



Chapter 30 — The Draft Becomes a Mission

The protocol draft wasn't elegant.

It was the kind of document you write when you've stopped pretending the universe is polite.

Someone—Lehto again—had stapled extra sheets to it: hand-drawn maps, a list of analog gear, a route that avoided the worst automation corridors. At the top, in thick pen, a single sentence:

WE DO NOT "CHECK."

Mai read the whole stack once, then once more, eyes moving faster the second time. She marked three lines with her pen and crossed out anything that sounded like a mantra.

Ace leaned over the table without hovering too long. "Tell me the part where we fix it."

Lehto answered before Mai could. "We can't 'fix' it from here. We can only force it back into a place where it costs it something to exist."

Halverson stepped into the briefing room like he'd never left the story. Same coat. Same binder aura. Same "I'm not here to be liked."

Ace's mouth quirked. "You again."

Halverson glanced at her. "Lucky you."

Mai didn't look surprised. She just asked the only question that mattered. "Where."

Halverson tapped the map with two fingers. "Municipal Six. Same access spine as the first incident. Different timing. Different team. Minimal electronics. We go down, we provoke a clean attempt, we collapse it while it's exposed."

Ace stared at the map. "So we're doing controlled contact."

Lehto's tone was practical, almost apologetic. "Yes."

Ace exhaled. "Wonderful."

Mai's voice stayed flat. "Team."

Halverson nodded toward the door. "Two agents, one tech. You two. Me as handler. Bright on HARD LINE only."

Ace squinted. "You're the handler now."

Halverson didn't blink. "I'm the person who says 'no' when you want to do something heroic and stupid."

Ace smiled faintly. "So, you're Mai in a coat."

Mai didn't look up. "Don't flirt with him."

Ace lifted both hands. "I'm insulting him."

Halverson spoke over them, tone unchanged. "We're not doing a long descent. We're not exploring. We're going to a single node. If it tries to make you 'choose,' you make the choice ugly and slow."

Mai nodded once. "And if it tries the interior softening."

Halverson's gaze sharpened. "Anchor procedure. Immediate. No pride."

Ace's jaw tightened. "Yeah."

Mai closed the file. "When."

Lehto checked his watch. "Thirty minutes."

Ace made a small sound that was halfway between a laugh and a sigh. "Of course."

Halverson slid one more page across the table—handwritten, not printed.

At the top:

FAILSAFE

Mai read it. Her expression tightened.

Ace watched her face. "What."

Mai's voice stayed controlled. "If we can't collapse it, we flood the access and seal. Permanently. Human access gone."

Ace's stomach dropped. "You mean drown the tunnel."

Lehto's eyes didn't soften. "We mean deny it a stage."

Halverson added, "And deny it you."

Ace stared at the paper, then looked away. "Okay."

Mai's pen moved once. She wrote: We do not negotiate with "inside."

Then she stood.

No speeches.

No comfort.

Just motion.

They were going back down.

Not because the world asked.

Because they were choosing to punch the seam in the throat while it was still learning how to breathe.

—

© 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:ace2:chapter30>

Last update: **19/03/2026 16:02**

