

Decompression Protocol #003 — “Equilibrium Break”

Type: Core Intensity: High (Controlled Release) Focus: Triad Canon Impact: Echo

No one stepped back.

That was the first decision.

Not spoken. Not agreed on.

Just... not undone.

Ace felt the shift before it fully happened.

That precise, fragile point where tension stops building and starts demanding resolution. It wasn't the same as combat. There was no opponent, no trajectory to follow.

Just... proximity.

Choice.

Mai's hand was still at her waist. Still controlled.

But not neutral anymore.

“You're still calculating,” Ace murmured.

It wasn't an accusation.

More like... recognition.

Mai didn't deny it.

“I always am.”

“Yeah.” Ace's voice dipped, quieter now. “But that's not what this is.”

A pause.

For once — just once — Mai didn't respond immediately.

Shammy felt it.

Of course she did.

The air tightened for half a heartbeat — not constricting, not sharp — just enough to mark the threshold. The moment where the system either stabilized... or tipped into something else entirely.

Her fingers flexed slightly at her sides, not intervening.

Observing.

Waiting.

Mai exhaled.

Not long.

Not dramatic.

Just enough to let something go.

“Then what is it?” she asked.

This time, it was a question.

Ace didn't answer with words.

She moved.

The shift was small.

A change in angle, a fraction of forward pressure — but it carried intent with it. Not the blunt force she used in a fight, not the reflexive closeness from before.

Deliberate.

Chosen.

Her hand closed slightly at Mai's arm, not to hold, not to pull — just to anchor the contact in place.

“Not everything needs to be solved,” Ace said quietly.

Mai's eyes flickered — not uncertainty, but recalibration.

“That's... inefficient.”

Ace almost laughed.

“Yeah,” she said. “That's kind of the point.”

That was it.

That was the break.

Mai's hand shifted.

Not away.

Never away.

But different — the controlled placement softening into something less structured, less... designed. Her fingers tightened just slightly at Ace's side, enough to register as a choice, not a function.

Her gaze didn't leave Ace's.

“Then we're deviating,” she said.

“Finally.”

Shammy stepped in.

Not carefully.

Not cautiously.

Just... there.

The moment the shift locked in, she let her field expand — not overwhelming, not forcing — but amplifying everything already present. The air warmed, pressure smoothing into something steady, something that held the space instead of just stabilizing it.

“Oh, that’s better,” she murmured.

Ace turned her head slightly, just enough to catch Shammy’s presence fully now.

“Yeah?” she asked.

Shammy’s smile was soft.

“Much.”

And that was the last moment anything needed explaining.

The system resolved.

Not into stillness.

Into motion.

Mai moved first this time.

Not as control.

Not as correction.

Just... response.

The distance that had already disappeared was replaced by something else entirely — a shift from proximity into contact that no longer pretended to be incidental. Her hand slid, not searching, not uncertain — just following the line that had already been drawn between them.

Ace met it without hesitation.

Of course she did.

There was no edge left to hold onto.

No reason to.

Shammy didn’t stay outside the moment.

She never had.

The air adjusted around all three of them, her presence threading through the space without breaking

it, without dividing it — just expanding it. Every movement carried a faint echo through her field, every shift mirrored and softened just enough to keep it from collapsing back into tension.

Not separate.

Never separate.

Time lost definition.

Not completely.

Just enough.

There was no clean line between grounding and something more.

No phase marker.

No point where a protocol ended and something else began.

Just three vectors that had stopped resisting alignment.

At some point — not measured — Mai's breath unsteadied.

Only for a second.

Only enough to matter.

Ace noticed.

Of course she did.

A quiet, almost amused sound slipped out of her — not mockery, not victory.

Recognition.

"Still inefficient?" she murmured.

Mai didn't answer immediately.

For once.

"...yes," she said finally.

A beat.

"...but acceptable."

Shammy laughed softly — not loud, not sharp — just a warm ripple through the air itself.

"High praise," she said.

No one disagreed.

The pressure that had built since the mission — sharp, contained, dangerous in its own way — finally gave way. Not all at once. Not explosively.

Just... released.

Not gone.

Never gone.

But no longer holding them.

And when the room settled again — slower this time, deeper — there was no need to re-establish distance.

No need to define what had just happened.

The protocol hadn't ended.

It had simply...

Resolved.

END LOG — DECOMPRESSION PROTOCOL #003—

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