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Chapter 1: Neon Frequencies

The neon on 14th Street flickered at 50Hz. Ace counted it without meaning to, the way other people counted heartbeats after a close call. Fifty cycles per second, steady as a metronome, which meant the transformer was original hardware and nobody in Night City maintained original hardware because original hardware was old enough to vote and young enough to still be disappointed about it.

She stood at the window of their temporary apartment, forty floors up. Rain-slicked city in her peripheral vision. Night City didn't do stars; it did light instead. Neon, chrome-reflection, data-stream glow from a hundred thousand screens, the sick amber of street-level sodium lamps that made everyone look like they'd been embalmed yesterday. The light replaced the sky. After three days your eyes stopped looking up.

Ace's eyes never stopped. That was the problem with being built for threat assessment. Every flicker was a signal. Every shadow was a doorway. Every stillness was a thing holding its breath.

The window glass was cold against her palm. Below, the rain hit the streets and split into a thousand micro-frequencies, each one a small bright signal that nobody else was counting. She counted them. 14th Street, 50Hz. The block east, 60Hz. Three blocks south, unstable oscillation between 49 and 61—someone running an unlicensed server farm off the grid and not caring who noticed.

"You're doing the frequency thing again." Mai didn't look up from her data station. Three screens running, a cup of tea going cold next to her elbow. Silver hair caught the glow of the leftmost monitor, runic reflection shifting like water over stone. "Your left eye does a micro-saccade at about 4Hz when you're cataloguing. It's distinctive."

"Twelve blocks at 50Hz. Six at 60Hz." Ace didn't turn from the window. "The Harbor district is 50Hz."

"Which means old infrastructure. City hasn't rebuilt there since the Consolidation. Cheaper rent, worse plumbing." A pause. "Noted. Also not a case."

"Data."

"It's your version of a security blanket, and I say that with love and also because you're standing between me and the coffee maker."

Ace moved. Not because Mai asked—because she'd already clocked that her position was suboptimal and the request just confirmed timing. Five steps across the apartment, two fewer than most people would need. She sat on the counter next to the coffee machine instead of in front of it.

Mai poured without comment. They'd done this enough times that the steps were worn smooth. Coffee for Mai, tea for Ace—Ace didn't drink coffee but would sit next to the machine because the machine was next to Mai, and proximity was Ace's primary love language whether she'd admit it or not.

"Shammy?"

“Roof. Something about pressure fronts, then a sound I think was excitement but could also have been concern.” Mai's mouth twitched. “With Shammy, the two are adjacent.”

Ace nodded. Shammy's emotional geography ran different from most people's. What she called “beautiful” often meant “dangerous.” What she called “interesting” meant “stand closer to me than you're comfortable with.” The fact that she was reading the sky at 10PM in a city where the sky was a polite fiction—that told Ace something had shifted.

The tip had come in two days ago. A data-broker named Whisper, who owed Mai a favor from a thing in Manila that nobody talked about anymore, had sent a packet through three encrypted relays and one remarkably unencrypted dead drop. The packet said: Cult activity. Old Harbor district. Non-Euclidean architecture. Organic material purchases in bulk. Possibly real.

That last part was doing a lot of work. In Night City, “possibly real” covered everything from “definitely a scam” to “we should leave the city.” Mai had run probability models. Ace had checked exit routes. Shammy had gone still for twelve seconds—which was her version of screaming—and then said the air tasted wrong.

Mai pulled up the tip data on her center screen. “Whisper's information checks out on the structural level. The warehouse at 88 Harbor Row has been leased for six months to an entity called 'The Deep Congregation.' They've purchased, in chronological order: industrial salt, copper tubing, galena crystals, and two tons of sea salt.”

“Sea salt.”

“Sea salt. In a city where the nearest ocean is three hundred kilometers away and the harbor hasn't seen a ship in forty years. The shipping cost alone would buy a decent apartment in the Chrome District.”

Ace considered this. Her version of consideration was stillness. Ace's brain processed through motion; when she went still, it meant the information had weight.

“Ritual architecture?” she asked.

“Or ambitious cooking.” Mai's mouth did the thing it did when she was being dry and also right. “The purchase pattern maps to ritual-structure protocols. Salt for boundary demarcation. Copper for conductivity. Galena for frequency anchoring. Whoever's running this either studied containment architecture or downloaded a very specific set of dark-web blueprints.”

“Real.”

