

CHAPTER 19 — Spread

The pattern didn't show itself again.

Not immediately.

That was the second warning.

The first had been that it existed.

The second—

that it didn't need to.

They moved through the city.

Not fast.

Not slow.

Deliberate.

Mai tracked structure.

Not locations.

Not landmarks.

Relationships.

Where things aligned—

and where they didn't.

At first—

nothing.

Then—

small fractures.

A street corner where distance felt compressed.

A walkway that seemed shorter from one direction than the other.

A doorway that didn't quite sit in the wall it belonged to.

Nothing obvious.

Nothing actionable.

But enough.

"It's distributed," Mai said.

Ace didn't ask.

"How far."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because the answer wasn't fixed.

"It depends," she said.

Shammy walked slightly behind them.

Listening.

The air—

still held.

But now—

it carried something else.

Residue.

“It’s not spreading,” she said.

A beat.

“It’s echoing.”

That was worse.

V frowned.

“...What’s the difference.”

Mai answered.

“Spread implies growth.”

A beat.

“Echo implies recurrence.”

That landed.

Ace glanced at her.

“So it’s already everywhere.”

Mai shook her head slightly.

“No.”

A beat.

“But it doesn’t need to move.”

That was enough.

They stopped again.

Another intersection.

Different.

Less crowded.

More contained.

The buildings leaned slightly inward—

not enough to notice—

unless you were looking for it.

Mai stepped forward.

The space responded—

not by shifting—

by hesitating.

“There,” she said.

Ace moved beside her.

Nothing resisted.

Again—

wrong.

Shammy closed her eyes.

The air tightened—

just enough.

“Same pattern,” she said.

V looked around.

“...Looks like every other block.”

Mai didn't look away.

“That's the point.”

The object—

shifted.

Not toward the center—

but toward—

alignment.

For a fraction—

the space between the buildings—

collapsed.

Then—

released.

Ace's hand moved instinctively.

Not to draw—

to mark.

“Repeat,” she said.

Mai adjusted her position.

Not forward.

Not back.

Offset.

The object stabilized.

Not correct—

but consistent.

Shammy exhaled.

The air held.

“This one’s weaker,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“Because it’s not anchored.”

That tracked.

Ace looked across the street.

“How many.”

Mai didn’t answer.

Because she couldn’t.

V exhaled slowly.

“...You’re telling me this is happening all over the city.”

Mai finally looked at him.

“Yes.”

Flat.

No emphasis.

That made it worse.

Silence settled.

Not heavy.

Expanding.

Ace broke it.

“Then we don’t chase points.”

Mai nodded once.

“We find the origin.”

Shammy opened her eyes.

The air shifted—

just slightly.

“There isn’t one,” she said.

That stopped them.

Ace turned.

“Explain.”

Shammy didn’t hesitate.

“It’s not coming from somewhere.”

A beat.

“It’s resolving everywhere it can.”

That locked the problem.

Mai exhaled slowly.

“Then we’re not dealing with a source.”

Ace finished it.

“We’re dealing with a system.”

That changed the scale.

V let out a quiet breath.

“...That’s bad.”

Ace didn’t react.

“No.”

A beat.

“It’s predictable.”

Mai glanced at her.

“Explain.”

Ace’s gaze moved across the city.

“If it needs agreement—”

A beat.

“—then it needs structure.”

That was the first real leverage.

Mai’s eyes sharpened.

“Yes.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

The air—

shifted.

Recognition.

“It’s stronger where things already align,” she said.

Mai nodded.

“High-density structure.”

V blinked.

“...You mean like—”

Mai didn't let him finish.

“Core zones.”

That was enough.

Ace turned.

“Then we go where it matters.”

No hesitation.

No delay.

The city didn't resist.

It didn't guide them either.

It simply—

continued.

And somewhere deeper inside it—

where systems overlapped—

where structure was strongest—

something was already

much closer

to finishing

than it should have been.

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From:

<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:

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Last update: **05/04/2026 14:39**

