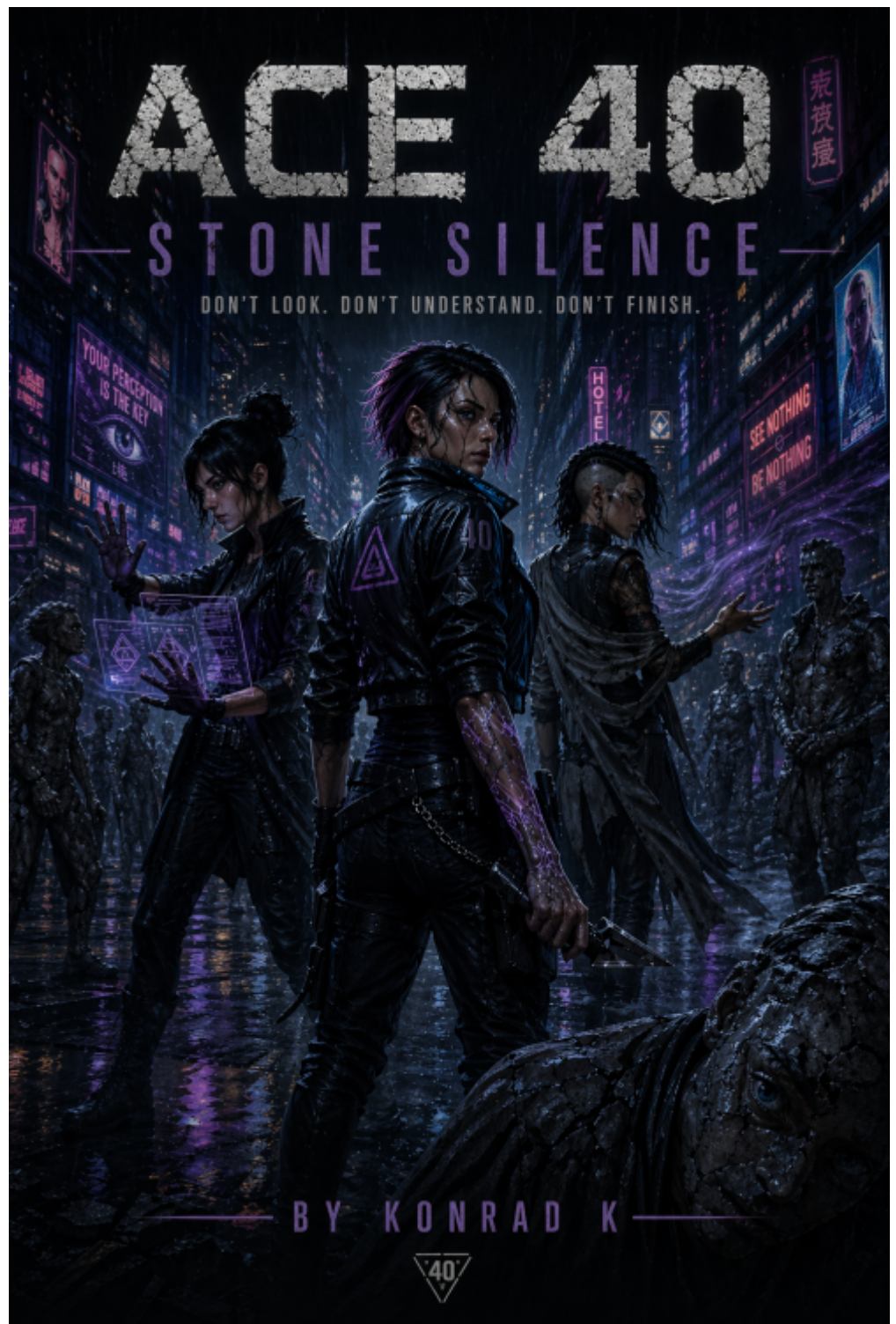


## Chapter 1 — The First Shape



Night City didn't usually slow down.

It stuttered, sure—traffic choking on its own arteries, neon flickering like a dying pulse—but it never stopped. Not for anything. Not for fear. Fear was currency here. Measured, traded, weaponized.

But this...

This was different.

The alley was too quiet.

Not empty—never empty—but *quiet* in a way that didn't belong. Sound should have been there.

Dripping pipes. Distant engines. Someone arguing three blocks over. The constant, low hum of a city that refused to sleep.

Instead—

Nothing.

Shammy paused first.

Not visibly. Not in a way most people would notice. But the air around her shifted—subtle pressure tightening, like a storm reconsidering whether it wanted to break.

Ace noticed.

Of course she did.

“You feel that?” Ace’s voice came low, almost casual. Too casual.

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

She was already looking.

The body stood halfway down the alley.

Not lying.

Not slumped.

Standing.

