

**ACE 35.5 — “Afterimage”**  
**Chapter 2 — Safehouse Loop**

No one suggested leaving.

That alone said enough.

---

The safehouse wasn't neutral anymore.

Not hostile.

Not unstable.

---

Just—

too aware of them.

---

Mai moved first.

Not away from the table.

Not toward the kitchen.

---

Across.

---

A slow, deliberate shift in position that didn't line up with anything obvious.

No reason.

No destination.

---

Ace watched it.

Not the movement itself—

but the timing.

---

“...you're offsetting,” she said.

---

Mai didn't stop.

---

"Yes."

---

A beat.

---

"On purpose."

---

Shammy didn't move.

Not yet.

---

She was listening.

Not to sound.

To space.

---

The air felt different depending on where she focused.

Near the couch—stable.

Near the table—slightly delayed.

Near Ace—

ahead.

---

"...it's still prioritizing," she said quietly.

---

Ace didn't look at her.

---

“...good.”

---

Shammy’s brow tightened slightly.

---

“No,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“It means we’re still inside something.”

---

Silence.

---

Mai stopped.

---

Not at a meaningful point.

Just—

where she happened to be when the sentence finished.

---

“...then we don’t give it a frame,” she said.

---

Ace tilted her head slightly.

---

“...we already tried that.”

---

Mai shook her head.

---

“No.”

---

A beat.

---

“We broke its frame.”

---

Another.

---

“Now we stop building a new one.”

---

---

The room seemed to react to that.

---

Not visibly.

---

But the gaps—  
shifted.

---

The tiny misalignments between sound and movement—  
timing and expectation—

---

became harder to ignore.

---

Shammy stepped forward.

---

This time, the air followed more cleanly.

Still uneven.

But closer.

---

“...it’s trying to match us,” she said.

---

Mai’s voice came immediately.

---

“Then don’t match back.”

---

---

Ace moved.

---

Not across the room.

Not toward either of them.

---

Toward the table.

---

The glass was still there.

---

She reached for it—

---

and stopped.

---

Her fingers hovered—

a few centimeters from the surface.

“...it’s early,” she said.

---

Mai’s eyes flicked to her hand.

---

“...or you are,” she replied.

---

Ace didn’t move closer.

Didn’t pull back.

---

“...difference is smaller now,” she said.

---

Shammy exhaled.

---

The air dipped—  
then corrected—  
then dipped again.

---

“...no,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“We’re just noticing it sooner.”

---

---

Silence settled again.

Not comfortable.

---

Not tense.

---

Just—  
misaligned.

---

---

Mai shifted her weight.

---

Then—  
deliberately—  
she spoke  
before she fully turned her head.

---

“Ace.”

---

Ace answered—  
  
before the sound finished.

---

“...yeah.”

---

The moment hung.

---

Just a fraction too long.

---

Shammy felt it like a pressure ripple.

---

"...there," she said.

---

Mai nodded.

---

"Still off."

---

Ace exhaled.

---

"...fix it then."

---

---

That word again.

---

Fix.

---

As if this was a system that could be repaired.

---

Mai didn't argue this time.

---

She stepped closer.

---

Not toward Ace.

---

Toward Shammy.

---

The triangle tightened.

---

Not perfectly.

---

Never perfectly.

---

---

Shammy's gaze moved between them.

---

Not tracking.

---

Feeling.

---

The air—  
for a moment—  
aligned.

---

Not fully.

---

But enough.

---

"...hold," she said.

---

Ace didn't blink.

---

Mai didn't move.

---

The room—

---

paused.

---

The gaps—

shrunk.

---

Sound matched movement.

Movement matched intent.

---

For one second—

---

they were back.

---

---

Then—

---

Ace's hand moved.

---

Not deliberately.

---

Not even consciously.

She adjusted—

just slightly—

and the alignment broke.

Harder than before.

The glass on the table—

tipped.

Before gravity caught up.

Mai's hand shot out—

caught it—

after it had already fallen.

Silence.

Shammy's breath hitched.

"...that's worse," she said.

Ace didn't look at the glass.

---

"...yeah."

---

---

Mai set it back down.

Carefully.

---

This time—

it stayed.

---

---

The air shifted again.

---

Not correcting.

---

Reacting.

---

Shammy stepped back.

---

"...we're forcing it too much," she said.

---

Mai didn't disagree.

---

"We're trying to synchronize," she said.

A beat.

---

“That’s the wrong direction.”

---

Ace’s gaze moved between them again.

---

Slower now.

---

More controlled.

---

“...then what.”

---

Silence.

---

Mai looked at both of them.

---

Really looked.

---

Not measuring.

Not mapping.

---

Seeing.

---

“...we stop trying to line up,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“We line up on something else.”

---

Shammy’s head tilted.

---

“...like what.”

---

Mai didn’t answer immediately.

---

Because she knew.

---

But saying it—  
meant committing.

---

---

Ace did it for her.

---

“...us.”

---

---

Silence.

---

Different now.

---

Not incomplete.

---

Not misaligned.

---

---

Intentional.

---

Shammy’s lips curved slightly.

---

“...that’s not structural,” she said.

---

Mai met her eyes.

---

“No,” she said.

---

A beat.

---

“It’s better.”

---

---

The room didn’t react.

---

Not immediately.

---

Not noticeably.

---

---

But the gaps—

shifted again.

---

Smaller.

---

Closer together.

---

Not gone.

---

Never gone.

---

---

Ace stepped forward.

---

This time—

not adjusting for timing.

---

Not compensating for delay.

---

---

Just—

moving.

---

---

The space accepted it.

---

Not perfectly.

But—  
more willingly.

---

---

Shammy followed.

---

Closer now.

---

The air moved with her—  
not controlled—  
not forced—

---

shared.

---

---

Mai didn't move.

---

Not yet.

---

She watched them both—

---

not for alignment—

---

for connection.

---

---

“...again,” she said quietly.

---

Ace looked at Shammy.

---

Shammy looked back.

---

Not perfectly synced.

---

But—

close enough.

---

---

And for the first time since they had come back—

---

the gap between them

didn't feel like an error.

---

It felt like something

that could be closed.

—

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