

Chapter 2: Two Chairs

Mai woke to noise.

Not sound.

Numbers.

Not the kind she could hold—no edges, no boundaries, no clean sequence. They didn't line up. They didn't cascade. They *spilled*. Light through the window fractured into wavelengths she could almost name—six hundred, five hundred, four-fifty—but the ratios were wrong, the mix skewed, the whole spectrum drifting just out of reach of anything stable.

The building vibrated under her.

Load-bearing estimates surfaced automatically. Resonance patterns. Structural tolerance.

No baseline.

No comparison.

No certainty.

The electromagnetic field pressed in from every direction. Signals layered over signals—data streams, communication noise, power distribution, surveillance. Her mind reached for structure.

It didn't find it.

Seventy-three percent—

No.

Wrong.

Eighty-two—

Wrong.

Forty-seven—

Everything wrong.

She sat up.

The apartment resolved around her in pieces. Small. Functional. Compressed. The walls too close, the window too open, the city pressing in even through the glass.

And in the corner—

the chair.

Empty.

Still.

Waiting.

Mai lowered her hands to the floor.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers didn't stop, but they lost volume. Not gone—never gone—but less... insistent.

"Grounding."

She looked up.

Shammy stood in the doorway.

Same clothes. Different posture. Morning had settled into her. Not softer. Just... aligned.

"Grounding?" Mai repeated.

"When it gets loud." Shammy stepped in, slow, like she knew exactly how much movement Mai could process. "You touch something real. You let that be the baseline instead of the noise."

"My time," Mai said.

Shammy didn't answer that.

She moved to the kitchen surface instead. Containers. Water. Heat. Routine. Familiar in a way that didn't ask questions.

"Where's Ace?"

"Upstairs. Found a working heater." A small pause. "Or broke one until it worked."

That sounded right.

Mai pressed her fingers harder into the floor.

The numbers still moved, but they stopped trying to own everything.

"Your hands," Mai said.

Shammy stilled.

Mai stood.

The distance between them was short. Too short for fifty years.

"The scars," Mai continued. "They weren't there before."

"No," Shammy said.

She didn't hide them.

"Fifty years," Mai added.

"Fifty years."

Simple.

Unprotected.

Mai's mind tried to fill the gap. Time-to-injury ratios. Job frequency. Risk modeling—

"Stop."

Shammy was closer now.

A hand on her arm.

Firm.

Present.

"You're doing it again," Shammy said. "Your eyes go distant. You start building numbers you can't finish."

"I'm not—"

"You are." A small smile. Not teasing. Not quite. "Sixty percent you ask about the chair next. Seventy you try to reconstruct my life from fragments."

Mai froze.

"That's not—"

"It is."

Silence.

Then, quieter:

"I lived it, Mai."

That landed.

Mai's hands found the floor again.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

"The probabilities don't hold," she said. "There's no baseline. No stable model. The interference alone—"

"I know."

"You *know*?"

"I've been here long enough to learn what matters and what doesn't." Shammy stepped back, giving her space without breaking contact entirely. "The signals don't stop. You just stop listening to all of them."

"How."

Shammy hesitated.

Just for a second.

"You don't start with how," she said. "You start with *less*."

Mai breathed out.

Slow.

Measured.

"Show me," she said.

Shammy looked at her.

Not evaluating.

Remembering.

"You want the short version," Shammy said.

"I want something that works."

"That takes longer than a morning."

"I don't have longer."

Shammy's expression flickered.

There—gone.

"You have today," she said. "That's enough to start."

She turned to the window.

The city was already awake.

It hadn't slept.

"You'll need to understand districts. Who owns what. Where you can move and where you can't." She glanced back. "And you'll need work."

"Work."

“Nothing here exists without cost.”

Mai nodded once.

“The triad,” Shammy said.

The word didn’t land clean.

It hovered.

Past tense.

“Vector sync,” Shammy continued. “You remember.”

Mai did.

Not as memory.

As absence.

“I don’t know if it’s still there,” Shammy said.

“We’ll test it,” Mai replied.

“Tonight.”

Agreement.

No comfort.

—

The Afterlife didn’t quiet the numbers.

