



Chapter 42: The First Crack

Thirty minutes is a long time when you can't trust silence.

Ace sat with the foil blanket bunched in her lap like a shield she didn't believe in. The layered patches and interference band made her sternum feel...foggy. Not free. Just harder to read, even from the inside.

Mai stayed glued to her wrist.

Bright leaned on the wall with his arms folded, eyes half-lidded but alert in that infuriating Bright way—like his body was exhausted but his sarcasm had union-mandated overtime.

For a while, nothing happened.

No tug sharp enough to matter. No hook that made her ribs want to sing. Violet stayed back, behind glass, a dark silhouette with a patient smile.

Ace almost started to believe the room was doing what it was built to do.

Then the building made a sound.

Not a speaker.

Not a voice.

A pipe groaning somewhere in the wall, a low metallic shudder like a cooling system cycling.

And with that shudder, Ace's sternum tightened.

Not violently.

Precisely.

Like something had found a clean seam—not through air, not through speakers, not through water—through infrastructure.

Mai felt it instantly because Ace's hand went cold in hers.

"No handshake," Mai said.

Ace's breath went ragged on purpose. "No handshake."

The tug didn't ease.

It hovered—testing—like a fingertip running along a scar.

Bright's eyes snapped up, scanning the ceiling corners and the high vent grille. "That was a coupling spike."

Mai's jaw clenched. "From what?"

Bright's voice went low. "From a harmonic channel. The building's plumbing just gave it a clean rung to step on."

Ace swallowed hard. "It's not the ocean."

Bright's mouth twisted. "No. It's the medium principle. Anything that can carry structure."

Mai's fingers tightened on Ace's wrist until it hurt. Pain was human. Pain was anchor. Pain was real.

Ace hissed a breath, grateful and angry at the same time. "Okay—okay."

The tug wavered, still present.

Then Violet spoke—quiet, delighted.

See? she whispered. Boxes always have gaps.

Ace clenched her jaw and didn't answer.

Mai leaned closer, voice like a blade wrapped in velvet. "Violet, you don't get to comment."

Violet didn't laugh, but the amusement was there anyway, like the shadow of a grin.

Then the corridor outside the room changed.

Footsteps.

Two sets. Heavy, deliberate, not the soft “facility staff” pace.

Bright’s shoulders stiffened.

Mai’s eyes narrowed.

Ace’s sternum tugged again—fainter now, but still testing—like the internal channel was excited by the idea of company.

A knock hit the door.

Not the polite tap-tap from earlier.

A hard, single thunk.

A voice came through the thick metal—muffled, but clear enough.

“Open. Medical extraction.”

Mai didn’t move.

Bright didn’t move.

Ace’s stomach dropped.

Mai spoke loudly, steady. “No.”

A pause.

Then the voice again, sharper. “Authorized order. Open.”

Mai’s smile was pure teeth. “No.”

Bright glanced at the red button on the wall.

Mai didn’t even look at it. She pressed it.

The button didn’t beep. It didn’t speak.

It simply clicked—mechanical, physical—and somewhere outside, a light would flare and a wired buzzer would begin complaining in the corridor.

The voice on the other side of the door went still for half a second, like it hadn’t expected resistance to be...this boring.

Then a second voice joined—different tone, colder.

“Agent Mai. Stand down. You are interfering with a medical directive.”

Mai’s eyes went dead. “Try again.”

Bright muttered, "That's the internal override attempt."

Ace's sternum tugged—tight—like the system outside wanted in and something inside her approved of the tension.

Mai's grip bruised. "Ace. Eyes."

Ace forced her gaze to Mai's.

Mai's voice dropped. "Stay with me."

Ace breathed wrong. "I'm here."

The door handle rattled once.

Testing.

Not yet forcing.

Bright's jaw clenched. "If they breach the door, we have a problem."

Mai's eyes stayed hard. "They won't."

The corridor outside erupted with faster footsteps—more people, moving with purpose.

Then a new voice cut in, calm and lethal, from just outside the door.

"Step away."

Clipboard.

The door didn't open, but you could feel the room exhale anyway.

The first voice snapped, "We have a medical order."

Clipboard's reply was flat. "You have a paper. I have the authority to shred it."

A beat.

Then the colder voice tried again, "Compartment Integrity does not supersede—"

Clipboard interrupted without raising volume. "It does when I say the word 'compromised.'"

Silence.

Then: "This is excessive."

Clipboard's tone didn't change. "This is survival."

There was a sound of something being held up close to the door—an ID scan perhaps—then a second, softer click.

The handle stopped rattling.

A pause—like someone outside decided to retreat rather than escalate into a scene they couldn't

control.

Footsteps backed away.

But not all of them.

Clipboard's voice came again, nearer to the door, directed inward.

"Agent Mai," she said. "Status."

