

ACE 35 — “Blind Transport”

Chapter 1 — Line of Sight (Refined)

Afterlife was never quiet.

Not really.

Even on slower nights—if Night City ever allowed such a thing—the place held onto sound the way old metal holds heat. Conversations layered over each other, laughter cutting through bass-heavy music, glass meeting surfaces in rhythms that weren’t coordinated but somehow still repeated.

It was noise with memory.

Tonight, it was... thinner.

Not less.

Just stretched.

Mai noticed it first.

Not because she was listening harder than anyone else, but because she didn’t filter. Not instinctively. Not anymore. Every sound was allowed to exist long enough to be measured before it was dismissed.

There were gaps.

Small ones.

Milliseconds where a sound should have landed—

and didn’t.

Not delayed.

Missing.

She didn’t turn her head when she spoke.

“Do you hear that.”

Ace didn’t look at her.

Her gaze stayed forward, fixed somewhere past the bar, past the people, past the shifting light that never quite settled into a pattern.

“...hear what.”

Mai let the question sit.

Measured the room again.

“Exactly.”

Rogue hadn't called them over.

She didn't have to.

The booth was already theirs.

Corner placement. Partial shadow. Sightlines that covered most of the room without looking like they were trying to.

Control, disguised as habit.

Shammy slid into the seat last.

The air followed her.

Subtly.

A slight compression, barely enough to register consciously, but enough that the space around the booth felt... contained. Not isolated. Just less chaotic than the rest of the room.

She leaned back, one arm resting along the top edge of the booth, eyes drifting across the bar without fixing on anything in particular.

“Something's off,” she said.

Rogue didn't answer immediately.

She was already there, opposite them, one hand wrapped around a glass she hadn't touched since they'd arrived. Ice had melted just enough to dull the edges—

but the liquid didn't quite follow the motion of the glass.

Like it was settling a fraction late.

Her eyes moved once.

Not scanning.

Counting.

“Good,” she said.

A beat.

“You noticed.”

No introductions.

No warm-up.

That wasn't how Rogue worked.

She reached under the table and placed a slim data wafer between them. Not pushed forward. Just...

placed. Within reach, but not offered.

Mai didn't pick it up.

Not yet.

"What are we looking at."

Rogue's gaze shifted—just slightly—past Mai, settling somewhere between Ace and Shammy.

"Four units," she said.

Pause.

"Stored in an Arasaka deep facility."

Another pause.

"Client wants them out."

Ace's voice cut through the space between words.

"...what kind of units."

Rogue's mouth curved, not into a smile, but into something that acknowledged the question without respecting it.

"Statues."

Silence.

Not confusion.

Just recalibration.

Shammy's fingers tapped once against the backrest.

Light.

Controlled.

"What kind of statues."

Rogue lifted the glass, rotated it a fraction, watching the liquid shift—

slightly out of sync.

"Weird ones," she said.

A beat.

"Angel-looking."

The word sat wrong.

Not because of what it meant—

because it fit too easily.

Mai's hand moved—finally—resting on the data wafer without activating it.

“Arasaka doesn't warehouse art,” she said.

“Not like this.”

Rogue didn't argue.

Didn't confirm.

“Arasaka warehouses anything that behaves,” she said.

Another pause.

“These don't. Not exactly.”

Ace leaned forward a fraction.

Just enough to shift her center of gravity.

“...define 'not exactly.'”

Rogue looked at her properly for the first time.

Measured.

Direct.

“They stay still,” she said.

A beat.

“When you're looking at them.”

Another beat—

just long enough to feel like the order mattered.

The noise of Afterlife didn't stop.

But it shifted.

Not in volume.

In relevance.

Everything else dropped a layer.

Shammy didn't move.

Didn't blink.

"...and when you're not."

Rogue took a sip.

Finally.

"They don't."

Silence.

Real silence this time—not in the room, but at the table. The kind that wasn't about absence of sound, but about the absence of easy conclusions.

Mai activated the wafer.

Light unfolded above it—not a full projection, not something meant to impress. Just enough data to give structure without detail.

Four silhouettes.

Humanoid.

Wing-like protrusions suggested, not defined.

Each on its own pedestal.

Angles inconsistent.

Spacing... off.

Mai's eyes narrowed.

"They're not arranged for display," she said.

Rogue nodded once.

"They're arranged for containment."

Ace's gaze locked onto one of the silhouettes.

Didn't move from it.

"...why not destroy them."

Rogue's answer came faster than anything else she'd said so far.

"They tried."

A beat.

"Didn't take."

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air around the table tightened just a fraction more, sound bending away from them like it had

somewhere else to be.

“They react to observation,” she said.

Not a question.

Rogue tilted her head.

“Closer.”

Mai shifted the projection, rotating the model just enough to catch the inconsistencies.

Angles that didn’t align.

Positions that suggested movement without showing it.

“...they need observation,” she said.

A beat.

“To remain what they are.”

Rogue set the glass down.

Carefully.

“Now you’re listening.”

She leaned forward, just enough that the light caught her eyes properly.

“Client doesn’t care what they are.”

“Doesn’t want analysis.”

“Doesn’t want a report.”

Her gaze moved between the three of them.

“One condition.”

The room seemed to tilt.

Not physically.

Perceptually.

Like something had just aligned that hadn’t been before.

Rogue’s voice didn’t change.

But it lost the last of its ambient noise.

“No loss of line-of-sight.”

The words didn’t land like a condition.

They landed like a constraint.

For a moment—

no one answered.

Then Ace spoke.

Quiet.

Flat.

Certain.

"...they've already moved."

Rogue's expression didn't change.

But the pause that followed was... different.

Not calculated.

Not controlled.

Just—

there.

"...maybe," she said.

Mai closed the projection.

The silhouettes vanished.

But the space they had occupied didn't feel empty.

"Entry point?" she asked.

Rogue slid a second wafer across the table.

"Coordinates."

A beat.

"And a piece of advice."

Shammy's gaze lifted.

The air around the booth tightened one last time, as if preparing to hold something in place.

Rogue met her eyes.

"For once," she said quietly,

"don't blink at the same time."

Afterlife noise rushed back in.

Not louder.

Just... present again.

Like something had let go.

Ace stood first.

No hesitation.

No discussion.

Decision already made.

Mai followed, the data already mapping itself into structure in her head, routes forming, collapsing, reforming.

Shammy lingered half a second longer.

Just enough to feel the air shift back to its usual chaos.

Then she stood.

Behind them, at the table—

the melted ice in Rogue's glass settled.

For a moment, the surface stilled completely.

Perfectly flat.

As if nothing had disturbed it.

Then a ripple moved across it.

Not from the edge.

From the center.

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