the city what it made you carry.

Mai stared at the line for a long time.

Ace read it over her shoulder.

Shammy stood by the window, watching morning fail to improve anything.

"What does that mean?" Ace asked.

Mai's voice was quiet.

"It means the name came later."

"Does that matter?"

"Yes."

Ace waited.

Mai did not explain immediately.

On the street below, vendors opened shutters. A man hosed blood off the sidewalk into a storm drain with the bored efficiency of routine. Someone had already painted over **FATE SAW YOU** with **FATE GOT CLIPPED** and a crude drawing Ace refused to interpret.

Mai finally said, "It means the first impulse may not have been control."

Shammy's reflection looked tall and pale in the glass.

"Pain first."

Mai nodded.

"Pain first. Then attention. Then power."

Ace leaned against the wall.

"That order feels familiar."

None of them argued.

The safehouse was quieter than it had been before Mr Fate touched it, but not peaceful. Screens remained dark by choice. The air held the exhausted aftertaste of too much information moving too quickly through too many frightened hands.

Shammy broke the silence.

"I dislike being named by hostile typography."

Ace looked at her.

Mai blinked once.

Then, despite the night, despite the dead mirror operator, despite the still-open questions, Ace laughed.

It was short. Uneven. Real.

Mai pressed two fingers against her eyes.

"That is not funny."

"It is a little funny," Ace said.

"It is structurally ridiculous," Shammy added.

Mai lowered her hand and looked at both of them.

"You are both impossible."

Ace smiled.

"Established canon."

Shammy nodded solemnly.

"Very locked."

Mai tried not to smile.

Failed.

Only a little.

That helped more than any of them admitted.

Rogue met them at the Afterlife after sunrise.

The club looked different in morning because places like the Afterlife were not meant for morning. The lights seemed more tired. The legends more expensive. The empty tables carried the faint embarrassment of surviving another night.

Rogue was in her booth, naturally.

There was a fresh glass in front of her and no visible sign that she had spent the last several hours holding parts of Night City together with threats, favors, infrastructure abuse, and personal spite.

Ace slid into the booth first.

Mai followed.

Shammy remained standing for a moment, looking around the club.

Rogue raised an eyebrow.

"Problem?"

Shammy considered.

"No. The room is chewing more slowly now."

Rogue looked at Ace.

Ace shrugged. "That means good."

"I was afraid of that."

Shammy sat.

Rogue pushed a shard across the table.

Mai did not take it.

Rogue said, "Payment."

Mai took it.

Ace leaned back.

"What happens to Vesper?"

Rogue's face did not change.

"Consequences."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only answer you get before coffee."

Ace accepted that because Rogue was right and because Mai's knee touched hers under the table in warning.

Rogue looked at Mai.

"Your broadcast did damage."

"Yes."

"Less than the alternative."

"Yes."

"Not clean."

"No."

Rogue smiled faintly.

"You're learning."

Mai's expression remained neutral.

"I resent the implication."

"You should. It is accurate."

Ace looked between them.

"I hate when two people insult each other in administrative language."

Shammy said, "It is a mating ritual for strategists."

Mai choked on nothing.

Rogue stared at Shammy.

Ace's grin arrived slowly and with great satisfaction.

"Oh, I like that one."

Mai pointed one finger at both of them.

"No."

Rogue actually laughed.

Quietly. Once. But enough that two mercs at the bar looked over and immediately decided they had seen nothing.

Then Rogue's amusement faded.

"Mr Fate channels are still active."

Mai nodded. "Fragments."

"Some are already claiming last night was a purge by false Fate."

"Expected."

"Some are posting bounties for node names."

"Also expected."

"Some are using your speech as a verification checklist."

Mai's jaw tightened.

That one hurt.

Rogue saw it.

"Tools get used."

"That does not make misuse irrelevant."

"No. It makes ownership complicated."

Ace said, "That sounded almost like advice."

Rogue looked at her.

"It was. Try not to make me repeat it."

Mai looked down at the shard in her hand.

"What about the fixers?"

Rogue's mouth curved without warmth.