Mai didn't relax yet. "Coupling spike through plumbing. Hook attempt. Internal override at door."

Clipboard's answer was immediate. "Understood."

The deadbolt turned.

The door opened a fraction—just enough to show Clipboard's face in the gap. Calm, eyes sharp, irritation contained and weaponized.

She looked at Ace first.

Not at Mai.

At Ace.

"Hook attempt still active?" Clipboard asked.

Ace swallowed. "It's...faint now. But it happened when the pipes cycled."

Clipboard nodded once, like she'd suspected that exact thing. "Good. That confirms a building-path vulnerability."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Good?"

Clipboard's gaze flicked to Mai. "Good because we can fix it."

Bright muttered, "Someone tried to 'extract' her."

Clipboard's mouth tightened. "Yes. Someone tried."

Ace's chest tightened again—faint tug—like the internal channel disliked the word someone.

Violet whispered behind the lock, pleased.

They're still fighting over you.

Ace forced her breath wrong and didn't answer.

Clipboard opened the door fully and stepped in. Two silent personnel remained outside like shadows with muscles.

Clipboard didn't sit. She didn't waste space. She spoke fast, clean.

"Attempted override is logged," she said. "The individuals outside will be detained for identity confirmation and chain-of-command trace."

Mai's eyes flashed. "Detained. Not 'questioned.'"

Clipboard nodded once. "Detained."

Bright's jaw clenched. "So it's inside."

Clipboard met his gaze. "Yes."

Mai's voice was low and brutal. "Who."

Clipboard's answer was honest—and worse because of it.

"Not yet," she said. "But I have something."

She reached into her case and pulled out a thin sheaf of printed sheets—actual paper. Logs.

"Sedation authorization on the platform," Clipboard said. "It exists. It was signed. It was routed through a compartment that should not have had access."

Mai's eyes went razor-thin. "So the handler wasn't rogue. She had cover."

Clipboard nodded once. "Yes."

Bright took a step forward. "Name."

Clipboard shook her head slightly. "The name on the authorization is a proxy. But the routing path is not. And it points to a cluster of accounts that have touched speaker relays."

Mai's jaw clenched so hard a muscle jumped. "Speaker relays again."

Clipboard's eyes went cold. "Yes."

Ace swallowed. "So they'll try again."

Clipboard looked at her, calm and certain. "They will try until it stops being convenient."

Mai's voice was a growl. "Then we make it inconvenient."

Clipboard nodded once. "Exactly."

She turned slightly and spoke to the corridor without leaving the room.

"Lock this section down," she said. "Plumbing cycle schedule—bring engineering. I want every resonance pathway mapped. Now."

A faint acknowledgment from outside. No "yes ma'am." Just action.

Clipboard looked back at Ace.

"Ace," she said, "you did something right. You reported the spike. You didn't chase it. You didn't answer it."

Ace's throat tightened. "I...didn't want to."

Clipboard nodded once. "Good."

Mai squeezed Ace's wrist once, gentler this time. "Anchor check."

Ace breathed wrong, then answered. "Here."

Mai nodded, satisfied.

Clipboard closed her case and finally—just for a second—let her irritation show teeth.

"They tried to reassert control," she said softly. "Which means we hit something important."

Bright's mouth twisted. "And it means they're scared."

Clipboard didn't deny it. "Yes."

A silence settled in the room again—but it was a different kind of silence now.

Not "quiet."

Not "safe."

A silence with posture.

A silence that had just learned it was being fought over.

Ace felt the sternum tug fade back into muffled fog, held down by layered dampeners, by interference, by Mai's grip, by Bright's presence, by a building that was being re-engineered in real time because of her.

Violet stayed quiet.

Not gone.

Just listening.

Boxes always have gaps, she'd said.

Ace stared at the door where the override voices had been, then looked at Mai.

Mai looked back like she was daring the universe to try again.

Ace breathed wrong—ugly, human—and felt something settle in her chest that wasn't the tag, wasn't Violet, wasn't the medium.

Resolve.

Not dramatic.

Not heroic.

Just stubborn.

"Okay," Ace whispered.

Mai leaned closer. "Okay what."

Ace’s eyes stayed steady. “Okay. If they want to fight over me, they’re going to learn I’m not a clean signal.”

Mai’s mouth curved slightly, fierce and proud. “Good.”

Bright let out a short, exhausted laugh. “Welcome to the Foundation, kid.”

Clipboard’s eyes didn’t soften, but the approval was there anyway—small, precise.

“Good,” she said again. “Now we tighten the box.”

And outside, in the corridor, the facility lights remained steady, the locks remained physical, and the people with paper teeth began biting down on the first real thread—hard enough that somewhere, some confident handler would finally realize:

Tonight didn’t end with calibration.

It ended with consequences.

—

© 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:
<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:
<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace1:chapter42>

Last update: **17/03/2026 17:39**

