

# CHAPTER 20 — Core Pressure

The city changed—

---

but only if you knew where to look.

---

The deeper they moved—

---

the tighter everything became.

---

---

Not visually.

---

Not obviously.

---

---

Structurally.

---

---

Distances shortened.

---

Movement aligned.

---

Noise—

---

compressed into something that no longer scattered.

This was where Night City held itself together.

---

---

And that—

---

made it vulnerable.

---

---

Mai didn't slow.

---

---

"This is wrong," she said.

---

---

Ace kept pace beside her.

---

---

"Good."

---

---

Shammy's breathing shifted.

---

---

The air—

---

tight.

Too tight.

“It’s building here,” she said.

No hesitation.

V glanced around.

“...Feels like every other day downtown.”

Mai shook her head.

“No.”

A beat.

“This is alignment.”

That word again.

---

---

Ace's gaze sharpened.

---

---

"Then it's close."

---

---

Mai didn't answer.

---

---

She didn't need to.

---

---

The object—

---

---

reacted.

---

---

This time—

---

---

immediately.

---

---

The moment they crossed into the next block—

---

---

it shifted.

---

---

Not subtly.

Not quietly.

The distance between her hand—

and the object—

collapsed.

For a fraction—

it was already where it wanted to be.

Then it snapped back.

Shammy flinched.

“It’s stronger,” she said.

Ace didn't look at it.

---

---

"Then we're close."

---

---

Mai stopped.

---

---

Not because she chose to.

---

---

Because the space—

---

did.

---

---

Ahead—

---

the street didn't misalign.

---

---

It agreed.

---

---

Perfectly.

---

---

Too perfectly.

“This is it,” she said.

---

---

Ace stepped forward.

---

---

Nothing resisted.

---

---

That was worse.

---

---

Shammy closed her eyes.

---

---

The air—

---

---

locked.

---

---

Every layer—

---

---

aligned.

---

---

“It’s complete here,” she said.

---

That wasn't good.

---

---

That meant—

---

this point—

---

had finished resolving.

---

---

V stepped back instinctively.

---

---

"...Yeah, I don't like this one."

---

---

Mai lifted the object slightly.

---

---

It reacted instantly.

---

---

The space—

---

tightened.

---

---

Not around them—

around itself.

“This is the anchor,” she said.

Ace nodded once.

“Then we break it.”

“No.”

Immediate.

Mai didn’t look away.

“If this point collapses—”

A beat.

“—everything connected to it shifts.”

That was worse.

---

---

Shammy stepped closer.

---

---

The air resisted—

---

for the first time.

---

---

Not violently.

---

---

But enough.

---

---

“It doesn’t want us here,” she said.

---

---

Ace exhaled slowly.

---

---

“Too late.”

---

---

She stepped forward—

---

into the aligned zone.

---

---

The reaction was instant.

---

---

The space didn't distort.

---

---

It corrected.

---

---

Around her.

---

---

Mai felt it.

---

---

"It's locking to you," she said.

---

---

Ace didn't stop.

---

---

"Then it picked wrong."

---

---

The object surged.

---

Not physically—

---

structurally.

---

---

The alignment—

---

tightened further.

---

---

The street—

---

shortened.

---

---

The buildings—

---

leaned inward.

---

---

Everything—

---

converged.

---

---

Shammy inhaled sharply.

---

---

The air—

---

---

snapped.

---

---

“It’s closing,” she said.

---

---

Mai moved—

---

---

fast.

---

---

Not toward the center—

---

---

toward Ace.

---

---

“Don’t resist it!” she said.

---

---

Ace didn’t.

---

---

That was the difference.

She let the alignment—

---

complete around her.

---

---

For a fraction—

---

everything—

---

locked.

---

---

Perfect.

---

---

That was the moment.

---

---

Mai stepped in.

---

---

The object—

---

lifted—

---

aligned—

---

not with the space—

---

---

but with Ace.

---

---

Shammy pushed—

---

through the pressure—

---

not against it—

---

breaking agreement—

---

not structure.

---

---

The air—

---

fractured.

---

---

Not violently.

---

---

Enough.

---

---

The alignment—

failed.

---

---

The street—

---

expanded.

---

---

The buildings—

---

released.

---

---

The center—

---

collapsed.

---

---

Not destroyed.

---

---

Unresolved.

---

---

Ace stepped back.

---

---

The space—

---

---

snapped into imperfection.

---

---

Alive again.

---

---

Mai lowered the object.

---

---

It resisted—

---

---

just slightly.

---

---

Good.

---

---

Shammy steadied herself.

---

---

The air—

---

---

uneven.

---

---

Breathing.

---

---

V let out a breath they hadn't realized they were holding.

---

---

"...Okay," they said.

---

---

"...that one I definitely didn't like."

---

---

Mai didn't answer.

---

---

She was already recalculating.

---

---

"If that was a completed node—"

---

---

Ace finished it.

---

---

"—there are more."

---

---

Shammy nodded slowly.

---

---

"Yes."

---

---

A beat.

---

---

“And they’re getting stronger.”

---

---

Silence.

---

---

Short.

---

---

Because there was nothing else to say.

---

---

They had just stopped one point from finishing.

---

---

Not the system.

---

---

Not the pattern.

---

---

Just—

---

one place

---

where it had almost succeeded.

---

---

And somewhere deeper in the city—

---

where structure was tighter—

---

where alignment was easier—

---

something else

was already closer

to completion

than this had been.

—

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