

## Decompression Protocol — Sandbox #001 “House Rules”

Type: Sandbox (External) Intensity: Medium-High (Controlled Tension) Focus: Triad + External Canon  
Impact: None

The place didn't advertise itself.

It didn't need to.

No signs, no noise bleeding out into the street — just a narrow entrance tucked between two buildings that looked like they'd forgotten why they were built in the first place. Inside, though...

Different story.

Low light. Deep tones. Everything designed to feel expensive without ever saying the word.

Mai noticed the exits first.

Of course she did.

Two visible. One implied. Staff movement suggested at least one more behind the bar. Sightlines clean, no obvious surveillance — which meant there was surveillance, just better hidden.

“Acceptable,” she said quietly.

Ace glanced sideways. “That your version of ‘nice place’?”

“It will do.”

Shammy stepped in last.

The air shifted with her.

Not dramatically — no flicker, no obvious anomaly — but something about the room recalibrated by a fraction. Conversations dipped just slightly in volume. A few heads turned without fully realizing why.

She smiled.

“I like it.”

They didn't take a table.

Too static.

Instead, they moved toward the bar — the kind that curved just enough to break lines of sight without closing them completely. Strategic. Social.

Mai chose the position.

Back partially covered. View of the room. Enough space on either side.

Ace leaned in against the counter like she'd been there before, even if she hadn't.

Shammy didn't lean at all.

She didn't need to.

The bartender approached with the kind of calm confidence that came from dealing with people who thought they were dangerous.

"What can I get you?"

Mai answered without looking at the menu. "Something clean. No residuals."

A pause.

The bartender blinked once, then nodded like that made sense. "Of course."

Ace snorted softly. "You just made that up."

"No," Mai said. "I didn't."

It didn't take long.

It never did.

The first one approached from Ace's left.

Confident. Not stupid. The kind of person who knew how to read a room... just not well enough.

"Didn't think I'd see someone like you here," he said, voice easy.

Ace didn't turn immediately.

Let him hang there for half a second.

Then she glanced over, eyes flicking up and down once — quick, assessing, not subtle.

"...you didn't," she said.

Not dismissive.

Just factual.

Mai watched the interaction through the reflection in the glass behind the bar.

Didn't intervene.

Didn't need to.

Her attention was split — half on Ace, half on the rest of the room, tracking micro-movements, shifts in posture, anyone getting too interested too quickly.

There were a few.

There were always a few.

Shammy tilted her head slightly, studying the man with open curiosity.

Not judgmental.

Just... interested in the process.

"Is this part of the protocol?" she asked softly.

Ace smirked faintly. "Depends how it goes."

The man leaned in a fraction closer.

Too close, if he knew what he was doing.

"I can do better than that," he said.

Ace finally turned fully toward him.

That was his first mistake.

Up close, the illusion didn't hold as well — the compact frame, the stillness, the way her eyes didn't soften the way people expected.

"You're trying," she said.

A beat.

"I'll give you that."

Mai's fingers tapped once against the glass in her hand.

Not a signal.

Just... a note.

She was watching the line.

How far this would go.

How far she would let it go.

Shammy shifted slightly closer to Ace's other side.

Not possessive.

Not protective.

Just... present.

The air followed her, warmth threading through the space, amplifying the subtle tension building at the bar.

The man felt it.

Didn't understand it.

But he felt it.

“Friends of yours?” he asked, glancing between them.

Ace didn’t look away from him.

“Something like that.”

Mai finally turned her head just enough to meet his gaze.

Measured.

Precise.

“Close enough,” she said.

That was his second mistake.

Looking at Mai too long.

There was something about her that didn’t read the way it should.

Not cold. Not distant.

Just... exact.

Like every variable had already been accounted for, including him.

He shifted his weight slightly.

Didn’t know why.

Shammy smiled.

That didn’t help.

Ace caught it.

The moment the confidence dipped.

Small.

But real.

Her grin sharpened just a fraction.

“You’re still here,” she said. “So either you’re brave... or you’re not reading the situation.”

The man laughed, a little tighter now. “Maybe I like my odds.”

Mai’s voice cut in, smooth and even.

“You don’t.”

Silence.

Not loud.

Not heavy.

Just... enough.

And then it broke.

The man stepped back, just slightly, raising his hands in a gesture that tried to play it off as casual.

“Alright,” he said. “Fair enough.”

He lingered a second longer — pride, maybe — then turned and disappeared back into the room.

Ace watched him go, then leaned back against the bar again.

“...you didn’t have to do that.”

Mai took a slow sip of her drink.

“I did.”

“Did you?”

A pause.

Mai glanced at her, just briefly.

“Yes.”

Shammy exhaled softly, the air settling with her.

“That was interesting,” she said.

Ace huffed a quiet laugh. “Yeah?”

Shammy nodded. “He thought he was part of the system.”

Mai’s lips curved faintly. “He wasn’t.”

For a moment, the three of them just stood there.

The noise of the room flowing around them again, unbothered, unaware.

But the space immediately around them...

That stayed different.

Ace turned slightly, shifting closer to Mai now instead of away.

Deliberate.

“You’re still watching everything,” she said.

“I always am.”

“Yeah,” Ace murmured. “But that’s not all you’re doing.”

Mai didn’t answer.

Didn’t need to.

Shammy stepped in just enough to close the triangle.

The air warmed again, subtle but unmistakable, threading through the gap between them.

“Parameters are different here,” she said softly.

Ace glanced at her. “No kidding.”

Mai set her glass down.

That was the tell.

“External environment,” she said. “Uncontrolled variables.”

Ace’s eyes flicked to hers, catching the shift immediately.

“...and?”

Mai’s gaze held, steady.

“And we adapt.”

Shammy smiled, the faintest crackle returning to the air.

“I like this version.”

Ace did too.

That was the problem.

Nothing escalated.

Not fully.

Not here.

Not yet.

But the line had moved.

And this time...

They hadn’t stopped it.

END LOG — DECOMPRESSION PROTOCOL — SANDBOX #001—

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