

ACE 35.5 — “Afterimage”
Chapter 1 — Almost Normal

The coffee machine made a sound it wasn't supposed to make.

Not loud.

Not broken.

Just—

wrong.

Shammy stopped mid-step.

Not visibly.

Not enough that someone watching would call it hesitation.

But the air around her tightened for a fraction of a second—like the room itself had noticed before she did.

“...again,” she said quietly.

From the kitchen, something clicked.

A beat too late.

Ace didn't look up from the couch.

She was leaning forward slightly, elbows on her knees, eyes fixed—not on anything in particular—but on the space just in front of the table.

“...it's fine,” she said.

The words came before the second click.

Mai noticed that.

Of course she did.

She didn't comment.

Not yet.

The coffee machine clicked again.

This time—

on time.

Shammy exhaled slowly.

The air followed.

Mostly.

“...no,” she said.

“It’s not.”

Silence settled.

Light. Casual.

Almost normal.

Mai sat at the table, one leg crossed over the other, fingers resting lightly against the surface.

She wasn’t doing anything.

That was the problem.

She should have been.

Her gaze moved once—toward the kitchen, toward Shammy, then to Ace.

Measured.

Compared.

Filed.

“...you heard it too,” she said.

Ace didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes shifted—

not to Mai—

to the edge of the table.

A glass sat there.

Half-full.

Still.

“...yeah,” she said.

A beat.

“...it corrected.”

Shammy leaned against the counter.

The machine hummed again—this time perfectly aligned with expectation.

Too perfectly.

“That's not better,” she said.

Mai's lips pressed together.

“No,” she said quietly.

“It isn’t.”

The safehouse looked exactly the same.

That was the second problem.

Nothing had moved.

Nothing had changed.

Nothing had even drifted.

The couch was where it always was.

The table. The chairs. The low ambient lighting that never quite reached the corners.

Everything—

stable.

Too stable.

Ace shifted slightly.

The movement was small, almost imperceptible—

but it came before the floor creaked.

Mai’s eyes flicked down.

Just once.

“...you’re doing it again,” she said.

Ace didn't look at her.

"...doing what."

The floor creaked.

Late.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She didn't need to.

Shammy pushed off the counter and walked back into the room.

The air followed her this time.

Better.

Not perfect.

"...she's ahead of it," she said.

Ace's jaw tightened slightly.

"...no," she said.

A beat.

"...it's behind."

Silence.

Mai stood.

That was new.

Not abrupt.

Not dramatic.

But—

decisive.

She walked to the table.

Picked up the glass.

Held it.

For a moment—

nothing happened.

Then—

the liquid inside shifted.

A ripple.

Small.

Precise.

Uncaused.

Shammy felt it immediately.

The air dipped—just slightly—like something had been acknowledged.

“...don't,” she said.

Too late.

Mai tilted the glass.

Just enough.

The liquid moved—
before the angle changed.

She froze.

“...there it is,” she said quietly.

Ace was already standing.

She hadn't decided to.

Her body just—
was.

“...it’s still here,” she said.

No one argued.

The silence that followed wasn’t uncomfortable.

It was incomplete.

Like a conversation that hadn’t started yet—but had already gone wrong.

Shammy stepped closer.

Slow.

Measured.

The air around the three of them shifted—

trying—

failing—

trying again.

“...we didn’t leave it behind,” she said.

Mai didn’t look at her.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

“...we changed how we see.”

Ace’s eyes moved—

once—

between them.

Not measuring.

Not calculating.

Checking.

“...then fix it,” she said.

The words landed harder than they should have.

Mai shook her head.

“We can’t.”

A beat.

“Not like that.”

Silence.

Shammy's fingers brushed the edge of the table.

The air responded—

then corrected—

then hesitated.

"...it's not broken," she said.

Another beat.

"...we are."

That should have felt heavier.

It didn't.

That was the third problem.

Ace moved.

Not toward the door.

Not toward the kitchen.

Toward the center of the room.

She stopped there.

For a moment—
everything aligned.

The table.

The couch.

The light.

The three of them.

Perfect.

And in that moment—

the world felt right.

Exactly right.

Too right.

Ace blinked.

The alignment broke.

Immediately.

The room breathed again.

Shammy exhaled—
sharper this time.

“...don’t do that,” she said.

Ace didn’t apologize.

“...it worked,” she said.

Mai stepped forward.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

“It forced it.”

Silence.

Ace didn’t argue.

Didn’t need to.

Because somewhere—

between the hum of the coffee machine
and the settling of the glass on the table—

there was a gap.

Small.

Precise.

Unavoidable.

And for just a fraction of a second—

all three of them
noticed it
at different times.

That was enough.

Shammy leaned back slightly.

The air followed—

better now.

Still uneven.

“...we’re out of sync,” she said.

Mai nodded once.

“Yes.”

A beat.

“Not broken.”

Another.

“Just... not aligned.”

Ace’s gaze shifted between them again.

Slower this time.

More deliberate.

“...then we fix that,” she said.

Silence.

Mai looked at her.

Really looked.

Not analyzing.

Not measuring.

Seeing.

"...not here," she said quietly.

Shammy's lips curved—

just slightly.

"...definitely not here."

The coffee machine clicked again.

This time—

no one reacted.

Because for the first time since they had come back—

it sounded

almost

right.

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