

[← Chapter 1](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 3 →](#)

Chapter 2: The Whisper Market

What does a cult do on a Tuesday?

Mai had been turning this question over since 0530, when they'd left the apartment in the thin gray light of a Night City pre-dawn that couldn't decide if it was morning or nighttime with different marketing. The Data Warrens operated on a 26-hour cycle because the information brokers who'd built them had decided that standard time was for people who didn't have enough data to require more of it. At 0700 on a Tuesday, the Warrens were approaching their third wind. Foot traffic was a mix of night-shift brokers heading home and day-shift analysts heading in, plus a smattering of people for whom time had lost all meaning around Thursday.

The Warrens lived below street level. Three blocks of subterranean service tunnels that some enterprising soul had converted into a market after the Consolidation, when the city government stopped maintaining infrastructure and started maintaining plausible deniability. The air down here was terrible. Mai noted this objectively and also with her lungs.

"The ventilation system was designed for electrical conduits, not human habitation," she said, ducking under a data-cable strung across the corridor at forehead height. "The air exchange rate is approximately 40% of what it should be for this occupancy level. If I had a week and access to the maintenance panels, I could improve it by—"

"Later," Ace said.

Ace moved through the Warrens like a blade through silk. Her shadow-pressure preceded her by about two meters, and the brokers who'd been considering a casual shakedown took one look at the way the air folded around her and found something else to do. Ace didn't notice them noticing. She was busy cataloguing structural vulnerabilities: load-bearing walls, cable routes, three exits she'd mapped before they'd gone twenty meters.

Shammy brought up the rear, which was where she preferred to be when the space was enclosed. At 195 centimeters, she had to duck every structural support in the Warrens, which she did with the particular grace of someone who'd spent her entire humanoid life navigating spaces that hadn't been built for her. The air pressure around Shammy shifted subtly as she walked—smoothing the press of bodies, making the crowded corridor feel less like a crush and more like a very well-attended gathering. Not control. Regulation.

"The air quality down here is genuinely offensive," Shammy said. "Not metaphorically. I mean it's actually offending the atmosphere. There's a difference between recycled air and air that's been through something, and this air has been through something."

"Data exhaust," Mai said. "The servers generate heat, the heat degrades the ventilation seals, the degraded seals leak coolant fumes into the air supply. It's a closed system with no scrubbers. The Warrens have been slowly poisoning their own atmosphere since 2047."

"That's very sad and also very avoidable and I'm going to need to not fix it or I'll be down here all

day.”

“Self-awareness,” Mai said. “Growth. I'm proud.”

Shammy made a sound that was half laugh and half atmospheric disturbance. A data-broker three meters to their left dropped his coffee. Shammy didn't notice. She rarely noticed the small effects her field had on the environment. To her, the air was a language she spoke natively. To everyone else, Shammy speaking that language was like standing next to a subwoofer that had opinions.

The corridor opened into a junction where six tunnels met and a hundred small shops competed for attention through light, sound, and the aggressive deployment of holographic signage. Mai navigated by memory. She'd been here before, two years ago, on the Manila business. The layout hadn't changed, because nothing in the Warrens changed except the data.

“Whisper's shop is down Transaction Avenue.”

“Transaction Avenue is not a real avenue,” Shammy observed.

“It's a corridor that someone branded. The branding was done with a holographic projector that hasn't been calibrated since installation. It currently reads 'Transaction' or something in a script I don't recognize, depending on the angle.”

“I like that. A street that can't decide what it is.” Shammy ducked under a pipe. “That's Night City all over.”

Ace said nothing. She was watching a broker who was watching them. The broker looked away first. Ace filed the encounter under things that were probably nothing and could become something if circumstances changed.

Whisper's shop was at the end of the corridor. The door was a privacy screen that required either an invitation, a password, or enough firepower to make the question academic. Mai had an invitation. She placed her palm on the reader and the screen dissolved.

The interior was smaller than Mai remembered. Whisper operated from a space roughly the size of a storage closet, if the storage closet had been designed by someone who believed that information density was a spiritual practice. Data-screens covered every surface. Three displayed market feeds. Two showed security camera footage of the corridors outside. One was running what appeared to be a solitaire game with cards that had data codes instead of suits.

Whisper herself sat at the center of this information hurricane with the specific stillness of someone whose tired had moved past tired and into something that had given up on sleep entirely. Her eyes tracked across three screens simultaneously. She didn't look up when the triad entered.

“Three visitors. That's two more than I was expecting and one more than I'm comfortable with.”

“You said you had more information on The Deep.” Mai sat in the only available chair, positioned so that Whisper's screens were visible from it. Mai didn't think this was an accident. The chair was a negotiation tool: sit here, see what I show you, trust the framing.

“I said I had additional data points. Information implies I've verified it. Data points imply I'm passing along things that crossed my desk and might be relevant or might be the ramblings of a data-addict who hasn't slept in six days.” Whisper finally looked at Mai. “You're still as direct as a surgical procedure.”

“Efficiency is a virtue.”

