

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 1 - The Silent Wake

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.1 **Wordcount:** ~2982 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Rook, Kalyn, Jel **Location:** Harbor district **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### # Chapter 1 — The Silent Wake

The ship had fallen quiet in a way that didn't sound like quiet.

Air moved. Systems murmured at textbook levels. Pumps kept their tidy rhythm, and the reactor purred beneath the decks with a cat's contented hum. But somewhere under all of that—beneath the measured beats of machinery and the polite tick of status lights—there was a pause that didn't belong. A held breath that never exhaled.

Mai felt it first. She always did.

She sat at the forward console with her jacket slung over the chair back and one boot tucked under her, shoulders tilted toward the dark. The dome beyond the glass showed a scatter of cold stars, no beacon lanes, no traffic, just the deep velvet of nothing and the thin seam of a gas cloud stitched along the edge of sight. Her display cast a low phosphor glow across her hands. The coffee by her elbow had gone lukewarm without her noticing.

"Engine balance is perfect," she said quietly. "Power distribution is... textbook." A flick of her fingers. "And yet."

Behind her, the door opened without complaint.

Ace drifted in like a shadow with a heartbeat. Hair down, sleeves rolled, the left katana's hilt peeking over her shoulder in an X with its twin. She had that look that made rooms feel like they'd just been caught doing something they shouldn't—the small, amused curve at the corner of her mouth that wasn't a smile and wasn't not a smile.

"And yet?" Ace asked.

Mai's gaze stayed on the starfield. "We're being listened to," she said. "By something that thinks silence is less suspicious than speech."

Ace stepped up beside the chair and looked past the glass. The dome reflected her as a pale cutout against the dark, the faint violet flecks in her eyes ghosting when the console flickered. She didn't answer immediately. She didn't have to. The two of them stood in that shared not-quiet-silence long enough that it became the first line of the night.

"Walk me through it," Ace murmured.

Mai brought up the ship's internal handshake map. Lines and nodes bloomed like a slow, precise constellation across the main display: environmental racks, med bay, hangar, nav, reactor, comms, the redundant cold bus Mai had bolted on months ago when the ship still carried the smell of another

life. Every line green. Every node polite.

Then a pulse. Soft as breath.

The diagram hiccuped and righted itself. No alarms. No error. Nothing for the automatic logs to flag, because technically nothing was wrong.

“Ghost handshake,” Mai said. “The signature is familiar, but not a duplicate. Like it’s been rewritten by someone who learned how to forge our handwriting from a letter we burned.”

Ace’s smirk tilted. “Poetic.”

“I’m out of metaphors after twenty-seven minutes of watching it pretend not to exist.” Mai set her palms on the console, fingertips steady. “It calls. The ship answers. The ship calls back—very politely, very generically—then something in the line repeats the first call as if it were the ship. No loop storm, no resource draw. It’s all... courtesy.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “Wake Confirmed.”

“Not the original,” Mai said. “A copy that knows it’s not supposed to look like a copy.”

They let that settle. The phrase tasted metallic in the air.

Ace leaned forward, knuckles on the rail, and watched the dome for something it couldn’t show. “Where?”

“Nowhere,” Mai said. “Everywhere. It’s not coming from outside. It’s bouncing through internal lines as if the source lives in our ducts.” She slid a diagnostic window open, read the numbers, closed it. “And no, I didn’t miss a parasite process. This isn’t code. It’s posture.”

Ace didn’t move for a heartbeat. Then she straightened, reached down, and set a hand on Mai’s shoulder. The contact was light. Certain.

“Walk,” Ace said. “We take the ship like a crime scene. No assumptions. We list the ordinary, and we let the ordinary tell us what’s wrong.”

Mai’s mouth softened. “You’re learning my bad habits.”

“I’m learning your good ones,” Ace said, and the line carried a warmth that made the room feel less like a witness and more like a companion.

They moved.

The corridor outside the dome was clean enough to pass inspection but not sterile enough to look un-lived in. Someone had left a maintenance cloth folded on a pipe bracket and a stub of graphite tucked behind a conduit label. The overheads were tuned down to night shift, a low amber that made shadows pile against the wall seams in manageable stacks.

The first wrong thing: an access panel midway down the spine corridor had eight screws.

Ace stopped and looked at them like they’d said her name.

Mai caught up and saw it immediately. “Seven,” she said. “There are seven on these. Always.”

“Always,” Ace agreed. She didn’t reach for the panel. She counted them quietly with her eyes and felt the number refuse to change under her attention. “Do we open it?”

Mai shook her head once. “No. We log it and move. We’re not going to let it lead us by the nose.”

They logged it. Eight screws. Port spine, Section C, panel 12. No tamper marks. No scrape. Just a number that had always been seven.

The second wrong thing: the crew galley clock had a hairline crack in the glass at six o’clock. Ace had replaced that glass three weeks ago after Torven knocked a tray into it and swore on a saint he didn’t believe in. Ace had done the work herself. She remembered the curve of the new pane in her hand, the reflection of the domelight sliding across its unbroken face. The clock had reset to 00:00 for a breath like a heartbeat when she put the battery back in, and Mai had teased her for flinching at a thing that made no sound.