“I think the probability of this being a genuine ritual operation sits at approximately 72%, with a 15% margin for elaborate fraud and 13% for something I haven't accounted for yet because Night City has a way of producing options you didn't put on the matrix.”

Ace processed. She shifted her weight on the counter, left foot to right, which was the equivalent of anyone else pacing for a full minute.

“We go.”

“I know. I've already packed the field kit.” Mai finally looked up from her screens. Silver-blue eyes holding that particular intensity—she'd been problem-solving for hours and had reached the point where data became decision. “Whisper's waiting. She wants to meet in the Data Warrens tomorrow,

which means we need to leave before the morning shift change if we want to avoid the worst of the crowd.”

“Mai.”

“Ace.”

“The Harbor district is 50Hz.”

Mai waited. Ace didn't elaborate often. When she did, the words had been trimmed of everything unnecessary.

“Every other district in Night City fluctuates. Power grid instability. Transformer decay. Illegal modifications. But the Harbor runs at 50Hz, constant, for twelve blocks.” Ace turned from the window just enough. “That's not old infrastructure. That's regulated.”

Mai's eyes sharpened. That look she got when a variable she'd dismissed as noise turned out to be signal. Her fingers moved across the center screen, pulling up power grid data for the Harbor district. The readings confirmed what Ace had observed: a flat line of stable frequency across twelve blocks. No fluctuation. No transformer decay. No illegal modification signature.

“Regulated power infrastructure in a district the city hasn't maintained in thirty years,” Mai said. “That's either a very dedicated local cooperative or something with a vested interest in electrical stability.”

“Ritual architecture needs stable frequency.” Ace's voice was flat. Clinical. Reciting. “Salt boundaries fail if the carrier wave fluctuates. Copper conductivity degrades under power oscillation. The entire containment structure depends on a stable electromagnetic environment.”

“You're quoting containment theory at me.”

“Learned it from you.”

Mai made a sound that was acknowledgment and something warmer underneath. She saved her work, closed two of the three screens, stood. The motion efficient, the economy of someone who'd lived in spaces where you might need to leave fast.

“I'll tell Shammy we're moving to the active phase. She'll be thrilled—she's been vibrating for two days like someone left a tuning fork next to her nervous system.”

“I noticed.”

“Of course you did. You notice everything that enters your threat radius, which currently includes this apartment, the hallway, the elevator, the lobby, and I suspect the bus stop across the street.”

“Bus stop is outside perimeter.”

“Ace.”

“Fine. Bus stop is perimeter-adjacent.”

Mai paused at the door to the roof access. Light from the stairwell caught her hair, runic reflections dancing. “If this is real, if there's actually something in the Harbor district that's been running stable power for who knows how long without anyone noticing—then this isn't a cult with nice robes and bad

chant structure.”

“No.”

“Something with resources. Infrastructure. Patience.”

“Yes.”

“And you still want to go.”

Ace turned from the window. Rain had picked up. Behind her the city hummed at its dozen different frequencies, chaotic and alive, all of them except one.

“The triad goes together.” She said it flat. Not a declaration. “That's not a decision. That's architecture.”

Mai held her gaze. What passed between them didn't need words—it lived in the gap between Ace's motion and Mai's structure. Not sentiment. Architecture. The kind you build a life on.

“Architecture,” Mai repeated. “I'll take that as a yes. Get some sleep. We move at 0530.”

She went up the stairs. Ace heard the roof door open, heard Shammy's voice saying something about isobars, heard Mai's measured response. The apartment settled into its nighttime frequency, which was different from the city's. Calmer. The air pressure in the room was Shammy-modulated even from two floors away. That was the triad's ambient state: Shammy holding the atmosphere, Mai holding the structure, Ace holding the perimeter.

Ace didn't sleep. She stood at the window and catalogued the neon. 14th Street: 50Hz. The next block: 60Hz. A district three clicks east: unstable, oscillating, someone running illegal hardware off the grid.

The Harbor district: 50Hz. Constant. Twelve blocks of it.

Her katanas hummed at their resting frequency, a subsonic pulse most people couldn't hear but Ace felt in her bones. The hum was 50Hz. It had always been 50Hz.

She'd never thought about why.

She thought about it now.

The frequency matched. Her blades and the Harbor district ran on the same cycle. Coincidence. Had to be. The katanas were forged before she was born, in a place that no longer existed, by someone whose name she'd never learned. The Harbor district's power grid was older than Night City. No connection.

She filed it anyway. Irrelevant data, stored in the place where she stored all the irrelevant data, which was a large place because most of what she noticed was irrelevant to everyone except her.

