

Chapter 13: The Fragment's Price

The fragment pushed harder.

That was the simplest version.

It was also insufficient.

Ace could feel it now not just at the edge of vision, where she had spent years teaching herself to contain it, but deeper—in the space behind focus, behind intent, where decisions formed before the body obeyed them. Violet pressure. Patient. Intimate. Not a voice. Worse. A shape that kept offering itself as a solution.

Break.

Hurt.

Silence.

Not all at once. Never all at once. The fragment was too clever for that. It pressed in pulses. Fatigue. Stress. Combat memory. The aftermath of using the katanas. The city's endless electrical saturation. Every one of them gave it leverage.

Night City fed it.

That was the problem she had stopped pretending might resolve itself.

In her own world, the fragment had been a managed wound. A whisper in the margins. A presence that grew sharp under pressure but still answered to discipline, to ritual, to the stabilizing geometry of the triad. Here, the geometry itself had changed. Technology saturated everything. Every wall carried power. Every body carried chrome. Every district hummed with overlapping signals dense enough to make the air feel textured.

The fragment liked that.

Not because it understood the technology.

Because intensity was intensity, no matter the source.

She pushed back.

Every hour.

Every breath.

It was not a dramatic fight. It was attrition.

And she was getting tired.

Not physically. Her body remained exact. The katanas still answered cleanly. Her shadow still moved when called. The fatigue lived further in—behind the eyes, under the skull, in the place where vigilance became identity and identity became cost.

That was the price.

Not blood.

Not pain.

Endurance.

Morning in Shammy's apartment arrived under neon, not sunlight.

The city outside was already awake in stages—vendors setting up, shift workers moving, drones threading their fixed routes between towers and service corridors. Ads had shifted from nighttime hunger to daytime aspiration. Different lie, same machinery.

Ace stood at the window.

The glass was cool under one hand. The frame vibrated faintly with building current. Beyond it, Night City layered itself into reflection and depth until it almost stopped looking real.

The fragment pressed harder in the mornings.

She had stopped trying to explain why.

Transitions fed it. Waking fed it. The moment between sleep and function, between stillness and action, seemed to thin whatever line she held between herself and the thing that wanted through.

She pushed back.

The shadow around her shoulders tightened.

A small flicker. Visible if you knew her.

Mai knew her.

"You're tired."

Ace did not turn.

"I'm fine."

"The probability that you're fine—"

"No."

That stopped Mai.

Not the content.

The tone.

Ace almost never cut her off that fast unless she was already using too much control somewhere else.

Mai stood in the doorway with one hand against the frame. Grounding again. Cool metal. Real surface.

The city's signal filth still crawled at the edges of her awareness; Ace could see it in the slight distance behind her eyes, in the way she held herself when the numbers started getting too loud.

"The fragment is getting worse," Mai said.

"Yes."

"You're losing ground."

"Yes."

No defense.

No performance.

Just truth.

Mai stepped in fully then.

"The probability that—"

"Don't."

This time Ace turned.

Violet eyes steady. Shadow under control by force, not ease.

"I know what it is doing," she said. "I know I'm tired. I know it's stronger here."

Mai held her gaze.

The numbers were there. Ace could feel Mai wanting to assemble them, wanting to make the problem legible enough to solve.

That was the wrong tool.

She knew it too.

"What do you need?" Mai asked instead.

That was better.

Ace looked away first, back to the glass, back to the city.

"Presence," she said. "Not analysis."

Mai was quiet for a moment.

Then: "I can do that."

Ace believed her.

That mattered more than any plan could have.

Shammy came back with supplies, route notes, and the particular expression of someone who had already been thinking too much before breakfast.

The intercept job sat between them now whether anyone named it or not. Two days out. Arasaka. Unknown client. Premium pay for reasons Rogue had not shared. Exactly the sort of equation Night City loved: high money, partial truth, hidden motive, delayed consequences.

Shammy set the bags down, took one look at Ace, and stilled.

The warmth in her face flickered.

Concern came through before she could file it down.

“You’re losing ground,” she said.

Ace leaned one shoulder against the window frame.

“Yes.”

No point softening it.

Shammy nodded once as if she had expected the answer and hated being right.

“I don’t know how to help with it.”

That landed differently from “I don’t understand.”

It was more honest.

Ace pushed the fragment back another fraction.

“I know.”

“I’ve seen chrome psychosis. feedback collapse. net-burn. people whose implants start rewriting their emotional range because a corpo thought stress-testing loyalty was efficient.” Shammy’s mouth tightened. “I have never seen *that*.”

Ace almost smiled.

Almost.

“It’s not chrome.”

“I know that.”

“I know.”

Shammy came closer but not too close. She had learned that distance now—close enough to be present, far enough not to make presence feel like pressure.

“If there’s something in this city that could damp it—technology, treatment, black-market neural interference—”

"No."

The refusal came instantly.

Shammy stopped.

Ace kept her voice level.

"I'm not handing this to chrome."

"It was a thought."

"It's mine."

The words came sharper than intended. Ace made herself breathe once before continuing.

"The fragment is part of me. If I let technology suppress it, I don't know what else I lose with it."

Shammy watched her for a long second.

Then nodded.

No argument.

Good.

"I get that more than I'd like," she said quietly.

That shifted the room.

Ace looked at her fully then.

Shammy's warmth flickered low and steady.

"Year twenty-three," Ace said.

Shammy exhaled once through her nose.

"Yeah."

"You almost gave up."

The silence after that was thin and real.

"I almost did," Shammy said. "More than once. Year twenty-three was just the year it got close enough to name."