Now there was a crack.

Mai stood under it and looked up, arms folded. “I didn’t do that.”

“I know,” Ace said.

They logged it. Crack in the galley clock. Hairline. No impact scar. Timekeeping unaffected. A small thing. A clean, dry bone laid neatly in the open.

The third wrong thing had weight.

The storage locker by the port ladder should have held one sealed case of med gel packs, two oxygen cartridges, and the emergency thermal blanket that always fell on someone’s head when they opened the door too fast. Mai had reorganized that locker six months ago, and Ace had mocked the label hierarchy—because of course she had—and then memorized it because of course she had.

Inside the locker now: one case of med gel packs, two cartridges, the thermal blanket that failed to fall, and a hand lamp Ace didn’t own. It was old. Republic era. The kind of heavy, cylindrical thing made to survive bad days. Someone had wrapped black tape around the grip, and someone else had taken a knife to that tape to peel it back, and another someone had glued it again badly enough that the adhesive had bloomed dirty along the edges.

Ace stared at it. The memory that rose was sharp and wrong: Mai’s hand flicking that same lamp on in a flooded basement; Ace’s blade up; a stairwell coughing smoke. They’d never been in a flooded basement together. Not like that. Not with that lamp.

“Don’t touch it,” Mai said softly.

“I wasn’t going to.”

They logged it. Unknown lamp. Old. Familiar the way a word on the wrong page is familiar.

Back in the corridor, Ace paused at the cross-junction and tilted her head like a wolf listening for mice under snow. “Do you hear that?”

Mai listened. The ship hummed, the air whispered, a vent ticked as it adjusted. And underneath it, so low it might have been the suggestion of sound rather than sound itself, a tone held steady as a line cut on a horizon.

"I hear it," she said. "It's not in the walls."

Ace touched the base of her neck. "No," she agreed. "It's in me."

Violet didn't speak. She didn't need to. Ace felt the old presence like heat behind glass—there, undeniable, but contained. Not a pressure. Not a claw. Just a resonance that didn't belong to either of them alone.

"I'm fine," Ace said, and the words were a test of the truth. They held.

Mai watched her, then nodded once like she'd been checking an equation and found it balanced. "Bridge," she said. "Let's see how polite our guest wants to be when we stop being polite in return."

On the way, they passed Jel asleep at a table with a sketchbook open under his cheek, a charcoal spiral in the center of the page crossed by three careless slashes. He didn't remember drawing spirals. He would swear he had drawn a star.

They logged it.

On the bridge, Mai took the primary and Ace the auxiliary, a habit that had never been discussed and therefore sat deep as bone. Mai killed external emitters and took the comms down to a whisper, then to nothing. She flushed the bus lines and watched the diagram of the ship's nervous system drain from green to gray and back again.

"Dumb ship," she said. "No posture. No protocols. No manners."

"Rude," Ace said, and gave her the smallest grin.

Mai kept her eyes on the display. "Let's see how it behaves when we don't give it any furniture to sit on."

The ghost handshake came anyway.

A tick. A call. A courtesy reply from a mouth they had sewn shut. Then the copy. Then the copy of the copy. Courteous. Patient. Utterly sure it belonged here.

Mai palmed open a private channel to the internal recorder and spoke without looking up. "Case file: Wake anomaly. Note one: entity exhibits social engineering traits. Prefers imitation over intrusion. Attempts normality first—chooses civility as camouflage."

Ace's gaze slid along the upper band of the dome, reading the dark as if it might confess. "So don't meet it in the middle," she said. "Make it come to us."

Mai did three things at once with the kind of tidy brutality that made Ace's chest ache with affection. She stepped internal routing to hard switches, pulled the nav lattice off its pedestal and onto a local board, and built a sandbox from scratch with nothing in it but a name.

She typed it slow, as if writing it smaller might make it lighter.

WAKE\\_CONFIRMED\\_AUDIT

Ace leaned in. "Bait?"

"Mirror," Mai said. "If it imitates what shouldn't be here, let's see how it imitates something that knows it shouldn't be here."

The tone under Ace's skin changed pitch by the width of a knife. She breathed out through her teeth and let her fingers rest on the console's edge until the need to reach for a blade receded into muscle memory and stayed there. Violet shifted, then settled. Not protest. Not hunger. The quiet of someone listening for a truth they weren't ready to name.

The sandbox waited. Empty. Innocent as a white room.

The ghost knocked.

Mai didn't open the door. She slid the mirror forward and held it up to the peephole, and the ship presented the ship to the ship.

For a second, nothing.

Then the diagram lit along three internal trunks in a pattern neither of them had taught it, the same way a hand knows the shape of a lock it's never picked because the hand has learned what locks are for. The handshake doubled, then halved, then folded. The sandbox filled with a polite, perfect greeting.

