

INTERLUDE — BETWEEN HEARTBEATS

- Placement: Immediately after [Jacob Incident](#), safe house upper floor*

[blackfile](#), [interlude](#), [shammy](#), [ace](#), [mai](#), [triad](#)

The room smelled of damp concrete and faint ozone left behind by Shammy's earlier release. Jacob's voice had finally stopped ringing. Not gone from memory—memory would take longer—but the vibration inside her skull had cut out like a radio yanked from the wall.

Shammy kept her eyes closed.

If she opened them the ceiling would become real, the crack in the paint would stare back, and the real world would remember what it felt like to have someone try to wear your storm like a coat.

Breath hitched, steadied, hitched again.

Fingers moved through her silver-white hair. Slow. Methodical. Each pass confirming strands still answered only to her charge. Ace. The pressure behind the touch was too low and too certain to be anyone else.

Her stomach folded in on itself—not nausea, but the kind of relief that bruises on the way out.

"Hey," Ace said, voice low enough the word barely disturbed the air.

Shammy didn't trust hers yet. She swallowed instead.

Mai pressed in from the left. Gravity without demand. Silver hair slipped loose across Shammy's shoulder and stayed there. Mai's hand found hers; fingers slid between without hesitation. Shammy squeezed back hard enough she felt the small bones shift. Reflex. Proof.

Mai's thumb moved once. "Still with us?"

Shammy managed a nod she knew they couldn't see. "Yeah. Rebooting."

Ace's fingers paused at the nape of her neck, then resumed. "Take the time."

Permission, not order.

Shammy opened her eyes.

Cheap overhead light. Hairline crack exactly where she remembered it. Nothing tried to crawl inside her skin. Good.

She turned her head. Ace sat tight—120 cm of coiled watchfulness, violet eyes stripped of combat edge, just fracture-soft concern. Mai leaned even closer, silver-blue gaze sharp but not scanning, one strand of her hair still brushing Shammy's cheek like it belonged there.

"Sorry," Shammy said by habit.

"No," they answered together.

"I didn't even—"

"Doesn't matter," Ace cut in, mouth twitching once.

Mai traced a slow circle on the back of Shammy's hand. "You don't apologize for being affected."

Affected. The word settled like cool air after lightning.

"Feels like fingerprints," Shammy whispered. "Inside."

Ace leaned until foreheads almost touched. Compact frame fitting against impossible height without apology. "Then we overwrite them."

Mai's voice stayed level. "You're not alone in there."

Something inside Shammy gave—like ice finally letting spring through. She leaned before she chose to. Mai took the weight against her shoulder. Ace's arm slid across Shammy's back, sure, warm, never trapping.

Shammy pressed her face into the curve of Mai's neck. Warm skin. Real pulse. Air that tasted only of them.

"Stay," she breathed.

"Always," Mai said.

Ace's arm tightened just enough to register. "Not going anywhere."

Shammy clutched fabric at both their sides—Ace's worn shirt, Mai's jacket seam—knuckles whitening. Two heartbeats layered against hers. Different tempos. Still compatible. The mismatch itself steadied her more than any matched rhythm could.

Jacob had tried to make solitude feel inevitable even while standing between them.

Idiot.

Ace's hand drew slow arcs along her spine—comfort, not claim. Mai's breathing deepened deliberately, lending calm the way she lent structure to everything.

Shoulders dropped. Defensive lock released without permission.

"Better?" Ace murmured.

"Yeah." Pause. "Still want to punch him."

"Get in line," Ace answered.

"Preferably on repeat," Mai added, dry as cracked pavement.

Shammy laughed—short, surprised, real. The sound felt foreign and welcome at once.

She looked at them without measuring. Just seeing. They hadn't come back for the file. They had come back for the part of her Jacob tried to claim.

Eyes burned. She left them.

"Thank you."

Ace shook her head once. "Don't."

Mai's voice softened. "You don't thank people for loving you."

Shammy exhaled long, no hitch this time. "Good. Because I'm not done needing you."

"Good," Ace echoed.

"We're not done being needed," Mai finished.

Shammy settled fully between them on purpose now. Choice, not collapse. Closed her eyes again—not hiding, just safe enough to stop guarding.

Jacob had tried to make her feel like something desirable to own.

They made her feel like something impossible to replace.

Warmth pooled heavy. Healing kind of heavy.

"Don't let me wake up alone," she murmured, sleep already tugging.

"Not happening," Ace said.

"Sleep," Mai whispered.

Shammy slid under between the two steady rhythms, no warnings left screaming inside her chest.

Ace stayed awake.

She rarely slept when trust this complete pressed against her. Not distrust of the room—someone had to register first if anything shifted.

Shammy's breathing evened into exhaustion, not fear. Her hand still loosely fisted Ace's shirt. Ace let it stay.

Mai remained alert on the far side, silver eyes half-lidded but present.

Could have ended Jacob. Maybe not clean. But possible. That wasn't the point. He hadn't aimed for the body. He'd aimed for the doubt. Worse.

Ace looked down. In sleep Shammy looked younger—not softer, just momentarily allowed to stop holding atmosphere together. 195 cm folded small between them.

Ace leaned and pressed a quiet kiss into silver-white hair. Just enough pressure for the body to log it deep: here.

"Idiot," she told the dark.

Mai's voice barely carried. "He underestimated her."

"He underestimated us," Ace corrected.

Mai's fingers brushed Ace's forearm once—agreement without sound.

"Anything while I cleared the hall?" Ace asked low.

"Mostly just 'don't leave.'"

Ace’s chest tightened. She pulled Shammy fractionally closer.

“Not happening.”

“Told her.”

“Good.”

Silence filled instead of emptied.

Ace rested her hand across Shammy’s back—shield, never cage.

Shammy shifted in sleep, pressing nearer. Fingers tightened once, then relaxed.

Mai’s breathing synced without effort.

Ace watched the hairline crack in the ceiling until the first gray edge of dawn touched it. Nothing tried to fracture. Nothing tried to own.

Between heartbeats, the triad stayed exactly as it was.

File held.

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Last update: **22/03/2026 06:51**

