

ACE 35.5 — “Afterimage”
Chapter 3 — Slightly Offbeat

No one said anything for a while.

That, by itself, wasn't unusual.

What was—

was that the silence didn't land at the same time.

Ace leaned back against the edge of the table.

Shammy stood just close enough that the air between them felt shared.

Mai—

remained exactly where she was.

The triangle existed.

It just didn't... settle.

“...this is stupid,” Ace said.

The words came out flat.

Not annoyed.

Not dismissive.

Just—

early.

Shammy blinked.

A fraction too late.

“...what is.”

Ace didn't answer immediately.

Her gaze moved between them—
measuring something she wasn't putting into words.

"...we're trying too hard," she said.

Mai's lips twitched.

Not quite a smile.

"...you're saying that," she said.

A beat.

Ace shrugged.

Slight.

Contained.

"...yeah."

The timing almost lined up.

Almost.

Shammy let out a small breath.

The air followed.

Closer now.

More responsive.

"...she's not wrong," she said.

Mai turned—

but spoke before she fully did.

“That doesn’t make it useful.”

The sentence overlapped itself.

Just enough to feel like it had been said twice.

They all noticed.

No one pointed it out.

That, too, was new.

Ace pushed off the table.

Walked toward the kitchen.

Not carefully.

Not compensating.

Just—

moving.

The floor creaked.

On time.

She stopped.

"...okay, that's new," she said.

Shammy tilted her head slightly.

"...what."

Ace tapped the floor once with her foot.

Creak.

Perfect.

"...it's catching up," she said.

Mai exhaled.

"That's not reassuring."

Ace smirked.

"...it is a little."

The smirk came a fraction before the thought that caused it.

Shammy laughed.

The sound landed in the room—
clean.

For a moment—

everything aligned.

Then—

it slipped again.

Mai walked into the kitchen.

Not because she needed anything.

Because movement—

seemed easier than stillness.

She reached for the cabinet.

Opened it.

Paused.

“...we’re out of coffee,” she said.

Ace turned—

already halfway through the motion—

“...no we’re not.”

Mai blinked.

Looked inside.

There was coffee.

Exactly where it should be.

She closed the cabinet.

Slow.

“...I know that,” she said.

Shammy leaned against the counter.

“...you said it anyway.”

Mai didn’t answer.

Because that was the problem.

Ace grabbed the coffee container.

Set it down.

The sound hit the counter—

perfectly timed.

She froze.

“...okay,” she said slowly.

“...that’s definitely new.”

Shammy’s lips curved.

“...you like it.”

Ace glanced at her.

“...a little.”

A beat.

“...don’t tell Mai.”

Mai didn’t look at them.

“I heard that.”

The timing was perfect.

Too perfect.

Ace winced slightly.

“...yeah, no, that’s worse.”

Shammy laughed again.

This time—
the air followed smoothly.

Mai poured coffee.

The liquid hit the cup—
on time.

She stared at it.

“...we’re stabilizing,” she said.

Shammy nodded.

“...a little.”

Ace leaned against the counter.

“...too much?”

Mai didn't answer immediately.

She lifted the cup.

For a moment—

everything held.

Perfect.

Then—

she took a sip—

and the warmth hit

before the liquid touched her lips.

She froze.

"...no," she said quietly.

"...not stable."

Shammy's smile faded.

"...just closer."

Ace set her own cup down—
carefully—
watching the timing.

It landed exactly when it should.

She stared at it.

"...this is messing with me," she said.

Shammy leaned closer.

"...you love it."

Ace didn't deny it.

"...a little," she admitted.

Mai shook her head.

“You’re impossible.”

The words overlapped—
just slightly—
with the movement of her turning.

Ace grinned.

“...and you’re trying too hard.”

Silence.

Shammy looked between them.

“...she’s right,” she said.

Mai exhaled.

Slow.

“...I know.”

A beat.

“...I just don’t like it.”

The room settled.

Not perfect.

Not aligned.

But—
lighter.

The gaps were still there.

But now—

they weren’t the only thing in the space.

Ace stepped closer.

Not calculating.

Not compensating.

Just—

choosing.

She stopped near Mai.

Close enough to matter.

The timing—
didn't line up.

Didn't need to.

"...you're overthinking it," she said quietly.

Mai didn't move away.

"...I know."

A beat.

"...I always do."

Shammy stepped in—
closing the space between them.

The air shifted—
not perfectly—

but together.

“...then don’t,” she said softly.

Silence.

This one—

landed

at the same time.

Mai looked at both of them.

Not analyzing.

Not measuring.

Just—

seeing.

“...that’s not how this works,” she said.

Ace’s voice came immediately.

“...maybe it is now.”

A beat.

Shammy's hand brushed lightly against Mai's arm.

Not deliberate.

Not calculated.

Just—

there.

The air followed.

Soft.

Warm.

Not aligned.

Shared.

And for the first time since they had come back—

the gap between them

didn't feel like something to fix.

It felt like something

they could

step through.

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