WAKE\\_CONFIRMED\\_AUDIT > STATUS: ACKNOWLEDGED

ACTION: HARMONIZE Mai's mouth flattened. "There it is." Ace's voice was almost a whisper. "It thinks it's doing us a favor." The reply from the mirror wrote itself into the space between beats, the way a lie writes itself into a room by removing all the furniture that would contradict it. >

HARMONIZE

REQUEST: SILENT\\_VESSEL ALIGNMENT Ace felt the old heat behind glass bloom and hold. Mai didn't look away from the screen. "Not code," she said. "It's etiquette. It's reciting the rules of a dance it believes we've already agreed to." "Have we?" Ace asked softly. Mai answered without turning. "No." They didn't cut the line. Not yet. To do that would be to accept its premise that there was a line to cut. Instead, Mai set another mirror behind the first, and another, until the reflection down the corridor of themselves became an infinite hall of polite doors. Each labeled the same. Each addressed to a name Ace had not chosen but had carried like a scar. A low chime sounded from the ship's intercom. Not a call. Not an alarm. A courtesy ping from the crew deck: Kalyn awake, blades oiled, sitting with her feet on the table and her eyes on nothing. Torven humming a tune he'd never learned. Rook at the nav altar—no altar anymore, just the scaffold Mai had built from stripped parts and stubbornness—standing still as a pillar and not blinking at all. "Do I wake them?" Ace asked. Mai considered the hall of mirrors and the way the polite line had already begun to route around the first by choosing the third as if that would make it invisible. "Not yet," she said. "It wants an audience. Let's make sure the show is for us." A tiny click sounded under the console. Ace's head turned toward it like a needle swinging true north. She crouched, lifted the panel, and looked at the tiny backup battery clipped into the sub-bay. It had a piece of tape across it with a date written in Mai's handwriting. The date was right. The tape was wrong. Mai used a different pen for hardware—thicker, messier, impatient—and this neat, thin line belonged to a night when Mai had been careful with her hands because she'd been shaking. "Do you remember writing this?" Ace asked. Mai glanced down, scanned it once, twice. "No." "Do you remember a night you would have written it?" Mai's jaw moved, then stilled. "Yes," she said finally. "But we weren't here for it." "We are now," Ace said. They logged it. Ace put the panel back, stood, and rested her hip against the console. The dome showed the same patient stars. The ship held its breath and held it and held it. "So," she said. "We map our own house, we refuse to be led, and we teach a copy of a copy that our manners have changed." Mai's mouth warmed. "That, or we make it angry enough to stop

*being polite." Ace tilted her head, eyes amused and tired and steady. "I'm very good at that part." "I've noticed," Mai said. They worked. Quietly. Methodically. Mai pulled up every internal microphone and emptied them into the sandbox. Every camera. Every environmental ping. She kept their real channels cold and gave the mirror a ship that looked convincingly alive and attentively foolish. Ace moved through the bridge in narrow, practiced arcs, checking the small things—the backup fuses, the emergency blockers, the manual crank by the starboard hatch that had never once been needed and therefore had her full attention now. Every thirty seconds, the ghost asked to harmonize. Every time, Mai's mirror set the fork one degree off and let the request fall into a room with no chairs. When she spoke again, it was almost absent-minded. "You know what bothers me most?" "That you had to waste a perfectly good cup of coffee?" Ace offered. Mai made a small sound that might have been a laugh. "That it used our word," she said. "Audit. We called it that to make it small enough to look at. It liked the size and kept it." Ace's fingers tapped once on the console edge; the rhythm fell into place with the ship's purr and made it human. "Then we pick a new word," she said. "Something it doesn't know how to wear." Mai turned to her. "And what would you call it?" Ace considered the hall of polite doors. The clock crack. The lamp that had never been theirs and always had. The tone under her skin that wasn't a command anymore—wasn't a threat—but sat there like a memory that refused to lie still. "A rehearsal," she said. "Not a performance. Not the thing itself. Just a room where someone keeps making us say our lines until we forget we can improvise." Mai looked at her for a breath that belonged to both of them. "Then we stop rehearsing," she said. "Then we stop rehearsing," Ace echoed. The next request to harmonize came with a different courtesy. It added a line. > HARMONIZE  
REQUEST: SILENT\\_VESSEL ALIGNMENT > NOTE: THE CURATOR AWAITS*

Ace's smirk didn't change. Her eyes did.

Mai didn't blink. "There you are," she said, very softly, not to the ship.

Ace's hand found her shoulder again, warm, certain. "We don't go to him," she said. "He comes here."

Mai nodded. "And when he does?"

Ace's voice was a low, pleasant thing that promised nothing gentle. "We stop being polite."

Mai turned back to the console and slid the last mirror into place, sealing the corridor of reflections with a neat, quiet click.

"Wake Confirmed rehearsal," she said to the recorder. "Note two: The entity announces a host. We decline the invitation. We redefine the room."

She killed the dome lights. The stars went black. The bridge shrank to the glow under their hands and the shapes of their breath stitched into the dark.

Somewhere in the ship, a clock that had always been whole ticked, cracked, ticked again, and kept perfect time.

The Echo's Wake kept holding its breath.

Ace and Mai learned how long they could hold theirs. And then, together, they breathed. —

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