

# ACE 40 — STONE SILENCE

## Chapter 3 — Pattern Recognition

The crowd was already forming.

Too fast.

That was the second wrong thing.

Night City didn't gather like this unless there was something to gain—eddies, spectacle, violence. Curiosity alone wasn't enough. Not anymore.

But fear—

Fear pulled people in.

Ace slowed as they approached the mouth of the alley. Not stopping. Never stopping. Just enough to let the scene resolve before she stepped into it.

Five people.

No—six.

Clustered just outside the narrow entrance, voices overlapping, stepping forward, stepping back. That jittery rhythm of people trying to decide whether to get closer or run.

A kid—late teens—held up a shard of reflective chrome, angling it like a mirror.

“Don't,” Ace said.

Too late.

The kid flinched as her voice hit him—turned toward her, confused—

—and then instinct snapped him back.

Back to the alley.

Back to the wrong place to look.

Mai moved.

Not toward him.

Across his line of sight.

A clean interruption.

Her body didn't block the alley completely—just enough to fracture the angle, to break the continuity of what he was trying to see.

“Put it down,” she said.

No urgency.

No panic.

Just instruction.

The kid hesitated.

That hesitation saved him.

The chrome dipped slightly.

His focus wavered.

“Why?” he shot back, defensive. “There’s something in there—”

“No,” Mai cut in. “There isn’t.”

The words landed harder than they should have.

Not denial.

Correction.

The crowd shifted.

Uneasy.

They wanted a monster.

Something external. Contained. Killable.

Ace stepped forward now, slipping into the gap Mai had created.

“Everybody back,” she said. “Now.”

One of them—a woman with a corporate badge still clipped to her jacket—shook her head.

“People are saying it’s—”

“Yeah,” Ace interrupted. “People say a lot of things. Move.”

Her tone wasn’t loud.

Didn’t need to be.

Something in it made the decision for them.

They started backing off.

Not far.

Not enough.

But enough to break the cluster.

Enough to reduce the risk.

Shammy stayed just behind Ace, her presence expanding—not outward, not visibly—but in a way that made the air feel... heavier. Slower. Like movement required just a little more effort than usual.

It bought them seconds.

Maybe less.

Mai's gaze tracked each bystander, not their faces—but their eyes.

Where they pointed.

Where they tried to return.

"Information leak already active," she murmured.

Ace exhaled through her nose. "No kidding."

"Not just verbal," Mai added. "Behavioral."

Ace glanced at her. "Explain."

"They're trying to reconstruct it," Mai said. "Angles. Reflections. Indirect observation."

Ace's eyes flicked to the chrome shard in the kid's hand.

He was still holding it.

Still thinking about it.

Still tempted.

"Drop it," Ace said again.

This time, sharper.

He did.

The metal clattered against the pavement.

Too loud.

The sound snapped through the space—

And for a fraction of a second—

Everything aligned.

Sightlines.

Attention.

Expectation.

Ace felt it.

That same pressure inversion.

Closer now.

Hungry for definition.

Her vision twitched—

A curve again.

Sharper.

Her brain lunged for it—

Snake.

Hair.

Eyes—

Shammy stepped forward.

Not between Ace and the alley.

Between Ace and *herself*.

Her hand rose—not touching—just *there*, in Ace's peripheral space.

The air thickened instantly.

Pressure spiked, just enough to disrupt thought, not enough to harm.

The forming image shattered.

Ace sucked in a breath.

"Yeah," she muttered. "That's getting worse."

Mai nodded once.

"The pattern is stabilizing."

"Meaning?"

"It's becoming easier to recognize."

Ace grimaced. "Which makes it easier to die from."

"Yes."

That was a problem.

A big one.

Because Night City—

Didn't stop looking at things.

Didn't stop trying to understand them.

Didn't stop turning everything into a story.

And this—

This was a perfect story.

Shammy tilted her head slightly, eyes unfocused again.

"It's not in the alley anymore," she said.

Ace blinked. "What?"

"It moved."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "Direction?"

Shammy didn't point.

Didn't need to.

Her body shifted subtly—weight redistributing, orientation adjusting.

Tracking pressure, not position.

Ace followed the movement instinctively—

Stopped herself.

Forced her gaze down instead.

"Give me something I can use," she said.

Shammy considered that.

Then:

"It's following attention," she said.

Mai went still.

Completely still.

"That changes everything," she murmured.

Ace huffed. "Good or bad?"

Mai didn't answer immediately.

Because the answer was obvious.

Bad.

“Containment becomes impossible,” she said finally. “Unless we control perception at scale.”

Ace barked a short, humorless laugh. “Yeah, let me just tell Night City to stop looking at things. That’ll go great.”

A shout from further down the street cut through the moment.

Different voice.

Different tone.

Panic, not curiosity.

“Someone’s down!”

Ace didn’t wait.

She moved.

Fast again—but this time controlled. No forward lean into the unknown. No attempt to *find* it.

Just movement.

Mai and Shammy followed.

The street opened up slightly beyond the alley—a wider corridor between buildings, lit in harsh neon and flickering signage. A delivery drone lay on its side, one rotor still spinning weakly.

And near it—

Another body.

Mid-collapse.

Not fully stone yet.

The process was happening in real time.

Ace slowed again.

Forced it.

The man—older, worn jacket, grease-stained hands—was on one knee, one arm braced against the ground.

His skin—

Cracking.

Not like stone breaking.

Like something *forming* beneath it.

His eyes were locked on something just above the drone.

“Don’t,” Ace said, voice low. “Don’t look at it.”

He laughed.

A broken sound.

“I’m not,” he rasped. “I already... saw it.”

Wrong answer.

Mai moved to his side—but not into his line of sight.

Always breaking the angle.

“What did you think it was?” she asked.

The man’s breathing hitched.

“Thought...” he started. “Thought it was a reflection. In the glass. But there was no—”

His voice cut.

Body locking.

Too fast.

Too clean.

Shammy stepped forward—

Pressure surged—

But this time—

It didn’t stop it.

The man froze.

Complete.

Stone.

Silence dropped again.

Heavier now.

Thicker.

Ace stared at the spot he’d been looking at.

Didn’t focus.

Didn't define.

But she felt it.

Right there.

Close.

Closer than before.

"It's speeding up," she said.

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

A beat.

Ace's fingers twitched slightly at her side.

The old instinct—strike, cut, end it—pushed forward again.

There was nothing to cut.

Nothing to hit.

Nothing to kill.

Just a mistake waiting to happen.

"...we need a new rule," Ace said.

Mai glanced at her.

"We already have several."

"Not those," Ace said. "Something simpler."

Shammy's eyes shifted toward her.

Curious.

Ace exhaled slowly.

Then:

"Whatever you think you're seeing—assume it's wrong."

Mai considered that.

Turned it over.

Tested it against the data they had.

"...acceptable," she said.

Shammy nodded once.

“Safer,” she added.

Ace’s gaze stayed low.

Controlled.

“Good,” she said. “Because this thing?”

A faint distortion rippled in the air ahead.

Barely there.

Almost nothing.

But enough.

Ace didn’t look.

Didn’t chase it.

Didn’t try to understand.

“...it’s counting on us getting it right,” she finished.

Silence answered.

And somewhere—

Just beyond what any of them could safely perceive—

Something shifted.

Adapting.

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