

Chapter 7: The Name

Mai couldn't stop thinking about Martinez.

Not the man.

The shape he left in the room.

A name on the board should have stayed a name. Another line in Shammy's web. Another dead contact in a city built on temporary alliances and permanent losses.

It didn't.

It caught.

That annoyed her first.

Then it started getting in the way.

The numbers wouldn't hold. Threat trees opened and collapsed. Probability chains split into noise. Every time she tried to sort the board into something legible, Martinez was there—crossed out, still connected, still structurally alive in a network that should have let him go.

Eleven years.

Dead for twelve.

Still present.

The wall under her hand felt cool.

Solid.

Real.

The city behind it did not.

Night City pressed through everything. Data hum in the wiring. Surveillance bleed through cheap alloys. Street-level personal networks broadcasting from every body in the building and every building across the street. Drones moving in approved corridors. Bass from somewhere below. Ad-glow flickering across the room in colors no one inside had chosen.

But Martinez interfered harder than the city did.

That was new.

The board took up half the room if you looked at it the right way.

Strings. Pins. Printed photos. Ink notes in Shammy's narrow, practical hand. The analog skeleton of fifty years lived without permission.

Mai had been studying it for days.

Not because Shammy asked.

Because Shammy hadn't.

That mattered.

She found Martinez in four places.

A Watson security contract with the client name scratched out.

A Pacifica transport run that looked suicidal unless you knew the district intimately.

A corporate security job that ended abruptly—name crossed out, line cut, connection left hanging.

A meeting at the Afterlife marked in shorthand only a fixer would still trust after this many years.

That was enough to tell a story.

Not enough to understand one.

Her fingers traced the twine between names.

Not thread.

Twine.

Deliberate. Physical. Hard to break.

In a city where digital vanished, Shammy had trusted what could be touched.

That, too, mattered.

Each crossed-out name on the board felt heavier once Mai noticed the pattern. Not data points. Not completed jobs. Losses. Carried forward. Not erased.

Martinez had been crossed out.

His strings were not.

“Stop.”

Mai blinked.

Ace stood a few steps away from the window now, shadow still touching the glass in strange angles whenever the neon shifted. Her violet eyes were steady.

“You’re spiraling,” Ace said.

“The numbers are loud.”

“They’re always loud.”

“This is louder.”

Mai didn't turn fully. Her hand stayed on the wall.

"The board is data," she said. "Connections. Duration. recurrence. risk—"

"No," Ace said.

Simple.

Quiet.

Final.

Mai looked at her then.

Ace stepped closer.

"Data is what you use when you don't want to admit it's a person."

That landed harder than it should have.

Mai's jaw tightened.

"You calculate threats."

"Yes."

"Routes. combat patterns."

"Yes."

"Then why not this?"

"Because this isn't a system failure."

Ace's gaze flicked to the board.

"It's grief."

Mai said nothing.

Ace moved closer still, until her hand rested briefly against Mai's arm. Not holding. Not restraining. Just there.

"You want to make Shammy understandable," Ace said. "That isn't the same as seeing her."

Mai exhaled once.

Sharp.

"Then what."

"Ask."

Not calculate. Not infer. Not build a model and pretend it counts as compassion.

Ask.

Ace let go and stepped back.

The room kept humming.

The board did not become simpler.

But something in Mai's posture changed.

Not solved.

Shifted.

Shammy came back from the Afterlife carrying the city with her.

Not physically.

In the way her shoulders held. In the way the door shut behind her and some part of the room recalibrated to her presence. She smelled like cold air, old chrome, bar cleaner, and somebody else's cigarette smoke caught in fabric.

"Rogue has another line open," she said, by habit.

Then she saw Mai still at the board.

Saw Ace watching.

Saw the room had changed shape while she was gone.

Her warmth flickered once.

Gone.

Professional mask in place.

"What."

Not hostile.

Guarded.

Mai didn't soften it.

"Martinez."

The name hit.

That was visible now.

A small tightening around the mouth. A stillness in the hands. Not surprise. Impact.