“Efficiency is a coping mechanism, but I respect the framing.” Whisper's attention shifted to Ace, who had positioned herself by the door with sightlines on every exit and her shadow-pressure between the entrance and the rest of the room. Then to Shammy, who was examining the ceiling ventilation with the pain of someone who could see exactly how bad it was and was choosing not to fix it through what appeared to be an act of will. “Your associates are as charming as ever. The tall one still makes my coffee cup vibrate.”

“Shammy,” Shammy said warmly. “And your air circulation is genuinely dangerous. You should open a window.”

“We're forty meters below street level.”

“A vent, then. I can show you where the blockage is.”

“No, thank you. I prefer my atmosphere poisonous and my structural integrity unexamined.” Whisper pulled up a screen. “The Deep. Here's what I've got.”

The data appeared on the center screen. Purchase orders. Lease documents. Personnel movements. Financial transfers. The raw material of investigation, stripped of narrative.

“They've been active for six months, not the four I initially reported,” Whisper said. “The lease on the warehouse goes back further, but the activity pattern suggests they ramped up operations around month three. The organic materials—salt, copper, galena, sea salt—started arriving in bulk around that time.”

Mai leaned forward. “Sea salt. You confirmed the shipment?”

“Three shipments. Two from maritime suppliers outside the city, one from a depot that usually handles industrial chemical transport. The paper trail is clean, which is itself suspicious. In Night City, clean paper trails mean someone with resources wanted the trail to be found. The question is why.”

Ace shifted from the door. A small movement. Mai had learned to read it as the precursor to a question. Ace didn't ask many questions. When she did, the question had been compressed to its essential components.

“Previous investigators,” Ace said.

Whisper's hands paused over her screens. One second. In Whisper's operational tempo, that was the equivalent of a long silence.

“There have been two,” she said. “One corporate investigation team, six months ago. They filed a report that concluded 'no actionable intelligence' and closed the case. The team lead took early retirement two weeks later. He now runs a fish farm in the Pacific Northwest and doesn't answer his phone.”

“And the second?”

“Independent. A data-miner named Castellán. He came to me three months ago asking the same questions you're asking. I gave him the same data I'm giving you. He went to the Harbor district to verify.” Whisper's eyes met Mai's. “I haven't heard from him since. That was eleven weeks ago.”

The air pressure in the room shifted. Shammy's field, reading the emotional weight of the room and smoothing it without conscious thought. The data was heavy. Someone had disappeared. That changed the probability matrix.

"Castellan was competent," Whisper continued. "Not reckless. Not the type to disappear into a cult, if that's what this is. Which leaves two options: he found something that made him stop asking questions, or something found him."

"The third option," Mai said, "is that he found something that wasn't a cult and didn't need to report back because the situation wasn't what he expected."

Whisper's eyes narrowed. "That's specific."

"It's a hypothesis. The organic material purchases map to ritual-structure protocols. But they also map to containment-maintenance protocols. If Castellan walked into the Harbor district expecting a cult and found something else, he might have decided the original question was wrong."

"You're suggesting he's still there. Voluntarily."

"I'm suggesting it's a possibility your binary doesn't account for."

Whisper stared at Mai for a long moment. Then she closed one of her screens and opened another that Mai hadn't seen before.

"There's one more thing," Whisper said. "The name. The Deep. That's what they call themselves. Not 'The Deep Congregation'—that's the lease name, the corporate fiction. Among themselves, they're 'The Deep.' I don't know what it refers to. The ocean. A depth metaphor. A theological concept." She paused. "Or something I don't have a category for."

Shammy, who had been quiet, spoke. Her voice had shifted to the register she used when she was reading atmospheric data—focused, precise, less warm than her usual register but no less present.

"The air in the Harbor district. Has it always been this stable?"

Whisper looked at her. Really looked, for the first time, with the attention of someone recalibrating her assessment.

"You noticed that too."

"I noticed it three days ago. It hasn't changed since."

"Neither has the atmospheric data. I pulled weather records for the Harbor district going back eighteen months. The pressure readings are a flat line. No variance. No fluctuation. Meteorologically, that's—"

"Impossible," Shammy said. "Unless something is regulating it."

"Unless something is regulating it." Whisper leaned back. "I ran the numbers myself. Double-checked the sensors. Had a contact verify from a different monitoring station. The data is accurate. The Harbor district has had zero atmospheric variance for at least eighteen months. In an open-air urban environment, that doesn't happen. That can't happen."

"In an open-air urban environment," Mai said, "nothing should be able to maintain that level of

atmospheric control without massive infrastructure. The power requirements alone would show up on the grid.”

“They don't,” Whisper said. “I checked. The Harbor district draws less power than the Chrome District. Nothing unusual. No spikes, no anomalies, no off-the-grid draw that would explain atmospheric regulation on that scale.”

“So the regulation isn't technological,” Mai said slowly.

“No.” Whisper's eyes moved between the three of them. “The regulation is something else. I don't know what. I don't have a framework for it. And that's why I told you to be careful. The last person who asked about The Deep stopped asking about everything.” A pause. “I'd prefer not to add you to that list, Mai. I still owe you for Manila.”

“You owe me for Manila.”

“Yes. That's what I said.”

