

Decompression Protocol — Sandbox #002 “Overpressure”

Type: Sandbox (Overdrive Variant) Intensity: High Focus: Triad Canon Impact: None

The problem started small.

That was what made it dangerous.

Not a breach. Not a failed containment. Not even a proper combat spiral.

Just residue.

A low-level atmospheric anomaly nested inside a dead industrial block on the edge of the city, half dissolved by the time they got there and mean enough on its way out to leave scratches where there should have been none. It didn't hit like force. It hit like aftertaste — electrical ghost-pressure, static under the skin, an ugly little feedback system that amplified whatever the body was already doing.

Fight. Run. Clench. Reach.

It was gone now.

Mostly.

The safe house door sealed behind them, and the room was quiet enough that the remaining charge had somewhere to be heard.

Ace dropped her katanas onto the equipment table harder than she meant to. The blades hummed once in complaint, emerald light running thinly along the edges before settling. Her shoulders were high, too high. Breathing steady on paper, wrong everywhere else.

Mai noticed before the sound finished.

“Don't touch anything conductive for the next five minutes,” she said.

Ace threw her a flat look. “That sounds annoyingly specific.”

“It is.”

Across the room, Shammy stopped halfway through shrugging off her coat. Tiny sparks ran through the silver-white strands of her hair and snapped harmlessly into the air.

“...oh,” she said softly.

That one syllable carried far too much information.

Mai turned. “How bad?”

Shammy tilted her head, listening to something inside the room that wasn't fully part of the room.

“Not catastrophic.” A pause. “Just recursive.”

Ace exhaled through her nose. “I hate when you say things like that.”

“You hate it because you know what it means.”

Unfortunately, she did.

Recursive meant the leftover field wasn't simply fading. It was feeding on response. Tension feeding charge, charge feeding tension. A closed loop.

On a good day, manageable.

On a bad one—

Ace rolled one shoulder, then the other, trying to shake loose the restless burn in her muscles. It only made it worse. The motion sent a fine violet shimmer through the edges of her vision, not a full fragment surge, just enough to make her jaw tighten.

Mai saw that too.

Of course she did.

"Sit down," she said.

Ace laughed once. Short, humorless. "Tried that already. Doesn't help."

"That wasn't a suggestion."

"Yeah, I noticed."

Still, she sat.

Not because she wanted to. Because some part of her already understood that this had crossed the line from irritation into management.

The couch gave slightly under her weight. The room did not.

Shammy stayed standing.

That was another bad sign.

Normally she settled first, let the air follow her down into something survivable. But now the charge around her was alive in the wrong way, flickering at the edge of coherence, responding to every tiny shift in the others like a storm trying to remember itself.

Mai stepped closer to Ace and placed two fingers against the side of her throat.

Clinical. Precise.

Pointless.

Ace grabbed her wrist a second later — not hard, but fast enough that the motion carried more charge than intent. A sharp blue-green crack snapped between skin and air.

Both of them froze.

The room answered.

Shammy inhaled sharply as the pressure changed all at once, the atmosphere tightening around them like invisible fabric pulled too taut.

"...that," she said, voice thinner now, "was not ideal."

"No kidding," Ace muttered, still holding Mai's wrist.

The problem was that she didn't let go.

Neither did Mai.

For one suspended second, all three of them understood the exact shape of the failure.

The anomaly had found a simpler loop.

Touch. Response. Amplification.

Mai's eyes narrowed, silver-blue gone brighter at the edges. "Do not move suddenly."

Ace gave her a look that was halfway between irritation and something more dangerous. "You say that like I'm the unstable one."

"You are currently glowing."

Ace looked down.

She was, very faintly.

"Rude."

Shammy should have laughed.

Instead, she took one step closer and the air in the room shifted with her so abruptly that the lights overhead dimmed for half a heartbeat. Static rippled outward in a soft ring. Not violent. Not controlled either.

Her expression changed.

Not fear. Not exactly.

Concentration, stretched too thin.

"It's picking up on us as a system now," she said.

Mai's gaze snapped to her. "Can you bleed it off?"

Shammy's mouth tightened. "Not without somewhere for it to go."

The answer landed with ugly clarity.

Ace felt it first, because of course she did — that same razor-thin point where problem-solving stopped being abstract and became physical. The loop wanted release. Not metaphorical release. Not time, not breathing exercises, not patience.

Discharge.

Human systems were wonderfully inconvenient like that.

Mai clearly arrived at the same conclusion a second later and hated it on sight.