Frozen mid-step, one foot slightly lifted as if the motion had been interrupted mid-thought. The posture alone would have been enough to draw attention—but it wasn’t the posture that held the eye.

It was the stillness.

Total.

Absolute.

No sway. No micro-adjustment. No breath.

Stone.

“Third one today,” Mai said quietly.

No emotion in the words. Just placement.

Ace moved before the sentence fully settled.

Two steps. Three. Close enough to see detail.

The surface wasn’t clean marble. It was wrong. Too precise in some places, too rough in others—like something had translated flesh into stone without fully understanding the difference.

The face—

Ace stopped.

Not physically.

Something in the movement halted. A fraction. A hesitation that shouldn't have existed.

The expression was intact.

Mouth open—not screaming, not quite—but caught between sound and silence. Eyes wide, fixed on something that wasn't there anymore.

Fear.

Not panic.

Not surprise.

Fear that had already understood something.

Ace's jaw tightened.

"Yeah," she muttered. "I see why this is a problem."

Behind her, Mai stepped closer, slower. Controlled.

"Any signs of external force?" she asked.

Ace didn't look away.

"No trauma. No blood. No—"

She stopped.

Something felt off about the answer.

Not wrong.

Incomplete.

Shammy moved then.

Not toward the body.

Around it.

A slow arc, like she was testing the space itself rather than the object in it.

Her fingers brushed the air—not touching, not quite—and the faintest crackle of static whispered across her skin.

"This isn't where it happened," she said.

Ace glanced back. "What?"

Shammy tilted her head slightly, eyes unfocused—not looking *at* anything so much as *through* it.

"The pressure's wrong," she murmured. "It's... settled. After."

Mai's gaze sharpened.

"Post-event displacement?" she suggested.

"Maybe." Shammy's voice stayed soft. "Or it followed."

Ace didn't like that.

Didn't like the way the sentence sat in the air, unfinished.

"Followed what?" she asked.

Shammy didn't answer.

Because something moved.

Not in the alley.

Not physically.

Ace felt it first.

A flicker. Not in her vision—*behind* it. Like something had tried to form in the edge of perception and failed.

Her head turned instinctively.

Nothing.

Empty wall. Cracked concrete. Faded graffiti layered over older graffiti in a history of territorial arguments no one remembered anymore.

Still—

Her eyes lingered.

Too long.

"Don't," Mai said.

Sharp. Immediate.

Ace blinked. "Don't what?"

Mai was already watching her, not the alley.

"That," she said. "Whatever you were just about to do."

Ace frowned.

"I wasn't—"

She stopped.

Because she had been.

Trying to see it.

Whatever *it* was.

The thing that *should* have been there.

“Yeah,” Ace muttered. “Okay. That’s new.”

Mai turned back to the statue.

“Witness reports?” she asked.

Ace snorted. “Messy. One says they saw someone ‘looking back.’ Another swears it was just... there. No movement. No sound.”

“No consistent description?”

“No consistent anything.”

Shammy’s arc around the body slowed.

Stopped.

Her eyes lifted—not to the statue, but just past it.

A few meters deeper into the alley.

There was nothing there.

And yet—

The air shifted again.

Not stronger.

Tighter.

Like something was trying to *fit* into a space that didn’t want it.

Shammy’s voice dropped, almost lost under the absence of sound.

“It’s close.”

Ace didn’t hesitate this time.

Of course she didn’t.

Her weight shifted forward—intent compressing into motion, into action—

Mai’s hand caught her wrist.

Not hard.

Precise.

“No.”

Ace looked at her.

Annoyance flared first. Then something else. Something sharper.

“You felt that too,” Ace said.

“Yes.”

“Then why—”

“Because you’re about to make the same mistake they did.”

A beat.

Ace’s eyes flicked—just for a second—back to the statue’s face.

That expression.

That moment of understanding, frozen forever.

“...which is?” she asked.

Mai held her gaze.

“Trying to understand what you’re seeing.”

Silence settled again.

Not natural.

Not empty.

Waiting.

Shammy didn’t move.

Didn’t breathe any deeper.

Didn’t blink.

Her presence shifted instead—subtle, atmospheric, like she was redistributing something invisible across the space.

“Don’t give it shape,” she said quietly.

Ace exhaled slowly.

Forced.

“Great,” she muttered. “So we’re fighting something we can’t see, can’t track, and shouldn’t think about too hard.”

Mai didn't look away from the alley's far end.

"Yes."

Another beat.

Ace's lips twitched.

Not quite a smile.

"Night City," she said. "You really know how to keep things interesting."

Behind them, somewhere far too loud for how quiet the alley had been—

A scream cut through the air.

Not distant.

Close.

Too close.

All three of them turned.

And for a fraction of a second—

Just before the sound fully resolved—

Ace could have sworn

something

looked back.

—

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Last update: **21/04/2026 16:06**