"Everyone is suddenly very interested in internal confidentiality audits."

Ace blinked.

"That sounds boring enough to be violent."

"It will be."

"Good?"

"Necessary."

Shammy watched the club.

"Trust was damaged."

Rogue nodded.

"Trust is always damaged. Difference is, now people saw the cracks."

"And?"

Rogue lifted her glass.

"Now we charge more to stand on them."

Ace laughed under her breath.

Mai did not, but her mouth softened.

Rogue set the glass down.

"For what it's worth, you did the job."

Ace tilted her head.

"Did we?"

Rogue looked toward one of the Afterlife screens. It showed a news-adjacent segment where a bright-

faced host asked whether “Fate-style transparency” was the future of citizen accountability while a banner underneath advertised premium anonymity packages.

“No,” Rogue said after a moment. “But you ended the version I hired you for.”

That was honest enough.

Mai accepted it with a nod.

Shammy looked at the screen.

“They are already turning the corpse into furniture.”

Rogue said, “Welcome to Night City.”

Ace watched the segment for three seconds, then looked away.

“Next time someone calls themselves Mr Something, I vote we leave town.”

Mai said, “We live here temporarily.”

“That has not saved us so far.”

Shammy smiled.

“Perhaps the city considers us recurring content.”

Ace pointed at her.

“Hostile typography again.”

Mai finally laughed.

Small.

Tired.

But there.

Rogue watched them over the rim of her glass with an expression that was almost unreadable and therefore probably kind.

Almost.

Then she said, “Go sleep.”

Ace stood.

“That was also almost advice.”

“No. That was an operational assessment. You look terrible.”

Mai stood beside Ace.

“You do too.”

Rogue smiled.

"Mine is branding."

Outside, morning had arrived in the weak, gray way it did when the city refused to let the sky have final say.

A few public screens still carried Mr Fate clips, but now every title fought with ten different interpretations. Debunk. Reaction. Counter-reaction. Meme edit. Fixer analysis. Corpo warning. Conspiracy deep-dive. Someone had uploaded a dance remix of **When I chose** and it was already doing better numbers than the original Biotechnica exposure.

Ace stopped under a flickering crosswalk sign.

"That is obscene."

Mai looked.

The remix played over footage of a cartoon fortune cookie wearing gold sunglasses.

Mai closed her eyes.

"I hate that this helped."

Shammy tilted her head, listening.

"It did help."

"That is worse."

Ace slid her hand into Mai's.

No ceremony.

No dramatic pause.

Just contact.

Mai's fingers closed around hers.

A second later, Shammy's hand settled lightly against Ace's shoulder from behind, warm despite the charged air around her.

For a moment, in the middle of a city that had spent the night trying to turn truth into ammunition, the three of them stood without performing anything for anyone.

No stream.

No title card.

No audience.

Just breath.

Then a screen across the street went black.

Ace's hand tightened.

Mai's head turned.

Shammy's hair lifted.

White letters appeared.

Not centered.

Crooked. Cheap font. Bad spacing.

MR F8TE IS L1VE!!!

A cartoon skull bounced into frame and exploded into discount cyberware coupons.

Ace stared.

Mai stared.

Shammy stared.

The ad continued cheerfully.

EXPOSE YOUR OLD JOINT PAIN! 30% OFF KNEE REPLACEMENTS TODAY ONLY!

For three whole seconds, none of them moved.

Then Ace said, very quietly, "I am going to kill capitalism."

Mai squeezed her hand.

"Queue system."

Shammy nodded.

"Long queue."

Ace looked between them.

Then at the terrible advertisement.

Then she sighed.

"Fine. Breakfast first."

They walked on.

Behind them, Night City kept talking.

Not as one voice.

Never as one voice.

That was the small victory.

That was the wound.

That was the warning.

EPILOGUE — SIGNAL LOSS

By evening, Mr Fate was dead enough to be profitable.

That was how Night City measured most deaths.

Not by silence.

Not by mourning.

By how quickly someone found a way to put the corpse on a shirt.