"What about him?"

"You worked with him eleven years."

"Yes."

"You trusted him."

Shammy's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yes."

"He died."

"Yes."

"You're not okay."

There it was.

No lead-in. No escape route. No respectful circles around the thing.

Shammy's first reaction was anger.

Not loud anger.

Defensive anger. Sharpened enough to cut the question before it landed.

"I told you he died."

"You told me the event," Mai said. "Not the cost."

That stopped her.

The apartment went very still.

Even the city seemed to lower itself for a second, though it didn't. That part was illusion. Or attention.

Shammy looked at Mai.

Really looked.

Then away.

Then at the board.

"No," she said.

Quiet.

More dangerous than shouting.

"I'm not."

Mai's fingers tightened against the wall.

"I calculated wrong."

A bitter little smile touched Shammy's face and vanished.

"Yeah," she said. "You did."

Mai did not flinch.

"I thought if I mapped the structure, I could understand the feeling."

"You can't."

"I know."

"No," Shammy said, sharper now. "You know the sentence. That isn't the same thing."

That was fair.

Cruel, maybe.

Fair.

Mai nodded once.

"Then tell me the part I can't calculate."

Shammy stared at her for a long moment.

Then crossed to the board.

Her finger found one of Martinez's old lines and rested there, lightly, like pressing too hard would damage something still alive.

"Daniel," she said.

Not Martinez.

Daniel.

The room changed again.

"Daniel Martinez. We met twenty-three years ago on a job that should have gone bad faster than it did. He stayed useful. Then he stayed." A pause. "Eleven years."

"Partners," Mai said.

"Partners," Shammy echoed. "Not triad. Not this. But yes. Partners."

Ace said nothing.

That helped.

Shammy kept her eyes on the board.

"He liked expensive tea and cheap arguments. Hated bad tools. Hated sloppy shooters. Hated people who spoke like confidence was the same thing as competence." A tiny breath. "Would've hated this city if it ever gave him enough time to mean it."

The warmth in her voice didn't return all at once. It came in fragments.

That felt more honest than if it had been whole.

"He had a daughter," Shammy said. "Six when we met. Seventeen when he died. I watched her grow up between jobs and missed birthdays and cheap dinners and the kind of promises people make when they mean them at the time."

Mai listened.

Did not interrupt.

Did not count.

Good.

"Arasaka," Shammy said then, and the word flattened the room again. "Twelve years ago. Run was supposed to be simple."

Ace looked at her.

Did not say anything about the word *simple*.

Also good.

"We got sold out," Shammy continued. "He was point. I was support. That was the shape." A pause. "Then the shape broke."

Her hands had started shaking.

Not dramatically.

Just enough to make the stillness around them painful.

"He held the line," she said. "I got out. He didn't."

Silence.

Not empty.

Weighted.

Mai finally spoke.

"Did you see it happen?"

The question was surgical.

Shammy looked at her with something like shock.

Then—slowly—she nodded.

"Yeah."

That answered more than the word.

Ace pushed away from the window.

A small movement.

Huge consequence.

She stopped a step from Shammy. Not touching. Never forcing comfort where it hadn't been invited.

"That's why you couldn't take his name down," Ace said.

Not a question.

Shammy shut her eyes once.

Opened them again.

"Yeah."

There it was.

No theory left.

Just fact.

"I kept going," Shammy said after a while.

The sentence sounded almost apologetic.

"As if that needs defending," Ace said.

Shammy gave her a look that would once have become a laugh. Not tonight.

"You don't get it," she said.

"No," Ace replied. "I don't."

That honesty took the air out of whatever argument was trying to form.

Shammy stared at her.

Ace held the gaze.

"We weren't here," Ace said. "We don't know what twelve years of that felt like. We don't know what fifty years of this city did to you." A pause. "But we're here now."

Shammy's mouth moved as if to deflect.

Didn't.

Mai stepped in before the moment could close.

"We're not asking whether you recovered," she said. "We're asking whether you had to carry it alone."

The answer came immediately.

