

ACE 35 — “Blind Transport”

Chapter 2 — Approach Vectors (Refined)

Night City did not end.

It thinned.

That was the difference most people didn't notice. The skyline didn't stop, didn't give way to emptiness or distance. It just... lost density. Buildings spaced themselves further apart, light stopped stacking on top of itself, reflections had room to exist without interfering.

Out here, the city felt unfinished.

Or—

Mai watched the horizon through the side window as the vehicle adjusted its route without asking.

—not watched.

Filtered.

“Less observed,” she said.

Ace didn't look up.

“...what.”

“The city,” Mai continued. “Closer to the core, everything overlaps. Too many eyes. Too many sensors. Too many interpretations.”

She shifted slightly, tracking the way light moved across a passing surface—

slow—

uninterrupted—

and for a fraction, late.

“Out here... fewer observers.”

A beat.

“Less agreement.”

Not instability.

Something worse.

Shammy's hand hovered near the glass.

Not touching.

Close enough that the air between her fingers and the surface began to behave differently—subtle compression, like the space itself wasn't fully committing to where it ended.

"It breathes differently," she said.

The word didn't fit.

It wasn't airflow.

Not pressure.

Not temperature.

More like—

permission.

The vehicle slowed.

Not gradually.

Not smoothly.

It simply... reduced speed.

No input.

No command.

Mai noticed.

Of course she did.

She didn't override it.

"System hesitation," she murmured.

Ace's eyes lifted slightly.

"...why."

Mai watched the interface.

Minimal.

Clean.

Too clean.

Rogue's route package had stripped everything unnecessary.

No Arasaka handshake.

No system negotiation.

Just coordinates—

and silence.

"Because it's approaching a zone that doesn't resolve," she said.

A beat.

"...not consistently."

The structure appeared the way a thought does when it's already halfway formed.

No reveal.

No transition.

It was just—

there.

Matte surfaces.

No reflection.

Not absorbing light—

failing to return it.

Not hidden.

Ignored.

Which was worse.

Ace stepped out first.

No delay.

Her boots hit the ground—

—and the sound ended early.

Not quieter.

Shorter.

Cut.

Like something decided it had already finished.

She didn't react.

Her gaze had already locked onto the building.

Holding it in place.

Mai exited next.

Her eyes moved immediately—edges, seams, lines—
none of them fully agreeing with each other.

“There’s no passive reflection,” she said.

Flat.

Confirmed.

Shammy stepped out behind her.

The air shifted—
and resisted.

Not violently.

Not enough to stop her—
just enough that her presence didn’t settle the way it should have.

She tilted her head slightly.

“They’re not damping,” she said.

A beat.

“They’re selecting.”

The space between them and the structure felt longer than it was.

Not stretched—
uncommitted.

Each step took the same time—
but distance didn’t resolve into progress.

Mai noticed on the third step.

“Don’t anchor distance,” she said quietly.

Ace didn’t slow.

“...already didn’t.”

Halfway across—
the silence changed.

Not absence.

Selection.

The city behind them—

still there—

but no longer participating.

Sound didn't carry.

Light didn't stack.

Movement—

excluded.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air didn't respond.

Not fully.

Like something else had priority.

"They're already observing," she said.

Mai didn't stop.

"Of course they are."

A beat.

"They have to be."

The door was where Rogue's data said it would be.

Flush.

Seamless.

No handle.

But now—

there was something else.

A line.

Thin.

Almost not there.

Running vertically along the panel.

Not a gap.

Not a shadow.

A decision.

Ace stopped.

Not hesitation.

Recognition.

"...it's open," she said.

Mai's gaze fixed on the line.

Measured it.

Compared it.

"...no," she said.

Slower.

"It's resolving."

For a moment—

nothing moved.

Then—

the line shifted.

Not wider.

Not clearer.

Just—

acknowledged.

Shammy stepped closer.

The air resisted again—

then yielded.

Reluctantly.

Like the permission wasn't fully agreed on.

"Internal gradient," she said.

A beat.

"...not environmental."

Mai reached out.

Didn't touch.

Her fingers hovered just short of the surface—

and for a fraction—

the surface wasn't where it should have been.

Then it was.

"There's no lock," she said.

Ace's voice was flat.

"...then why is it closed."

Mai didn't look at her.

"Because it doesn't open unless it's being observed correctly."

Silence.

Then—

the panel changed state.

No motion.

No sound.

Just—

open.

The interior light didn't spill outward.

It held.

Contained.

Waiting—

as if crossing the threshold required agreement.

Ace stepped forward.

Crossed.

No hesitation.

The moment she entered—

the space changed.

Not visually.

Structurally.

Mai followed.

Her boots met the floor—

—and the sound cut off again.

Same point.

Same truncation.

“...consistent,” she said under her breath.

Not comfort.

Confirmation.

Shammy stepped in last.

The air shifted—

then stalled.

For the first time—

it didn't settle.

Didn't equalize.

It just—

existed.

Unintegrated.

The door closed behind them.

Not by moving.

By no longer being relevant.

The seam was gone.

The corridor ahead stretched forward.

Perfect.

Too perfect.

No asymmetry.

No wear.

No deviation.

Light existed—

without origin.

Shadow—

didn't.

Ace slowed.

Just enough to anchor.

Her gaze moved once—

left.

Right.

Forward.

"...it's wrong."

Mai was already tracking it.

Panel spacing.

Light intervals.

Repetition.

Something repeated every eleven segments.

But not exactly.

Never exactly.

"Don't trust the rhythm," she said.

"It's not for navigation."

Shammy lifted her hand slightly.

The air responded—

then didn't.

Like something else had already claimed it.

"They've taken control of the medium," she said.

Quiet.

A camera appeared.

Not revealed.

Not deployed.

Present.

Placed exactly where the eye would land.

After enough steps.

A small lens—

flush with the wall.

Not pointed at them.

At the space they occupied.

Ace stopped.

Completely.

The camera didn't move.

Didn't track.

Didn't react.

Mai studied it.

"There's no recording signal," she said.

Shammy tilted her head.

"...it's not storing anything."

Ace's voice cut through.

"...then what is it doing."

Mai didn't answer immediately.

When she did—

it was slower.

More careful.

"It's maintaining observation."

A beat.

Ace didn't blink.

"...same thing."

Mai shook her head once.

“No.”

Silence settled.

Tighter now.

Defined.

They moved.

One step.

Two.

Three.

Behind them—

the camera adjusted.

Not movement.

Not rotation.

But the angle—

was no longer the same.

Shammy’s voice dropped.

“...it noticed us noticing it.”

Mai didn’t look back.

“Good,” she said quietly.

A beat.

“Then we’re already late.”

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