

Decompression Protocol #001 — “After the Noise”

Type: Core Intensity: Medium Focus: Triad Canon Impact: Echo

The safe house door sealed behind them with a soft hydraulic sigh.

Not dramatic. Not final.

Just... closed.

For a moment, nothing moved.

The air still carried the mission with it — metallic, sharp, a faint ghost of burned circuitry and something older that refused to name itself. It clung to Ace’s skin like a second layer she hadn’t agreed to wear. Her shoulders were tight, not from damage, but from holding too much of it in place for too long.

Mai stepped past her first.

Of course she did.

No hesitation, no lingering. She crossed the room with the same clean efficiency she used in the field, fingers already loosening the seal at her wrist, disrupting the last threads of residual charge. The faint shimmer around her faded by degrees — not gone, never fully gone, but... quieter.

“Doors are hard-locked,” Mai said, voice even. A beat. “External channels are silent.”

Not a report. Not really.

More like permission.

Ace didn’t answer.

She leaned back against the wall instead, eyes closing just long enough for the afterimage of the fight to flicker — violet fracture lines, the hum of her blades still echoing somewhere behind her teeth. It hadn’t been close.

That wasn’t the problem.

The problem was how easy it had been to go further.

A soft crackle broke the silence.

Shammy.

She hadn’t moved far from where she’d appeared — just inside the room, near the edge of the light. Her hair lifted slightly, responding to something that wasn’t quite there anymore, the air around her adjusting, smoothing, like the space itself was exhaling through her.

“You’re both still holding it,” she said quietly.

Not accusing.

Just... stating a fact.

Ace let out a slow breath through her nose. “Yeah. I noticed.”

Mai glanced back, just enough to catch both of them in the same line of sight. Her expression didn’t change much — it rarely did — but something in her posture shifted. Less edge. More... intention.

“We should run a decompression protocol.”

There it was.

No emphasis. No weight.

Just the right words, in the right order.

Ace’s mouth twitched — not quite a smile, but close enough to matter. “Thought you’d say that.”

Shammy tilted her head slightly, the faintest hint of a smile pulling at the corner of her lips as the air pressure in the room settled another fraction.

“About time.”

It didn’t start all at once.

That wasn’t how this worked.

Mai moved first — not toward Ace, not yet, but toward the center of the room. She set her tablet down without looking at it, already disengaging from it completely. When she turned back, the calculated edge was still there... but softened, like a blade no longer under tension.

“Sit,” she said.

Not a command.

But Ace followed it anyway.

Dropping onto the low couch with a quiet exhale, she let her head tilt back, exposing the line of her throat without thinking about it. Her hands rested loose at her sides, fingers still twitching with leftover kinetic memory.

Mai noticed.

Of course she did.

She stepped closer, slower this time, attention narrowing — not on threats, not on exits, but on Ace. On the small, precise tells most people would miss. The way her breathing hadn’t quite evened out yet. The residual tremor under the surface.

“Too much overdrive,” Mai murmured.

Ace opened one eye. “You’re surprised?”

“No.” A pause. “But I am going to fix it.”

That got a real reaction — a faint huff of amusement, low and rough. “Yeah? You and what—”

She didn't finish.

Because Mai's hand had already settled lightly against her collarbone.

Not forceful.

Not hesitant.

Just... placed exactly where it needed to be.

The effect was immediate.

Not dramatic — nothing in the room surged or flared — but something in Ace's posture shifted, tension unwinding by degrees as Mai's stabilizing field adjusted, tuning itself with surgical precision.

Ace exhaled, longer this time.

"Okay," she muttered. "Yeah... that helps."

"I know."

Shammy moved then.

Not toward either of them directly — never that — but around them, slow and unhurried, like she was tracing the edge of the moment instead of stepping into it. The air followed her, subtle changes in pressure smoothing out the last sharp edges left behind by the mission.

A faint static hum built, barely audible.

Comforting.

Ace's eyes drifted closed again, her focus narrowing to sensation — the grounding pressure of Mai's hand, the ambient shift Shammy was creating, the way the room itself seemed to be recalibrating around them.

No alarms.

No urgency.

Just... space.

Mai adjusted her position slightly, stepping closer, her other hand coming up to rest at Ace's shoulder. Not restraining. Not directing.

Anchoring.

"You're still bracing," she said softly.

Ace didn't argue.

Didn't need to.

Mai's thumbs traced a slow, deliberate line along the tension points she already knew by memory — not guesswork, never guesswork — easing pressure out of muscle and nerve in a way that was as methodical as any ritual she'd ever executed.

Except this wasn't a ritual.

Not really.

It just looked like one, if you didn't know better.

Ace's head tipped forward slightly, her forehead brushing against Mai's shoulder as the last of the edge bled out of her system.

"Better," she admitted, voice lower now.

"Good."

Shammy finally stepped closer.

Not between them.

Never between.

Just enough that the field she carried overlapped fully, the air around the three of them settling into a shared rhythm. The faint crackle softened into something smoother, like distant thunder rolling further away.

"You're stabilizing," she said, almost to herself.

Mai nodded once.

Ace didn't bother opening her eyes.

"Yeah," she murmured. "That's the idea."

No one rushed it.

There was no endpoint to hit, no phase to complete.

Just the slow, deliberate unwinding of everything they'd carried in with them.

The room stayed quiet.

The world stayed outside.

And for a while — not measured, not logged — the only thing that mattered was the simple, precise act of coming back down from the edge.

Together.

END LOG — DECOMPRESSION PROTOCOL #001—

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Last update: **18/03/2026 16:40**

