

ACE 40 — STONE SILENCE

Chapter 2 — Witness Error

The scream didn't last long.

That was the first wrong thing.

In Night City, screams stretched. They echoed, layered, turned into arguments, gunfire, sirens—something. They *propagated*. Fear didn't end cleanly here. It multiplied.

This one—

Cut.

Like someone had removed the rest of it.

Ace was already moving.

No hesitation now. No glance back. Just direction—sharp, immediate, locked onto the source before the sound had even fully resolved.

Mai followed without a word.

Shammy didn't run.

She didn't need to.

The air shifted with her—pressure adjusting, clearing paths through the cluttered alleyways as they cut through the city's underlayer. Trash, loose wires, hanging cloth—everything seemed to lean just slightly out of her way.

They turned the corner—

—and stopped.

Another alley.

Narrower.

Worse.

The kind of place where deals went bad and no one came back to argue about it.

The man stood near the far wall.

Alive.

For now.

His back was pressed against the concrete, one hand raised—not defensively, not quite—but as if he was trying to *measure* something in front of him.

There was nothing there.

Ace slowed.

Not by choice.

Something in the scene resisted speed.

“Hey,” she called, voice cutting clean through the stillness. “Don’t move.”

The man didn’t react.

Didn’t blink.

His eyes were locked on empty space.

Tracking something that didn’t exist.

Or did.

“Do you see it?” he whispered.

The words came out thin. Strained. Like speaking hurt.

Ace didn’t answer immediately.

Wrong question.

Mai stepped forward half a pace.

“Look at me,” she said.

Controlled. Precise. No room for interpretation.

The man’s eyes flickered—

Just for a second.

Toward her.

Relief flashed across his face.

Too fast.

“Don’t,” Shammy said.

Too late.

The man’s gaze snapped back.

Past them.

To that same empty point in the air.

“No,” he breathed. “No, it’s—”

His body locked.

It wasn't gradual.

No tremor. No struggle.

One moment: motion.

The next—

Still.

Ace felt it this time.

Not a flicker.

A pressure inversion.

Like the space between them had *collapsed* inward for a fraction of a second.

Her vision twitched.

Something—

There.

Not visible.

Not fully.

But implied.

A shape that didn't resolve.

Her brain tried to fill it in.

Failed.

Tried again.

"Stop," Mai snapped.

Ace's jaw clenched.

She dragged her gaze away.

Harder than it should have been.

When she looked back—

The man was stone.

Same posture.

Same half-raised hand.

Same expression—

Except now it was finished.

The understanding complete.

The fear... resolved.

“Shit,” Ace muttered.

No humor in it.

Mai didn't move closer this time.

Didn't scan.

Didn't kneel.

She stood exactly where she was, eyes narrowed—not at the body, but at the space around it.

“Sequence confirmed,” she said quietly.

Ace glanced at her. “You got all that from—what, five seconds?”

“Yes.”

“Then share.”

Mai inhaled once.

Measured.

“He didn't react to us,” she said. “Not initially. His attention was already locked.”

“Yeah. On nothing.”

“On something he believed was there.”

Ace's eyes flicked—dangerously—toward that same point.

She caught herself.

Looked away.

“...and that belief killed him?” she said.

“Not belief.” Mai's voice sharpened. “Interpretation.”

Shammy stepped closer now—but not toward the body.

She moved between it and the empty space the man had been staring at.

A subtle shift.

Like placing a barrier no one could see.

The air tightened again.

Not hostile.

Protective.

“It’s faster now,” Shammy said.

Ace exhaled. “Great.”

Mai nodded once.

“The more defined the pattern becomes, the shorter the delay.”

Ace frowned. “Translation.”

Mai’s gaze snapped to her.

“The city is learning it.”

Silence.

That landed wrong.

Too big.

Too abstract.

Ace shook her head. “No. People are. Rumors spread. Fear spreads. That’s normal.”

“Yes,” Mai said. “But this isn’t just fear propagation.”

She gestured—not at the body, but at the *position* it held.

“He wasn’t just afraid,” she said. “He was... recognizing something.”

Ace didn’t like that word.

“Recognizing what?”

Mai didn’t answer.

Because there wasn’t a clean answer.

Not yet.

Shammy’s eyes lifted slightly.

Not focusing.

Listening.

The air responded.

A faint ripple—like heat distortion, but colder. Sharper.

“There,” she murmured.

Ace didn’t turn.

Didn’t look.

“Don’t point,” she said under her breath.

“I’m not,” Shammy replied softly. “I’m... feeling.”

Mai adjusted her stance subtly—angle shifting, breaking direct lines of sight through the alley.

“Don’t give it a clean frame,” she said.

Ace huffed. “Yeah, yeah. No pattern recognition. I get it.”

But she didn’t.

Not fully.

Not yet.

Because part of her—

The part that solved problems by *seeing* them, by locking onto a target and ending it—

That part kept pushing.

Kept trying to force the unknown into something she could fight.

A shape.

A position.

A threat.

Something moved again.

Closer this time.

Ace felt it brush the edge of her perception—

And for a split second—

She almost saw it.

A curve.

Not physical.

Conceptual.

Her mind reached for it—

Medusa.

The word surfaced uninvited.

Ancient.

Simple.

Wrong.

Her muscles tensed.

Shammy's hand caught her shoulder.

Not forceful.

But the pressure—

Shifted.

The air thickened around Ace's head, like a sudden drop in altitude.

Her thoughts stuttered.

The image collapsed before it could form.

Ace blinked hard.

"What the hell—"

"Don't name it," Shammy said quietly.

Mai nodded once.

"Names anchor interpretation."

Ace let out a slow breath.

"Right," she muttered. "So no seeing, no naming, no thinking too hard."

A beat.

"...this is going to be fun."

Behind them, somewhere further down the street—

Voices.

Panicked.

More than one.

The sound of people gathering.

"Containment failure," Mai said.

Ace rolled her shoulders once, tension coiling back into something usable.

“Then we move,” she said.

“Carefully,” Mai corrected.

Ace’s lips twitched.

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s what I meant.”

Shammy didn’t smile.

Her gaze stayed fixed on that invisible pressure point in the alley.

“It’s not done,” she said.

Ace glanced back at the two statues.

Then at the empty space between them.

“...neither are we,” she replied.

And this time—

When something almost moved in the edge of her vision—

She didn’t look.

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