At 18:40, a Santo Domingo pop-up stall began selling black hoodies with **FATE LIED FIRST** across the back. At 19:05, a rival vendor three blocks away answered with **FATE WAS RIGHT, YOU'RE JUST UGLY** in glow-thread. By 20:00, a corpo-adjacent pundit was calling the whole event "a decentralized accountability experiment." By 20:17, three fixers had privately agreed that anyone using the phrase *decentralized accountability experiment* in a pitch meeting deserved a surcharge.

The original clean Mr Fate channel never returned.

That mattered.

Not enough.

Fragments kept moving. Smaller channels. Dirty mirrors. Anonymous dumps with bad formatting and worse ethics. People still leaked things. People still lied while leaking things. People still called revenge justice if the camera angle was flattering enough.

But the black screen had lost something.

The white letters no longer arrived like weather.

They arrived like branding.

And branding could be mocked.

That was not salvation.

In Night City, salvation was mostly a word used by people selling braindances, cult memberships, or experimental medication.

But it was a difference.

A small one.

The kind that kept someone alive for one more night.

The safehouse had not recovered.

Mai had insisted on checking every screen, every line, every local relay, every device that had ever connected to anything more sophisticated than a toaster. Ace helped by standing near doors and looking personally offended by the existence of signal architecture. Shammy helped by sitting on the counter, eating noodles, and occasionally saying things like, "That device feels smug," which somehow proved accurate twice.

At 22:30, Mai finally killed the last diagnostic pane and leaned back in her chair.

The room dimmed.

No streams.

No overlays.

No citywide feeds clawing at the walls.

Just neon through rain-streaked glass and the low electric murmur of Night City pretending it had not almost eaten itself again.

Ace was on the couch with one boot on the table and one katana across her lap, not drawn, but present enough to qualify as commentary. Her hair was still damp from the walk back. Violet highlights caught the window glow whenever she moved.

Shammy had claimed the windowsill again. Tall, silver-white hair loose over one shoulder, one hand resting against the glass. Outside, far above the street, clouds gathered without committing to rain.

Mai looked at both of them.

"We are clear."

Ace opened one eye. "That means safe?"

"That means clear."

"So no."

"That means clear."

Ace closed the eye again. "Night City has ruined your vocabulary."

"My vocabulary is precise."

"Your vocabulary is traumatized."

Shammy smiled faintly at the window.

"Both can be true."

Mai did not argue.

That meant she was tired.

Ace noticed and sat up.

Not dramatically. Just enough that the katana shifted softly against her knees.

"You should sleep."

Mai looked at her.

"So should you."

"I am making a strategic recommendation."

"You are making a hypocritical recommendation."

Ace considered that.

"Still strategic."

Shammy's fingers moved against the glass. A faint static trace followed the motion and vanished.

"The city is quieter."

Mai turned slightly.

"Actually quieter?"

"No." Shammy listened for another moment. "Less convinced of itself."

Ace liked that.

Mai liked it too, though she would have phrased it less like weather had developed a conscience.

Her reader chimed.

All three of them looked at it.

For half a second the room remembered the black screen.

Mai picked it up.

Not a stream.

A message.

From Pavel.

Short.

Unevenly typed.

I found the old thread cache. Sending what's left. Don't know if useful. Don't know if I want it to be.

Attached file.

Mai did not open it immediately.

Ace watched her thumb hover over the command.

"You don't have to do it now."

Mai's mouth tightened.

"Yes, I do."

Ace started to object.

Then stopped.

Because she understood.

Some wounds got worse when ignored. Some files did too.

Mai opened the cache.

Most of it was broken. Dead links, missing posts, corrupted attachments, copied arguments with no origin chain. But the first visible line remained intact.

Not black screen.

Not Mr Fate.

Just plain text on a cheap anonymous board:

Tell the city what it made you carry.

Under it, hundreds of replies.

Some pathetic.

Some cruel.

Some obviously false.

Some raw enough that reading them felt like stepping on glass barefoot.

A daughter looking for the clinic that erased her mother's records.

A merc posting proof that his crew had been sold out by their client.

A food vendor naming a protection gang that had burned his cousin's cart.

