

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 11 - The Foundation's Shadow

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.11 **Wordcount:** ~591 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright, Rook, Kalyn, Jel, The Curator **Location:** The Echo's Wake **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 11 — The Foundation's Shadow

The call came on a civil channel with civil words and the old tone of men who put fences on maps.

Transceiver: narrowband. Source: Foundation relay. Authentication: good enough to be polite.

"Echo's Wake," the voice said. Not a Curator. A captain. "You are requested and required to report to Holding Array K-9 for debrief and reclamation."

Mai didn't answer it yet. She let it live in the buffer long enough to decide not to grow teeth. Ace stood shoulder to shoulder with her and watched the dome pretend to be neutral.

"Bright?" Ace asked, without accusing the dead.

Mai scanned the metadata. "Not his handwriting," she said. "But his shadow."

She opened the channel and kept it honest. "Array K-9, your 'required' is declined," she said. "You don't own this ship. You don't own these people."

Static has many manners. This static tried reasonable first. "Echo's Wake, our records show Foundation assets onboard. Proprietary methodologies deployed. Liability outstanding."

Mai flicked a file into the pipe—the annex ledger, Eiden Marsh's resignation, the method's obituary stamped with his human name.

"Your record is out of date," she said. "Curator network: resigned. Method: compromised. Consent: not assumed. Liability: returned to sender."

A different voice came in—older, softer, closer to a memory that didn't hurt anymore. "Mai," it said. "Ace." Not a ghost. A man who had set things in motion and then lost any right to aim them. He didn't say his name. He didn't have to.

"Doctor," Ace said, and the title was both kindness and distance.

"I won't pretend we didn't build cages and call them rooms," he said. "Or that I didn't ask you to be furniture in them. I will say: there are storms. We can help. We can pay down what we owe with structure."

Mai kept her voice the way she keeps a tool: sharp because it must be. "We prefer kitchens to cages."

A breath. "You're right," he said quietly. "It took me too long to be a person about it."

The captain came back in, official again, as if shame could be delegated and handled by procedure. “Echo’s Wake, if you decline, Array K-9 will record you as noncompliant—”

“Record away,” Mai said. “Spell our names right.”

Silence. Not victory: a choice the other end had to make without a ritual to hide inside.

“Offer,” the doctor said at last—no coat, just a man, tired, trying to be decent. “No debrief. No reclamation. A line you can use if the weather turns. No strings that pretend they aren’t.”

Mai looked at Ace. Ace looked at Mai. Rook became a wall that liked the people in it. Kalyn listened to edges sharpening somewhere very far away. Jel nudged the galley clock a millimeter and felt it refuse to move; he smiled, reassured.

“We’ll take a frequency,” Ace said. “Not a leash.”

“Done,” he said. He read numbers in a way that made them sound like something other than control. “If you never call, you’ll still be right.”

The captain didn’t speak again. The channel closed the way officious doors do when someone has told them they’re not the only exit.

Mai exhaled, a fraction.

“Case file. Note fourteen: Foundation contact. Claim of ownership declined. Record amended with Curator resignation. Outcome: frequency accepted, debt retired. We are not property.”

Ace touched the charm—a loop of ugly wire that had stopped being a token and started being a habit of choosing. “We weren’t before,” she said. “Now the file admits it.” —

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