

ACE 35 — “Blind Transport”

Chapter 3 — First Contact (Refined)

The corridor did not end.

It lost relevance.

That was the only way to describe it.

There was no door.

No threshold.

No visible shift in structure.

The walls didn't move.

The light didn't change.

Distance didn't compress—

and then—

between one step and the next—

none of it applied anymore.

Mai felt it first.

Not as movement.

As loss of alignment.

The pattern she had been tracking—imperfect repetition, eleven-segment drift, light without source—

didn't break.

Didn't distort.

It simply—

stopped meaning anything.

She slowed.

Not enough to stop.

Enough to anchor.

“...this isn't a continuation,” she said quietly.

Ace didn't look at her.

"...no."

Shammy's gaze lifted.

The air didn't change.

That was wrong.

It should have resisted.

Adjusted.

Done something.

Instead—

nothing.

"Pressure's gone," she said.

A beat.

"...not equalized."

Another.

"Removed."

The space ahead opened.

Not large.

Not wide.

Just—

available.

The room presented itself as square.

Angles held.

Lines met.

Surfaces aligned with intention.

Everything—

correct.

Nothing—

trusted.

The light was the same as the corridor.

Diffuse.

Even.

Shadowless.

But here—

it felt thinner.

Like it didn't fully commit to what it illuminated.

Four pedestals.

Placed.

Not symmetrically.

Not randomly.

Deliberately—

in a way that prevented a single stable view.

Each position forced adjustment.

Not movement.

Interpretation.

And on them—

Ace stopped.

Not gradually.

Immediately.

The statues did not look alive.

That was the first lie.

Stone.

By every visible metric.

Surface consistent.

Edges worn in ways that suggested age—

not damage.

Humanoid.

Slight elongation in proportion.

Not enough to reject.

Enough to resist comfort.

Wing-like structures extended from their backs.

Not feathered.

Not detailed.

Not real—

but not abstract enough to dismiss.

Faces—

Mai didn't look at the faces.

Not directly.

Her gaze moved across them—

shoulders.

Angles.

Weight distribution.

Avoiding center.

"Don't center on the head," she said quietly.

Shammy exhaled.

The air didn't move.

Still.

Unresponsive.

"...they're already inside the observation," she said.

Ace didn't move.

Her eyes locked onto one.

Far side.

Forward-set posture.

Not leaning.

Not shifting.

Just—

ready.

"...they're wrong," Ace said.

Mai nodded once.

"They're not consistent."

She adjusted her position.

Barely.

Just enough to alter perspective.

The room responded.

Not physically.

Perceptually.

The spacing between two statues stretched—

then settled—

into something that felt correct

only because it had decided to be.

"...they're anchored to interpretation," Mai said.

Not position.

Shammy's gaze moved between them.

Didn't settle.

Couldn't.

She tried to hold all four at once.

Her breathing slowed.

Not intentional.

Forced.

"Don't blink together," she said.

Silence.

One second.

Then another.

Mai moved first.

Deliberate.

Minimal.

She let one statue fall out of focus.

Not fully.

Just enough.

A fraction.

Nothing happened.

Ace didn't react.

Didn't shift.

Didn't adjust.

Mai brought her focus back.

Reconstructed the layout.

Checked spacing.

"...no visible change," she said.

But the certainty wasn't there anymore.

Shammy frowned slightly.

"That wasn't a full drop."

Ace spoke.

Flat.

"...do it properly."

Mai didn't argue.

She repositioned.

Allowed a full break.

Clean.

Complete.

A real blink.

The room held.

No sound.

No motion.

No transition.

But—

her breath caught.

Not sharp.

Just—

late.

"Count," she said.

Ace didn't move.

"...four."

Shammy tracked.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

"...four."

Mai shifted.

Half a step.

Changed angle.

Rebuilt geometry.

"...again."

Ace didn't like it.

Didn't say it.

But something in her stance tightened.

Held.

Contained.

Mai blinked again.

Full.

Clean.

The room didn't react.

"Count."

"...four."

"...four."

Shammy's voice came slower.

Not delayed.

Out of sync.

Mai closed her eyes.

Not a blink.

A pause.

Then opened them.

Everything—

exactly—

where it had been.

"...inconsistent," she said quietly.

Ace spoke.

"...it moved."

Mai's head snapped toward her.

"You saw it?"

Ace didn't look away.

"...no."

A beat.

"...I missed it."

That landed harder.

Shammy's hand lifted slightly.

Habit.

Control.

The air didn't follow.

"They're not reacting to absence," she said.

Mai recalculated.

Fast.

Stripping assumptions.

Rebuilding.

"...they're reacting to discontinuity," she said.

Ace's voice dropped.

"...difference."

Mai nodded.

"Yes."

A beat.

"Not 'not seen.'"

Another.

"Seen... differently."

The room tightened.

Not physically.

Perceptually.

Distance didn't shrink—

it became harder to maintain.

Like holding the space required effort now.

Shammy swallowed once.

"They don't need darkness," she said.

A beat.

"They need disagreement."

Ace didn't move.

"...then we don't disagree."

Mai exhaled slowly.

“That’s not possible.”

A beat.

“...four objects.”

“Three observers.”

Shammy finished it.

“...one inconsistency.”

Silence.

Then—

something changed.

Not the statues.

The room.

The light—

shifted.

Not dimmer.

Not brighter.

Less certain.

And one of the statues—

felt closer.

No one saw it move.

No one broke line-of-sight.

No one blinked.

But something—

had not aligned.

Ace’s voice dropped.

Lower.

Tighter.

“...we’re already late.”

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