



Chapter 44: The Thing About Being Human

Medical came.

Real medical.

Not “platform sedation,” not “calibration convenience.” A tired-looking doctor with kind eyes and hard boundaries. A nurse who didn’t smile too much. Pain relief administered carefully, with consent stated clearly and logged twice.

Mai tolerated it because she had to.

Ace tolerated it because Mai’s glare made it non-optional.

Bright tolerated it because he knew what bad medical looked like and this wasn’t it.

When the doctor left, Mai was still awake.

Of course she was.

Ace lay on the cot, blanket pulled up, the interference band warm against her skin, patches cooling the edges of the tug. The hook attempts came less frequently now—still there, still testing—but weaker. Like the coupling didn't like the new noise environment.

Mai sat on the chair beside her, elbow on knee, hand still holding Ace's wrist like she was holding a pulse in place.

Bright had finally slumped into the other chair, head tipped back, eyes closed. He wasn't asleep. He was pretending.

Ace stared at the ceiling and whispered, "Do you ever get tired."

Mai didn't look away from Ace. "Yes."

Ace blinked. "You don't act like it."

Mai's mouth twitched. "That's because I have a job."

Ace's throat tightened. "Am I the job."

Mai's gaze sharpened—instant, offended. "You are not a task."

Ace swallowed. "Then why does it feel like everyone is...measuring me."

Mai's grip tightened, not painful this time—just firm. "Because they are afraid of what you represent. And because people who are afraid love charts."

Ace exhaled, a small bitter laugh. "I hate charts."

Mai's eyes softened by a millimeter. "Good. That's a normal human response."

Ace's sternum tugged faintly again—almost as if the coupling disliked being called "normal."

Mai's voice snapped low. "No handshake."

Ace breathed wrong. "No handshake."

The tug eased.

Mai stared at Ace for a long moment, then said something quieter, more dangerous because it was true.

"You did something tonight that most people can't do," Mai said.

Ace frowned. "What."

Mai's eyes held hers. "You refused relief."

Ace swallowed. "I refused being used."

Mai nodded. "Same thing."

Ace's throat tightened. "It would've been easier to stop fighting."

Mai's voice was flat. "Yes."

Ace stared at her. "And you didn't let me."

Mai's eyes sharpened. "No."

Ace whispered, "Thank you."

Mai's face didn't change much, but the warmth in her gaze did. "Don't thank me for doing the obvious."

Ace's lips twitched. "It didn't feel obvious."

Mai leaned closer, voice low, fierce. "It is obvious. You are you. Not a port. Not a vessel. Not a compatibility number. Not a medium interface."

Ace's breath caught slightly.

Mai continued, almost like she was speaking to the lock itself. "If something wants to talk to you, it can talk on your terms. Not through speakers. Not through drugs. Not through ocean rhythms."

Ace whispered, "And if it won't."

Mai's eyes went cold again. "Then it doesn't get you."

Bright, from the other chair, muttered without opening his eyes, "This is the healthiest threat I've ever heard."

Mai glanced at him. "Go to sleep, Bright."

Bright: "I am."

Mai: "You're lying."

Bright: "I am resting my sarcasm."

Ace let out a small laugh that surprised her.

The sternum tug tested—then faltered. Like humor created a texture the coupling couldn't grip.

Mai saw it and smirked slightly. "See. Human."

Ace nodded, tears threatening for no rational reason. "Human."

Mai squeezed her wrist gently. "Anchor check."

Ace breathed wrong on purpose, then answered, steady. "Here."

Mai nodded. "Good."

And for the first time since the platform, the word here felt like a location she owned.

—

© 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:chapter44>

Last update: **17/03/2026 17:42**

