

CHAPTER 18 — Echo Pattern

The city didn't change.

That was the problem.

Nothing slowed.

Nothing paused.

Nothing marked what had just happened as important.

Traffic moved.

Voices carried.

Neon burned the same as before.

Night City didn't acknowledge anomalies.

It absorbed them.

Mai walked slightly ahead.

Not leading.

Tracking.

The object in her hand—

quiet.

But not inert.

It didn't push.

Didn't pull.

It waited.

"That's wrong," she said.

Ace didn't look at it.

"Everything here is."

Mai shook her head slightly.

"No."

A beat.

“This is consistent.”

That was worse.

Shammy tilted her head.

The air around them—

stable.

Crowded.

But beneath it—

something else.

“Pressure’s uneven,” she said.

V glanced around.

“...Yeah, that’s the city.”

Shammy shook her head.

“Not that.”

A pause.

“Deeper.”

Ace slowed.

“Direction.”

Shammy didn’t point.

She couldn’t.

“It’s not in one place.”

That locked it.

Mai’s gaze sharpened.

“Pattern.”

Shammy nodded once.

“Yes.”

The object shifted.

Not physically.

Relationally.

For a fraction—

it aligned—

not with the street—

not with the buildings—

with something else.

Mai stopped.

“Again.”

Ace turned.

“What.”

Mai lifted the object slightly.

“It’s not referencing location.”

A beat.

“It’s referencing structure.”

That changed the search.

V frowned.

“...You’re losing me.”

Mai didn’t slow down.

“Where would a system like this propagate,” she said.

Not to V.

To herself.

Ace answered anyway.

“Where it can.”

“Incorrect.”

Immediate.

Mai’s voice sharpened.

“Where it is allowed.”

That was worse.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air shifted—

slightly.

Recognition.

“It’s not forcing anything,” she said.

“It’s waiting for agreement.”

That word again.

Ace’s gaze hardened.

“Then something’s giving it one.”

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

They moved.

Not toward a place—

toward a pattern.

The city didn’t guide them.

The structure did.

Subtle at first.

Distances that felt slightly off.

Angles that didn't quite line up.

Moments where movement—

lagged.

Nothing obvious.

Nothing that would matter—

to anyone else.

But to them—

it was enough.

They stopped at an intersection.

Unremarkable.

Four streets.

Equal flow.

No visible anomaly.

V looked around.

“...This is it?”

Mai didn't answer.

She was watching the space—

between movement.

There—

for a fraction—

two paths overlapped.

Then didn't.

“Here,” she said.

Ace stepped forward.

Nothing resisted.

That wasn't a good sign.

Shammy closed her eyes.

The air tightened—

not enough to alarm—

just enough to confirm.

“It’s thinner,” she said.

V frowned.

“...Thinner?”

Mai nodded.

“Less committed.”

That was the closest translation.

Ace looked at the object.

“Then use it.”

Mai hesitated.

Not uncertainty.

Calculation.

“If this aligns fully,” she said,

“...it will complete the pattern.”

Silence.

That was the risk.

Ace didn't flinch.

“Then we control it.”

Shammy shook her head.

“You don't control something that wants agreement.”

That was the truth.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“Then we limit it.”

She stepped forward.

Lifted the object—

just slightly.

The space reacted.

Not violently.

Subtly.

The overlap—

stayed.

Didn't correct.

Didn't resolve.

Held.

V took a step back.

"...Yeah, I don't like that."

Ace didn't move.

"Good."

Mai held position.

The object—

balanced—

between alignment—

and refusal.

“That’s it,” she said.

Shammy opened her eyes.

The air—

tight—

but stable.

“It’s not finishing,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Because it can’t.”

Ace's gaze shifted across the intersection.

"What's missing."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Then:

"More than one point."

That locked the pattern.

This wasn't a single anomaly.

It was—

distributed.

V exhaled slowly.

“...So this wasn’t a one-off.”

Ace didn’t react.

“No.”

Flat.

Mai lowered the object.

The space snapped back—

imperfect—

but moving.

The pattern disappeared.

Or—

hid.

Shammy took a slow breath.

The air relaxed.

Not fully.

Not clean.

But enough.

Mai turned.

“We map it.”

Ace nodded once.

“Then we cut it.”

V looked between them.

“...You two always talk like that?”

Neither of them answered.

Because the decision was already made.

This wasn't a job anymore.

It wasn't even a problem.

It was a system.

And somewhere inside Night City—

something had started—

not to break—

but to agree

in ways it shouldn't.

And now—

they knew

it wasn't alone.

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