“No,” she said.

Ace blinked. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“You were about to.”

“Okay, maybe.”

Shammy looked between them, hair lifting slightly in the growing field. “You are both thinking the same thing.”

Mai’s stare remained fixed on Ace. “It is not a controlled option.”

Ace’s grip shifted on her wrist, less accidental now. “Neither is this.”

There it was.

The truth, ugly and immediate.

The anomaly had taken everything the Decompression Protocol normally relied on — contact, trust, pressure equalization, triadic resonance — and overclocked it. What was usually a careful descent had become a live wire. The system still wanted the same answer.

It just wanted it faster, harder, with less room for denial.

Mai drew one slow breath, trying to reassert structure over a situation that was losing interest in being structured. “We do this wrong, it escalates.”

Ace’s eyes held hers. Violet irises brightening by degrees. “We do nothing, it escalates.”

The silence after that was brief and absolute.

Shammy stepped into it.

Not between them.

Never between.

But close enough that the field changed from divided tension into shared pressure, the atmosphere around all three of them folding inward, hot and electric.

Her voice was softer now, but less stable. “I can dampen the spikes. Not stop them. Just... keep the edges from tearing.”

“Comforting,” Ace said.

“It is the best offer available.”

A faint, unwilling smile touched Ace’s mouth.

Mai noticed that too. She noticed everything. The trouble was that the anomaly was now using those observations against her, turning every measured breath into another data point for escalation.

Her free hand came up and settled against Ace's shoulder.

That should have helped.

Instead the room pulsed.

Ace's eyes half closed for an instant. "Yeah, that's definitely worse."

Mai shut her eyes once, briefly, as though sheer annoyance could bully physics into behaving.

"It is a bad design."

"Whose?" Ace asked.

"Yes."

Shammy actually laughed then, but the sound came with a ripple of static that moved across the walls like heat lightning. The safe house sensors clicked somewhere in the ceiling, struggling to decide whether this counted as weather or a violation.

The answer, like most useful answers, was irrelevant.

Ace released Mai's wrist very slowly.

Not because the loop was broken.

Because the nature of it had changed.

The place where her fingers had been was still lit with residual charge under Mai's skin, pale blue lines branching and fading. Mai looked down at them once, then back up.

That look did things to the room.

To Ace.

To Shammy.

The problem with pushing a system past tolerance was that eventually tolerance stopped being the goal.

"Tell me the actual risk," Ace said quietly.

Mai answered because that was what she did, even now.

"Feedback amplification. Fragment resonance if your control slips. Atmospheric bleed if Shammy overextends. Neurological strain if I try to carry all of it alone." Her jaw tightened. "And a non-zero chance that the safe house loses patience with us and dumps suppressant foam from the ceiling."

Ace stared at her for a second.

"...I almost want to see that happen."

“You will not.”

“Fine.”

Another pulse moved through the room, stronger this time. Shammy’s breath caught with it; the windows trembled faintly in their seals.

Mai made the decision then.

Ace saw it happen. Not in words. In posture.

The moment calculation gave way to acceptance.

“We run it,” Mai said.

Not calm. Not quite.

“Modified protocol. Fast containment, maximum control.”

Ace’s voice dipped lower. “That sounds suspiciously optimistic.”

“It is what I have.”

Shammy came one step closer still, the heat of her field fully present now, storm-pressure resting against skin. “And if maximum control fails?”

Mai looked at her.

Then at Ace.

Then, for the first time since they walked in, she allowed the honesty to stay on her face unfiltered.

“Then we stop pretending control was the point.”

That landed like a struck wire.

Ace stood.

The motion was too quick. The room flashed with it — violet at the edge of her pupils, green across the table where the katanas answered instinctively, blue through the air around Shammy’s shoulders. Mai moved at the same time, not back, never back, but forward to catch the surge before it went feral.

Her hands found Ace at the waist and jaw, precise in intent, ruined instantly by the way the current jumped between them. The contact should have grounded.

Instead it burned.

Not pain.

Something worse. Something nearer.

Ace’s breath broke on the first impact of it, every muscle in her body going taut for half a second

before snapping into a different kind of alignment. “Mai—”

“I know.”

Shammy spread her fingers and the room answered her in a low, vibrating hush. Pressure equalized around them in concentric waves, every unstable edge softened just enough to keep the feedback from turning violent. It was beautiful in the worst possible way — a storm choosing mercy and still being a storm.