“Yes.”

No armor left on that one.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” Shammy said. “Not really. Contacts don’t count. Clients don’t count. People you work with don’t count if the work is the only reason they know your name.” Her voice tightened. “I had people around me. That isn’t the same thing.”

“Not triad,” Ace said.

“No,” Shammy whispered. “Not triad.”

That word broke something open.

Not cleanly.

Nothing here broke cleanly.

But it opened.

Mai let the numbers go.

Not perfectly. Not forever. Just enough.

“I am sorry,” she said.

Flat voice. Real statement.

“I tried to turn your loss into a pattern because patterns are easier to hold.”

Shammy watched her.

“And?”

“And it was cowardly.”

That one surprised all three of them.

Mai didn’t take it back.

“I wanted to understand without being changed by it.”

The city outside kept flickering through its manufactured colors.

Inside, the room had gone beyond quiet.

Shammy laughed once.

Tired. Small. Almost kind.

“Yeah,” she said. “That sounds like you.”

Mai accepted that too.

“I still want to understand.”

“You won’t,” Shammy said.

“Not completely.”

“No.”

“But I can listen.”

That finally did it.

Not some grand gesture.

Not a confession.

Just that.

I can listen.

Shammy’s shoulders lowered by a fraction.

Enough to count.

“Okay,” she said.

The warmth came back then—not bright, not restored, but present. A lived-in thing, not a performance.

“Okay.”

Later, the tea was wrong.

That helped.

Not the precise tea Ace made. Not ritual. Not care measured into temperature and steeping time.

Soycaff. Bitter. Functional. Night City in a cup.

They sat with it anyway.

Three chairs occupied now.

The board still on the wall.

Daniel’s name still crossed out.

Still connected.

As it should be.

"I told no one," Shammy said into the steam. "Because if I said it out loud, it stopped being survivable. It became real in a way that work couldn't file down."

Ace turned her cup once between both hands.

"It was always real."

"I know."

"That isn't the same as saying it."

"I know."

Mai held her cup.

Warm.

Solid.

Real.

No need to say it this time.

Shammy looked between them.

At Ace.

At Mai.

At the room that no longer felt like a place she merely operated from.

"I don't know what to do with this yet," she admitted.

Triad. Presence. Being seen. Any of it.

Ace nodded once.

"You don't have to."

Mai added, "It already changed shape."

Shammy's mouth twitched.

"Still talking like a machine."

"Less than before."

"That's true."

That almost became a smile.

Almost was enough.

The board remained.

The city remained.

The dead remained dead.

None of that changed.

But one thing had.

Martinez was no longer just a crossed-out name in a web of old work.

He had a first name now.

A daughter.

Bad tea standards.

A laugh, probably.

A shape in Shammy's life that the board could mark but never explain.

And that mattered.

Because some things were not meant to be solved.

Only carried.

Only heard.

Only witnessed.

Outside, Night City kept pretending movement was the same thing as life.

Inside, the triad sat in the same room and did something far more dangerous.

They stayed.

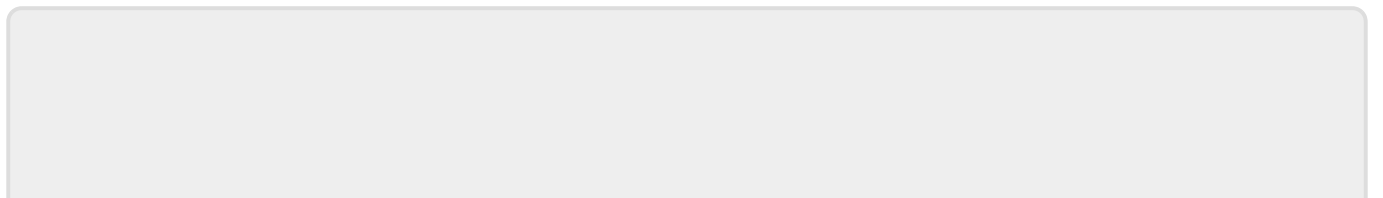
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