

ACE 35.5 — “Afterimage”
Chapter 4 — Shared Rhythm

No one moved away.

That, more than anything, was the change.

The space between them had been something to manage.

To correct.

To measure.

Now—

it was just there.

Imperfect.

Unstable.

Real.

Shammy’s hand didn’t leave Mai’s arm.

Not because she was holding on.

Because it felt—

right to stay.

The contact wasn’t precise.

Didn’t align perfectly with movement or timing.

A fraction early.

A fraction late.

But it didn't break anything.

Mai noticed that.

Of course she did.

Her first instinct was to adjust.

To match it.

To correct the slight delay—

She didn't.

Instead—

she let it stay.

"...this is wrong," she said quietly.

Ace's voice came from closer than before.

"...yeah."

A beat.

"...so don't fix it."

Mai exhaled slowly.

The air responded.

Not perfectly.

But together.

Ace stepped in.

Closer now.

Not abrupt.

Not hesitant.

Just—

inevitable.

Her presence shifted the space.

Not stabilizing it.

Grounding it.

Mai felt it immediately.

Not as pressure.

As absence of pressure.

“...you’re not compensating,” she said.

Ace’s lips curved slightly.

“...no.”

A beat.

“...I’m just here.”

That should have sounded simple.

It didn’t.

It landed—
heavy in a different way.

Shammy’s fingers moved slightly.

Not gripping.

Not guiding.

Just—

tracing the line of Mai’s arm.

The air followed.

Soft.

Responsive.

Closer than before.

Mai didn’t move away.

Didn’t shift to accommodate.

Didn’t try to align the timing.

She just—

stood there.

Between them.

“...again,” she said quietly.

Not a command.

A request.

Ace's hand lifted.

Slow.

Not calculated.

Not measured.

She placed it lightly against Mai's side.

The contact was—

late.

Just slightly.

And for a moment—

the old reflex kicked in.

Mai's body prepared to adjust.

To correct.

To sync—

She stopped herself.

Let the delay exist.

Let the misalignment stay.

Shammy's breath caught—

then steadied.

"...that's it," she said softly.

The air shifted again.

Not snapping into place.

Not correcting.

Flowing.

Three points.

Not aligned.

Connected.

Ace's gaze lifted—
met Mai's.

Not at the exact same moment.

Close enough.

"...better," she said.

Mai nodded slightly.

"...yes."

A beat.

"...not perfect."

Ace's smile deepened.

“...good.”

Shammy stepped closer.

Closing the last of the space—
not fully—

just enough.

Her hand slid from Mai’s arm—
to her back.

The movement wasn’t synchronized with anything.

Didn’t need to be.

Mai felt it.

The contact.

The warmth.

The slight delay.

And this time—

she didn't think.

Her hand moved.

Rested lightly against Shammy's side.

The timing—

was off.

The connection—

wasn't.

The room shifted.

Not visibly.

But the gaps—

changed.

They didn't disappear.

They softened.

Ace stepped in fully now.

No distance left to account for.

No angle to maintain.

Her other hand found Shammy's shoulder.

Light.

Unforced.

Three points.

Touching.

The triangle—

closed.

For a moment—

everything slowed.

Not because the world aligned.

Because they did.

Shammy exhaled.

The air moved—

not perfectly—

but with them.

Mai's eyes closed.

Just for a second.

Not a blink.

A pause.

When she opened them—

nothing had snapped back.

Nothing had corrected.

And that—

was the difference.

Ace leaned in slightly.

Not a decision.

A continuation.

Her forehead brushed lightly against Mai's.

The contact came—

late.

Mai smiled.

Not because it was right.

Because it wasn't.

Shammy shifted closer behind her.

The three of them—

no longer trying to match.

Just—

existing in the same space.

The air settled.

Not smooth.

Not perfect.

Alive.

And for the first time since they had come back—

the rhythm wasn't something they were chasing.

It was something
they were creating.

Together.

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