The modified protocol lasted approximately three seconds before it stopped being modified and became necessity.

Too much charge. Too little distance. Every point of contact feeding the next.

Ace caught Mai’s forearm. Mai’s hand slid from Ace’s jaw to the back of her neck. Shammy stepped fully into range and the atmosphere locked around all three of them like a sealed circuit finally completing itself.

The release wasn’t clean.

It was never going to be.

It came in surges — pressure breaking, rebuilding, then breaking again harder, each wave dragging the next one loose. Mai tried, for a while, to preserve sequence, to keep it compartmentalized, to insist on phases where the system no longer believed in phases. Ace stopped helping that effort almost immediately. Shammy, suspended between restraint and amplification, did what only she could do: kept the whole thing from tipping over into damage even as she made it larger than it should have been.

The room flashed once.

Then again.

Not lights. Field response.

A hairline crack zigzagged across the surface of the cheap glass water carafe on the side table and held there, undecided.

Ace gave a rough, half-laughing sound against the side of Mai’s throat. “Still think this was a bad design?”

“Yes,” Mai said, breath unsteady now despite all opposition. “Objectively.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“No,” Mai admitted, and the word felt like the real threshold.

Shammy’s hand found Mai’s shoulder, then Ace’s, not separating, not directing, just completing the line. Her touch carried pure atmospheric force translated into something the body could survive. Every spike that should have gone catastrophic bent under her influence into something else — still intense, still too much, but no longer destructive.

The anomaly fed on the loop.

Then the loop began feeding on itself.

And that, finally, was different.

Because this part belonged to them.

Not to the residue.

Not to the industrial block.

Not to whatever dead little field had hitched a ride home in their nervous systems.

The system turned inward and chose its own answer.

Pressure became rhythm. Rhythm became coherence. Coherence became release.

It hit all at once after that.

Not tidy. Not graceful. Just decisive.

A shockwave of static burst outward from the center of the room in a silent blue ring. The overhead lights snapped off completely, then back on in dim emergency mode. Somewhere in the ceiling, the safe house considered suppressant foam again, thought better of it, and settled for issuing one offended warning tone before giving up on them as a category error.

Then—

Nothing.

Not true nothing.

Aftermath.

The field collapsed so quickly it almost felt stolen. The pressure drained from the air, leaving behind only warmth, harsh breathing, and the faint ozone smell of a problem that had very narrowly decided not to become an incident report.

Ace stayed exactly where she was for a second too long, forehead resting against Mai's shoulder, one hand still braced at her waist. Her pulse was finally dropping. So was the light in her eyes.

"...okay," she said, voice rough with exhaustion and reluctant satisfaction. "That worked."

Mai's answer came after a pause long enough to suggest she was reassembling herself from first principles.

"It was unacceptable."

Ace laughed weakly. "You say that like you didn't help."

"I am aware that I helped."

Shammy leaned into both of them at once, not heavily, just enough that the shared contact remained unbroken while the last microcurrents bled harmlessly away. She sounded almost dreamy.

"The room is much happier now."

All three of them looked toward the cracked water carafe.

Then up at the faint scorch mark on the ceiling.

Then at the blinking sensor strip above the door.

Ace smiled without lifting her head. "Debatable."

Mai exhaled, something between a sigh and the distant memory of composure. "We are revising the protocol."

"Again?"

"Yes."

Shammy's quiet laughter returned, softer this time, real thunder gone gentle. "You're going to call this an outlier."

"I am," Mai said.

Ace lifted her head just enough to look at her. "And what are you going to call the part where control wasn't the point?"

Mai held her gaze.

There were a dozen answers available. Technical ones. Defensive ones. Elegant lies.

She chose none of them.

"Effective," she said.

Ace grinned, small and sharp and exhausted.

"Thought so."

The emergency lights steadied. The room stopped listening so hard. Somewhere outside, far beyond the walls, the city continued pretending people were simpler than the systems they built around themselves.

Inside the safe house, the storm had passed.

Mostly.

Shammy drew a fingertip through the air and caught one last remnant spark before it could disappear. It danced across her skin, then vanished.

"No repeat tonight," she said.

Mai nodded immediately. "Agreed."

Ace considered that.

Then, because she was Ace, she looked at the cracked carafe again and said, "Cowards."

Shammy laughed outright.

Even Mai's mouth twitched.

The safe house, for its part, remained deeply unconvinced by all of them.

END LOG — DECOMPRESSION PROTOCOL — SANDBOX #002—

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