It changed them.

Patterns tried to form in the crowd density. Movement channels. Structural load. Acoustic saturation. Mai touched the bar. The wall. The edge of a chair.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

“Rogue,” Shammy said.

The woman behind the bar didn’t move much.

Didn’t need to.

The room adjusted around her instead.

Her eyes passed over Ace first.

Then Mai.

Assessment. Dismissal. Reassessment.

“Yours?” Rogue asked.

“Old,” Shammy said. “And new.”

“Need work.”

“Need work.”

A pause.

Then—

“Security detail,” Rogue said. “Watson. Tonight. You stand there, look dangerous, don’t ask questions.”

Her gaze flicked back to Shammy.

“You’re vouching.”

“I am.”

“Then it’s your problem if they die.”

“Understood.”

Rogue nodded once.

Decision made.

“They look like trouble,” she said.

“They are,” Shammy replied. “The useful kind.”

Rogue turned away.

Conversation over.

—

Outside, the city hit again.

Mai’s mind reached for structure.

Failed.

Retried.

Failed.

“Sixty-four percent—” she started.

Her hand hit the wall.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

“Filter,” Shammy said, walking ahead of them. “You don’t need all of it.”

“All of it matters.”

“No.” A glance back. “You just think it does.”

They turned into Watson.

Different layout. Different rhythm. Different rules she couldn’t name yet.

“This is Viktor’s,” Shammy said.

The building didn’t look like a place people got repaired.

That meant it was.

“If you’re going to work,” Shammy added, “you need someone who can put you back together.”

Mai’s mind started again—

failure rates

augmentation risks

—

“Stop.”

The hand again.

Grounding.

“You can’t map this yet,” Shammy said.

“I don’t like not knowing.”

“I didn’t either.”

That one stayed.

Mai’s fingers pressed harder into the wall.

“I don’t remember how to filter,” she said.

Shammy’s expression softened.

“You do,” she said. “You just forgot what it feels like.”

"I don't have time to relearn."

"No," Shammy agreed. "You don't."

A beat.

"Which is why you trust me until you do."

That was the first real demand.

Mai looked at her.

Really looked.

Fifty years.

Not theoretical.

Not calculable.

Lived.

"Okay," Mai said.

Shammy nodded once.

That was enough.

—

Inside, the clinic smelled like antiseptic.

And something metallic underneath.

Familiar and not.

Mai's mind started again—

"Don't."

Ace.

Close.

Closer than she'd realized.

"The numbers are loud," Ace said.

"How—"

"Your eyes."

Simple.

Direct.

“Let them be wrong,” Ace added.

Mai stared at her.

“That’s not how—”

“It is now.”

A pause.

Then—

“Ground.”

Mai exhaled.

Her hand found the wall again.

Cool.

Solid.

Real.

The numbers didn’t disappear.

They stopped demanding obedience.

The door opened.

Viktor looked at them like a problem he hadn’t decided to solve yet.

“Natural,” he said.

Like it was a diagnosis.

“Completely natural.”

“Yes,” Shammy said.

“They’ll die,” Viktor replied.

“Not today.”

A beat.

Viktor considered that.

Then shrugged.

“Fine,” he said. “Then don’t die.”

He handed Shammy a kit.

“Bring them back if something breaks.”

“Nothing’s broken,” Ace said.

Viktor looked at her.

Then laughed once.

“Not yet.”

—

Back in the apartment, the silence held.

Smaller now.

Contained.

The chair was still there.

Mai looked at it.

The numbers tried.

They failed.

“I can’t calculate it,” she said.

“Don’t,” Shammy replied.

Her hand rested on Mai’s arm again.

“You don’t solve everything by understanding it first.”

Mai looked at the chair.

Then at Shammy.

Then back.

Fifty years.

No model.

No equation.

Just—

there.

“Okay,” Mai said.

Shammy smiled.

That one held.

“We leave in three hours.”

—
Three hours later, they did.

The numbers were still there.

Wrong.

Incomplete.

Loud.

But not everything needed to be solved.

Not yet.

Mai kept one hand on the wall as they passed.

Just long enough.

Then let go.
—

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