A corpo assistant threatening to release executive murder ledgers, then vanishing from the thread three posts later.

A teenager asking whether anyone knew how to make people believe you when the police database said your brother had never existed.

No logo.

No Fate.

Just pressure.

Pain first.

Then attention.

Then power.

Mai closed the file.

For a while, nobody spoke.

Ace's voice was quieter when it came.

"That does not excuse what it became."

"No," Mai said.

Shammy leaned her forehead lightly against the glass.

"But it explains why people fed it."

Mai nodded.

Ace stared at the reader.

She wanted a cleaner enemy.

That was not new.

Most of her life had been an argument with the universe about its refusal to present threats in shapes that deserved exactly one blade stroke. Monsters were easier when they had claws. Rituals were easier when they had circles. Men with guns were almost relaxing in their honesty.

Mr Fate had been hands.

Too many hands.

Grieving hands. Greedy hands. Frightened hands. Clever hands. Cowardly hands. Hands that submitted, shaped, verified, distorted, spread, laughed, demanded, punished.

Cutting one would not stop the rest.

But showing them to each other had changed the room.

Sometimes that was the only blade available.

Ace looked at Mai.

"You did good."

Mai exhaled through her nose. "I did damage."

"Yes."

Mai's eyes lifted.

Ace held her gaze.

“You also did good.”

That landed.

Not softly.

Correctly.

Mai looked away first, but her hand found Ace’s on the edge of the table.

Shammy turned from the window and slid down to the floor with quiet grace. She crossed the room and settled beside them, close enough that the air around the couch steadied. Not calm exactly. Calm was too simple for them.

Survivable.

Mai’s fingers tightened around Ace’s.

Shammy’s hand rested against Mai’s shoulder.

The city kept muttering beyond the glass.

Inside, for a few breaths, nothing demanded to be exposed, answered, named, solved, monetized, or survived.

Then Mai’s reader chimed again.

Ace’s expression went flat.

“I swear to every violent principle I have—”

Mai checked the notification.

Her face changed.

Not alarm.

Something worse.

Amusement trying to pass as irritation.

“What?”

Mai turned the reader around.

A message from Rogue.

If any of you start a podcast about truth, I will personally blacklist you from the Afterlife.

Ace stared.

Shammy tilted her head.

Mai said, "I think that is gratitude."

Ace leaned back.

"That woman needs medical help with emotional expression."

"She runs the Afterlife," Mai said. "This may be as expressive as the local ecosystem allows."

Shammy considered.

"We could call it Hostile Typography."

Ace pointed at her.

"No."

Mai's shoulders shook once.

Ace looked at her.

Then Shammy.

Then the reader.

Then, against her will, she laughed.

Not loudly.

Not cleanly.

But enough.

Outside, one of the public screens across the street flickered.

Black for half a second.

White letters appeared.

Ace stopped laughing.

Mai's hand tightened.

Shammy went still.

The letters resolved.

TRY OUR NEW FATE-BURGER™ — DESTINY HAS CHEESE.

Below it, a cartoon burger winked.

No one moved.

Then Ace stood up.

Mai caught her wrist.

"Ace."

"I am not killing capitalism."

"You just said that because you know I would stop you."

"I am killing that burger."

Shammy looked out the window.

"It has cheese."

Ace stared at her.

"That is not a defense."

"No," Shammy said solemnly. "It is context."

Mai lost the fight then.

She laughed properly this time, tired and low and helpless in the way laughter becomes when the alternative is screaming into the wiring.

Ace tried to stay offended.

Failed.

Not fully.

Enough.

She sat back down.

The terrible burger ad continued across the street, cheerful and obscene.

Night City did not learn lessons.

It repackaged them.

But tonight the black screen belonged to a sandwich.

That was not justice.

Not victory.

Not closure.

Still, Ace looked at Mai, then at Shammy, and decided it could count as a small insult successfully returned to the universe.

The reader stayed quiet.

The screens stayed commercial.

The rain finally began.

Soft at first, then steadier, washing neon into the street until every reflection became unreadable.

For once, unreadable felt like mercy.

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