The rain came down like it was being poured from a bucket by someone who hated the city and wanted it to know. Ace watched it hit the neon and fracture into a thousand different signals, each one a small bright frequency that nobody else was counting.

Then—burning rice.

The smell hit her without warning. The village kitchen, before. The last meal before the Rift, rice on the stove, the pot left on too long because everything went wrong at once and nobody remembered to take it off the heat. The smell of burning rice had been the last normal thing. After that: light, pressure, the sound of a seal failing, and then silence that wasn't silence but the absence of everything that should have been there.

Ace's shadow-pressure flickered. The apartment darkened for a fraction of a second—air thickening before it settled. She pulled it back. Controlled it. The memory receded.

It never left.

She was still at the window when Shammy came down from the roof two hours later. Shammy moved through the apartment like weather through a valley, filling space with presence and pressure changes. She stood beside Ace without speaking. The air settled. Not controlled.

Tended.

Shammy was tall enough that standing next to Ace created a visual that Mai had once described as “a thundercloud and a throwing knife sharing a window.” Shammy didn't stoop. She'd learned not to. The world was built for smaller people, and Shammy had decided long ago that the world could adjust.

“The sky's wrong.”

That sentence would worry anyone who didn't know her. In Shammy-language, “wrong” meant she'd detected an anomaly. Given that Shammy was an atmospheric hybrid elemental who could feel barometric pressure the way most people felt temperature—“wrong” was worth paying attention to.

“Wrong how?”

“The Harbor district.” Shammy's bright blue eyes held something Ace couldn't name. Not concern. Not excitement. Somewhere between the two, which was where Shammy lived most of the time. “The air pressure hasn't changed in three days. Not a fluctuation. Not a variance. It's like someone put a lid on the atmosphere and walked away.”

“Since we arrived?”

“Since before we arrived. Since before I started tracking it. I don't know how long. The air in that district doesn't move, Ace. It doesn't breathe. It doesn't do anything. It just... is.”

Ace looked at her. Shammy looked back.

“That's not normal,” Shammy said. “That's not anything.”

The silence that followed was the kind that happens when two people realize they've been looking at the same problem from different angles and arriving at the same answer. Ace's frequency data and Shammy's atmospheric data. Two measurements of the same anomaly. Twelve blocks of 50Hz power. Three days of zero atmospheric variance. Something in the Harbor district was keeping things still.

“Night City breathes,” Shammy said. “Every district. Every block. The air moves, shifts, changes. Even the dead zones have micro-fluctuations from the subway vents. But the Harbor district has nothing. It's atmospheric death. Except it's not death, because the air is healthy. Clean. Balanced. It's everything air should be, except it's not doing anything. It's like a held breath. Like something down there is breathing so slowly that the air has learned to hold still and wait for the next one.”

Ace absorbed this. Shammy's descriptions were always sensory, always layered, always more information than most people could process. But Ace processed it. She filed the atmospheric data next to the frequency data, and the picture that emerged had edges she didn't like.

"Mai knows."

"Mai has the probability models. I have the atmospheric readings. You have the frequency data." Shammy's hand found Ace's shoulder. Warm. Present. "We're going to walk into a district where something has been holding the air still for longer than any of us have been alive. And we're going to do it together. That's the only way this works."

"Yes."

Shammy's touch was a kind of communication. Not the compression of Ace's contact or the structured analysis of Mai's. Shammy's touch was atmospheric—it filled the space around the point of contact with warmth and presence. The air in the apartment shifted again, settling into something that felt like safety, which was Shammy's particular gift and also, sometimes, her particular burden.

"Get some sleep," Shammy said. "I'll watch the frequencies with you. Two sets of eyes are better than one."

"I don't sleep well."

"I know. Sit with me anyway."

They stood at the window together. Shammy catalogued cloud formations above the light pollution, naming them in her own private language. A lenticular formation she called "waiting-breath." A wispy cirrus she'd named "memory-thread." A bank of cumulus that shouldn't exist this low over a heat-island city she called "the stubborn one." The names were hers. No meteorological validity. Her language for the sky, and the sky didn't seem to mind.

Ace catalogued frequencies. 50Hz. 60Hz. Oscillation. The Harbor district held its 50Hz line through all of it, steady and ancient and patient.

The rain came down. The neon flickered.

And in the Old Harbor district, twelve blocks away, the air did not move at all.

It had not moved in a very long time.

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