“Then consider this partial repayment.” Mai stood. “Thank you, Whisper. Your data has been helpful and your ventilation will kill you eventually.”

“I'm counting on the data to kill me first. Better odds.” Whisper was already turning back to her screens. “One more thing. The organic materials they're purchasing? The combination maps to ritual-structure protocols. I ran it through three different analytical frameworks to confirm. If they're building what I think they're building, they're either maintaining something or containing something. There's no middle option in that architecture.”

“We understand ritual architecture,” Mai said.

“I know you do. That's why I'm telling you instead of selling this to someone who'd use it wrong.” Whisper's hands paused over her keyboards. “Manila. We're square.”

The triad left the way they'd come. The Warrens were approaching their peak now, foot traffic thickened into something that required navigation rather than walking. Ace's shadow-pressure moved the crowd the way a reef moves water. Shammy's atmospheric field smoothed the press of bodies into something more comfortable. Mai walked between them and thought about containment architecture, which was her version of a comfort blanket.

The stairs to street level were narrow and crowded. Shammy had to turn sideways at one point, her storm-gradient hair brushing the ceiling and picking up static that made the air taste of ozone. Mai filed the ozone taste alongside everything else. The Warrens' atmosphere was a closed system of bad decisions and worse ventilation. The ozone was something else.

“Six months of bulk organic purchases,” Mai said as they climbed. “Clean paper trails. Atmospheric stability across twelve blocks. A missing investigator. And a name—The Deep—that Whisper can't categorize.”

“And a warehouse,” Ace said from ahead. She was already at the top of the stairs, scanning street level.

“And a warehouse in a district that's been running stable atmospheric pressure for at least eighteen months with no meteorological explanation.” Mai's mind was running the probability matrix. The numbers were shifting in a direction she found both exciting and concerning. Exciting because the

case was genuinely anomalous. Concerning because anomalous meant her framework had gaps, and Mai's frameworks didn't like gaps.

"The air in the Warrens," Shammy said as they emerged onto street level. "Did you notice? It changed near Whisper's shop."

"Changed how?"

"Denser. Like the air was being held closer to the ground. Not pressed down. Held. The same way the Harbor district's air is held still. Someone in the Warrens is running atmospheric regulation too. Not as strong. Not as clean. But the same signature."

"Whisper's shop?"

"Near it. The corridor outside." Shammy turned her face toward the sky. The smog caught the neon and turned it into something that might have been a sunset if sunsets had been redesigned by committee. "I think the Warrens have their own containment. Something old, down there. Something that predates the information market. The brokers built their shops around it without knowing it was there."

"Two atmospheric anomalies in one city," Mai said. "The Warrens and the Harbor district."

"Night City is built on old ground," Shammy said. "Old things settle into the foundations. The city grew up around them. Most people don't notice because the air doesn't change fast enough to notice. But I notice." Her voice was quieter now. "I notice everything that breathes. And the Warrens are breathing the same slow breath as the Harbor district. Slower. Older. But the same."

They walked through Night City's morning rush. The crowd moved around them—not parting, exactly, but flowing, the way water accommodates a stone. Ace's shadow-pressure created a corridor of unease. Shammy's atmospheric regulation made the corridor feel calm. Mai walked through the result and analyzed it.

"We need to see the warehouse," Mai said. "Up close. Before we commit to anything."

"Reconnaissance," Ace said. Not a question.

"Reconnaissance. Observation. Data gathering. No engagement, no contact, no dramatic entrances. We look. We measure. We leave."

"And if something sees us first?"

Mai looked at her. At Shammy. At the way the air was already shifting around them.

"Then we adapt," she said. "That's what the triad does."

The rain started as they crossed into the fourth district. Light, constant, the kind of rain Night City produced when it couldn't decide between weather and atmosphere. Shammy raised her face to it and let the drops catch in her hair, which sparked and fizzed where the water hit the static charge.

"Real rain," she said. "Not regulated. Not maintained. Just rain."

"You like rain," Ace observed.

"I like anything that moves." Shammy's bright blue eyes held something that might have been joy in anyone else. In Shammy, it was atmospheric appreciation. "Weather is honest. It does what it wants. It doesn't ask permission. The air in the Harbor district hasn't done what it wants in centuries."

A pause. Longer than she meant.

"That's the saddest thing I've ever felt."

Mai redesigned Whisper's security layout in her head as they walked. Three critical vulnerabilities. Fixable in an afternoon. She didn't mention it.

Ace catalogued flicker rates. 50Hz. 60Hz. Unstable. Stable. Twelve blocks of 50Hz in the direction they weren't walking.

Shammy read the atmospheric pressure of every street they crossed. Chaotic. Chaotic. Chaotic. And one direction where the chaos stopped.

Tomorrow they would walk into that stillness.

Tonight, they walked in the rain.

[← Chapter 1](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 3 →](#)

© 2025-2026. "World of Ace, Mai and Shammy" and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

Check out our SubscribeStar page at <https://subscribestar.adult/konrad-k>

From:

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

Permanent link:

<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/novellas:shadow-over-night-city:chapter2>

Last update: **23/04/2026 16:19**