"But you didn't."

"No."

"Why."

Shammy laughed once. Tired. Not amused.

"You're both obsessed with causes."

Ace waited.

Shammy looked down at her own hands.

"I didn't because stopping felt too final. Because as long as I kept the chair, some part of me remained someone who could still be reached." A pause. "And because if I gave up entirely, then the city would have been right about what it turns people into."

That was closer to a confession than most people in Night City would ever manage sober.

Ace nodded once.

"I'm losing ground," she said. "I'm still not giving up."

Shammy's eyes lifted.

Warmth came back into them fully this time.

"I know."

It mattered that she said it like recognition, not reassurance.

The fragment had always fed on motion.

Combat. Survival. Pain transformed into velocity. The katanas made it worse because they reached deeper than her hands did—down into the part of her that converted fear into precision before thought had time to become interference. Every fight gave the fragment more ways to understand her. Every win taught it another shape her mind would accept under pressure.

That had been survivable before.

Because before, she had anchors.

Mai making the world legible.

Shammy making it survivable.

The triad had never fought the fragment directly. It had simply made Ace less alone inside the terrain where it hunted.

Here, the terrain was damaged.

The sync came and went in broken flashes. Enough to save them. Not enough to keep things easy.

The fragment knew that too.

It kept testing.

Not with grand surges.

With persistence.

The promise that one day exhaustion would be misread as surrender.

Ace had not made that mistake yet.

Yet.

The night before the job, the apartment stayed dim.

Mai at the table. Shammy at the board. Ace at the window again because some habits were functional even when they stopped being choices.

Below them, Night City moved through its evening conversion—workers off shift, clubs waking up, vendors hardening into nighttime economy. Everything sharper. More electric. More willing to exploit the human nervous system if it meant another sale.

The fragment pressed.

She pushed back.

Mai came to stand behind her after a while. Not crowding. Just there.

“The fragment has been growing for years,” Mai said.

“Yes.”

“In our world it was contained.”

“Yes.”

“Here it is accelerating.”

Ace’s shadow tightened once along the glass.

“Yes.”

Mai was quiet.

No probabilities yet.

Another improvement.

“What happens if it wins?”

That was the right question.

Ace kept looking outward.

“I don’t know,” she said.

Not fully true. Not fully false.

The fragment did not present outcomes. It presented invitations. A different way of being. Faster. Sharper. More absolute. Less burdened by the parts of her that still hesitated before violence became identity.

What would that be, if not loss?

"It doesn't win," she said instead.

Mai accepted the evasion for what it was.

"That was not an answer."

"No."

Silence.

Then Ace added, quieter:

"If it gets through, I become less exact. Less... myself. Maybe not immediately. But enough."

Mai absorbed that.

No numbers.

Still progress.

"The triad helps," she said after a while.

Ace nodded.

"Yes."

"The probability that—"

Mai stopped herself.

Ace almost smiled again.

"Yeah," she said. "That."

Later, Shammy found her still at the window.

The room behind them had gone quiet. Mai had finally retreated to her own rituals—grounding, breathing, trying to keep the city from turning every thought into static.

Shammy leaned against the wall beside the glass.

"Two days," she said.

"Yes."

"You can still say no."

Ace turned to look at her.

“To the job?”

“Yes.”

That was not a fixer speaking.

That was Shammy.

Ace looked back out over the city.

“No.”

Shammy nodded as if she had known that already too.

“Figured.”

A long silence followed.

Then Shammy said, “You’re not the only one who has a thing that keeps pushing.”

Ace turned again.

Shammy’s warmth stayed where it was this time.

Unhidden.

“I know.”

“No,” Shammy said. “I don’t think you do.”

The sentence sat there for a while.

Then Shammy went on.

“Mine doesn’t live in my head the way yours does. It lives in behavior. Habit. Distance. The flatness. The way I turn into something survivable whenever things get too close.” She looked at the city, not Ace. “That is also a form of possession, if you let it go far enough.”

Ace absorbed that without comment.

Shammy laughed softly, humorless.

“Look at us,” she said. “One held together by math that keeps breaking. One held together by a fragment that keeps wanting more room. One held together by fifty years of bad habits pretending to be professionalism.”

Ace’s mouth moved.

This time the smile was real, if brief.

“That sounds like a triad.”

Shammy looked at her then.

Warmth. Grief. Affection. Exhaustion.

All of it there.

“Yeah,” she said. “It does.”

The job was tomorrow.

The fragment would keep pushing.

Mai’s numbers would keep failing cleanly.

Shammy’s warmth would keep flickering whenever the city asked for the version of her that knew how to survive by subtraction.

None of that changed.

The difference was smaller and more important.

None of them were pretending anymore.

The apartment held that honesty awkwardly, like it had been designed for logistics rather than truth.

Three chairs at the table.

The old chair in the corner.

The board on the wall.

The city outside trying to sell everyone a version of themselves that would finally feel manageable.

Inside, they had something harder.

Reality.

Ace stood alone again at the window once both of them had gone still.

The fragment touched the edge of her vision.

Purple. Patient. Waiting.

She pressed one palm to the glass.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The city spread out below her in layers of chrome and appetite, all of it humming with enough power to make the fragment hungry.

It pushed.

She pushed back.

Not because she thought the fight would get easier.

Because it was hers.

Because the triad was still here.

Because tomorrow would ask for more and she intended, stubbornly, violently, to still be herself when it did.

For now, that was enough.

For now, she held.

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From:

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Last update: **27/03/2026 19:29**

