

Chapter 4 — The Half-Truth

The street didn't clear.

That was the problem.

It thinned—people backing off just enough to feel safe—but no one really left. Night City didn't abandon a story once it started unfolding. It circled it. Watched it. Waited for the moment it could turn into something worth remembering.

Or selling.

Shammy's presence pushed against that instinct.

Not force.

Not control.

Just... resistance.

Air that didn't invite lingering.

Breathing that felt slightly off if you stayed too long.

It worked.

A little.

"Perimeter's unstable," Mai said quietly.

Ace nodded once. "Yeah. We're not getting isolation here."

"Then we adapt."

"Story of the day."

Ace shifted her stance, deliberately breaking line-of-sight with anything that looked remotely like a focal point. No straight angles. No fixed gaze. It felt wrong—moving without locking onto a target—but wrong was safer.

For once.

A faint sound cut through the low murmur of the crowd.

Not a scream.

Not panic.

A... scrape.

Close.

Too close.

Ace's head turned—controlled this time, not snapping, not searching—just enough to register the source without committing to it.

Between the drone and the latest statue.

Something moved.

Not fully.

A twitch.

Mai saw it too.

Her breath caught—just for a fraction of a second.

“Wait,” she said.

Ace didn't move.

Didn't step forward.

Didn't close distance.

“Talk,” she replied.

Mai's eyes narrowed, tracking without focusing.

“The surface isn't stable,” she said. “It's—”

Another movement.

Subtle.

But undeniable.

The stone cracked.

Not outward.

Inward.

Like something beneath it was still trying to exist.

Shammy stepped closer—not directly, not in a straight line—curving her approach, keeping the angles broken.

The air shifted with her.

Pressure rising.

Stabilizing.

“Alive,” she said softly.

Ace exhaled once. “Of course it is.”

They didn't rush in.

That was the difference.

That was the rule holding—for now.

Mai adjusted her position again, ensuring no direct visual channel formed between her, the victim, and whatever might still be... there.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

No response.

The stone along the man's shoulder fractured again.

A thin line.

Too precise.

Like a seam.

Ace crouched—but off-angle, never aligning directly with the man's gaze line.

"Hey," she said, voice low. "If you're still in there, don't try to look at anything. Just... stay with the voice."

A pause.

Nothing.

Then—

The eye moved.

Barely.

A twitch beneath a half-formed layer of stone.

Still organic.

Still alive.

"Good," Ace murmured. "That's good."

Mai's focus sharpened.

"Cognitive function persists past initial lock," she said. "Partial conversion doesn't terminate awareness."

Ace grimaced. "Yeah. That's worse."

Shammy lowered herself slightly—not kneeling, not grounding—just bringing her center closer to the victim's level.

The air thickened again.

Not oppressive.

Containment.

A buffer.

“Don’t think about what you saw,” she said, voice almost a whisper. “Let it go.”

The man’s lips trembled.

Stone cracked at the edges.

“C-can’t,” he forced out. “It’s... still there.”

Ace’s jaw tightened.

“Then don’t fight it,” she said. “Ignore it.”

“Can’t,” he repeated, weaker now. “It makes... sense.”

That word landed wrong.

Mai’s head tilted slightly.

“Explain,” she said.

The man’s eye shifted—not toward them—but toward that same empty space.

Ace felt the pull again.

Stronger this time.

A shape pressing at the edge of thought, demanding resolution.

She didn’t take the bait.

Didn’t complete the image.

Didn’t let it *become* anything.

“...looked like...” the man whispered.

Stone crept further along his jaw.

“...like it was supposed to be there.”

Mai went still.

Completely still.

That was it.

Not confirmation.

Direction.

“Consistency anchor,” she said under her breath.

Ace glanced at her. “English.”

Mai didn’t look away from the man.

“It doesn’t impose a form,” she said. “It aligns with expectation.”

Ace blinked once. “So whatever you think fits—”

“—it becomes that,” Mai finished.

Shammy’s gaze flickered—briefly—toward the pressure point.

Then away.

Fast.

“That’s why it’s different for everyone,” she said.

The man’s breathing hitched again.

Shallower now.

Fading.

“It... looked right,” he whispered.

Stone closed over half his face.

“...so I kept looking.”

Silence pressed in.

Heavy.

Final.

Ace’s hand flexed once at her side.

No weapon drawn.

Nothing to cut.

Nothing to break.

“Listen to me,” she said, sharper now. “You need to stop making sense of it. Anything. Think something else. Anything.”

The man’s eye flickered.

Struggled.

For a second—

It worked.

The stone halted.

Just for a moment.

Hope—

Dangerous.

Because the next second—

He tried.

You could see it.

The effort to reframe.

To reinterpret.

To find a different explanation.

And that—

That was enough.

The process snapped forward.

Fast.

Violent in its precision.

Stone consumed the remaining flesh in a single, clean transition.

No struggle.

No sound.

Done.

Ace closed her eyes for half a second.

Then opened them.

"...okay," she said quietly. "That's new."

Mai nodded once.

"Yes."

Her voice had shifted.

Sharper.

Colder.

Because now they understood something they hadn't before.

Partial survival wasn't a window.

It was a trap.

"The act of reinterpretation accelerates completion," Mai said.

Ace huffed a dry breath. "So trying to fix it kills you faster."

"Yes."

Shammy rose slowly.

The air eased slightly—but not much.

Not enough.

"It's feeding on resolution," she said.

Ace looked at her. "Meaning?"

Shammy's eyes stayed unfocused, tracking pressure rather than sight.

"The moment something *clicks*," she said, "it finishes."

Mai turned that over instantly.

"Cognitive closure as trigger point," she said.

Ace shook her head. "Great. So no understanding, no re-understanding—what, we just stay confused until it gets bored?"

A beat.

Mai met her gaze.

"Yes."

Ace stared at her.

Then let out a short, incredulous laugh.

"Night City survival tip of the day," she muttered. "Stay stupid."

"Stay undefined," Mai corrected.

"Same difference."

Behind them, the crowd had shifted again.

Closer.

Not physically.

Mentally.

You could feel it.

The attention.

The curiosity.

The need to *figure it out*.

Shammy's expression tightened—barely, but enough.

"It's spreading through them," she said.

Ace glanced over her shoulder—careful, controlled, not locking onto any one face.

"They're trying to understand it," she said.

"Yes."

Mai's posture adjusted.

Decision made.

"Then we don't stop the phenomenon," she said.

Ace frowned. "What?"

"We stop the pattern," Mai clarified.

A beat.

Ace's lips twitched.

There it was.

Something she could work with.

"Okay," she said. "Now we're talking."

The air shifted again.

Sharper.

Closer.

Listening.

Adapting.

And this time—

All three of them felt it.

Not just near.

Not just present.

Focused.

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