

Decompression Protocol #002 — “Initiation Vector”

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

The room hadn't changed.

Not really.

Same low light. Same quiet. Same sealed edges keeping the outside where it belonged.

But the quality of the silence was different now.

Not empty.

Waiting.

Ace felt it first.

Not as a thought — those came later — but as a shift under her skin, something that hadn't been there a moment ago. Or maybe it had, and she'd just been too wrapped in the aftermath to notice.

Her breathing had evened out.

Her pulse hadn't.

Still just a fraction too fast. Not stress. Not anymore.

Something else.

She opened her eyes.

Mai was still close. Closer than before, actually — not by much, just enough that the space between them had stopped being neutral. Her hand hadn't moved far from where it had been, resting along Ace's shoulder now instead of her collarbone, but the intent behind it had changed.

Subtly.

Deliberately.

Ace watched her for a second longer than necessary.

“...you're not done,” she said.

It wasn't a question.

Mai's gaze flicked up to meet hers — sharp, focused, already there.

“No,” she said.

A beat.

“Neither are you.”

Shammy didn't interrupt.

Of course she didn't.

But the air responded anyway — a faint tightening, then release, like the room itself had decided to pay closer attention. The low static hum returned, softer than before but more... present. Not background anymore.

Context.

Ace pushed herself up from the couch slowly, not breaking eye contact.

"Thought we already ran the protocol."

"We did," Mai replied.

Her voice was steady.

Too steady.

"This is... continuation."

Ace huffed a quiet laugh under her breath. "Funny. Didn't know that was in the documentation."

"It isn't."

And there it was.

The smallest crack in Mai's composure — not loss of control, never that — but a shift in priority. A choice.

Ace felt it land.

She stepped forward.

Not fast.

Not hesitant either.

Just... direct.

"Then what is it?"

Mai didn't move back.

Didn't need to.

"Adjustment," she said. "Residual imbalance."

Ace stopped just inside her space now, close enough to feel the stabilizing field without touching it directly. It was different from before — less clinical, less targeted.

Broader.

Warmer.

“Right,” Ace murmured. “And how exactly are you planning to—”

Mai’s hand moved again.

Not to correct.

Not to anchor.

Just to rest — lightly, deliberately — at Ace’s waist.

That was new.

The sentence didn’t finish.

Shammy’s presence shifted with it.

A subtle drop in pressure, barely perceptible unless you were looking for it. The air thickened just enough to hold the moment in place, to keep it from slipping back into neutrality.

Her eyes flicked between them, bright with quiet curiosity.

“Oh,” she said softly.

Not surprised.

Just... interested.

Ace’s breath hitched — not sharply, just enough to notice.

“You’re changing the parameters,” she said.

“Correct.”

“Without telling me.”

Mai tilted her head slightly, considering that.

“Yes.”

Ace let out another quiet laugh, lower this time. “...bold.”

“I am aware.”

For a second, neither of them moved.

The tension wasn’t uncomfortable.

It wasn’t even unfamiliar.

It was just... unspoken.

Until Ace closed the gap the rest of the way.

The contact was light.

Intentional.

Her hand slid up along Mai's arm, slow enough to be a choice, not a reflex. She could feel the controlled energy under the surface, the precise restraint Mai carried even now — especially now.

"You sure this is about 'imbalance'?" Ace murmured.

Mai's eyes didn't leave hers.

"No."

At least she was honest.

Shammy stepped closer.

Still not between them.

Never between.

But near enough that the field she carried overlapped fully now, amplifying everything just slightly — the warmth, the tension, the quiet pull that had nothing to do with the mission anymore.

"Should I be... adjusting anything?" she asked, voice soft but threaded with that same underlying hum.

Mai shook her head once, almost imperceptibly. "Not yet."

Shammy's lips curved faintly. "Alright."

But the air stayed exactly where it was — balanced right on the edge of something.

Ace's thumb brushed against the inside of Mai's wrist, testing, mapping.

"Still calling this a protocol?" she asked.

"Yes."

A pause.

"...for now."

That did it.

Ace smiled — small, sharp, unmistakably real.

She shifted her weight forward just enough that the distance between them disappeared completely, her voice dropping a fraction.

"Then maybe your documentation needs an update."

Mai's breath caught.

Just once.

Controlled immediately after.

But not before Ace noticed.

Shammy exhaled slowly, the room following her lead, the pressure settling into something deeper, steadier.

“Yeah,” she murmured, almost to herself.

“I think it does.”

No alarms.

No urgency.

No need to rush.

Just three points in a system that had stopped pretending this was only about recovery.

And started acknowledging what came after it.

END LOG — DECOMPRESSION PROTOCOL #002—

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