

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 2 - The Fractured Signal

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.2 **Wordcount:** ~2675 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Rook, Kalyn, Jel, The Curator **Location:** The Echo's Wake **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 2 — The Fractured Signal

They left the dome dark and let the ship keep its secrets for five more minutes, the way you let a door pretend it's locked while you find the right key in your pocket. When the lights came back, they came up as a breath, not a flare—Mai's preference—sliding the bridge out of silhouette and into lines and edges again.

The sandbox held.

The hall of mirrors stayed where Mai had placed it: a corridor of polite doors labeled with the same stolen word—AUDIT—each politely refusing to be a real room. Inside the fake ship, fans spun, sensors blinked, life-support made a quiet rain of numbers. Inside the real ship, everything did the same, except for the part that wasn't really doing anything at all.

The ghost knocked again.

HARMONIZE > REQUEST: SILENT_VESSEL ALIGNMENT

NOTE: THE CURATOR AWAITS "Etiquette engine," Mai said, mostly to herself. Ace tilted a look at her. "Meaning it's not trying to breach. It's trying to teach us which fork to use." Mai's mouth moved in a smile that wasn't fond. "Exactly. It thinks consent is a ceremony you can perform for someone." Ace's gaze cut to the dome, then back to the console. "It would be wrong." Mai's fingers flicked a series of short commands, nowhere near as dramatic as they felt. "It usually is." She split the signal at the door—one branch into the mirror, one into a burner buffer with no returns—and peeled away the header like lifting the envelope off a letter without tearing the paper. The content inside wasn't code in the way code belonged to machines. It was a hummingbird of cues and courtesies, a sequence of practiced gestures dressed up as necessity: greet, acknowledge, invite, align. "Look at this," she murmured. Ace leaned in. The header barded itself with a dozen innocuous tags—latency stamps, error tolerances, handshake tolerances—only one of which drew the eye by refusing to blend. A sigil that wasn't a sigil—three shallow cuts through a spiral, drawn in metadata. Ace's jaw shifted, relaxed. "They never could keep their hands off a brand." Mai closed her hand over the cursor as if she could keep the mark from crawling. "Order," she said. "Confirmed, not guessed." Her voice lost its professional evenness for the first time since they started. "They came into our house." "They left a rehearsal space," Ace said. "And told us where to stand." Mai zoomed the header. Another tag sloughed loose like a scab: OR-Θ: Ceremonial Confirm / Custodian: Curator-of-Index / Consent-Key: (VOICE/yes). "Consent key," Mai repeated. "They're not just asking for alignment. They're pretending you already agreed." Ace's eyes twitched once at the word in brackets. Not the word. The capitalization. A surgeon's habit of precision turned inside out. "What is it?" Mai asked, softer. "Listen," Ace said. Mai fed the key into a filter, separated the waveform from the rest of the etiquette. It was short. A single syllable. Breath, vowel, consonant clipped neat. She played it at low volume. Yes. It was Ace's voice without being Ace's voice—trimmed of context, rubbed smooth of the grit that made it hers. Not the way she said the

word when she was teasing, not the weary yes she used when she stopped arguing and started acting, not the hushed yes that lived in quiet places where Mai's mouth found hers and the world took its hands off them for a while. This yes had no temperature. It was a token, a tile, a checkbox. Mai's stomach made a cold fist. "When?" she asked. "Never," Ace said. "Which means more than once." They let the syllable die. The bridge settled around them like a coat put back on after a bad conversation. "Okay," Mai said. The word ricocheted off her tongue and came back as work. "We flush the key wherever it hides. We burn every copy. We remove the furniture the consent needs to sit on." "Start with the obvious," Ace said. "Start with our holes." They went back to the eight screws. Mai took pictures. Ace measured the head slots and found a microscopic variation in the machining—half a hair finer, the kind of detail you only get from a different batch ordered by a different quartermaster in a different life. She ran a fingertip along the seam and felt no pry. The panel had always fit like a lid you could trust. It would still fit if they opened it. "Not yet," Mai said again. "Not yet," Ace echoed. They marked the clock, too. Mai photographed the crack at six, then stood on a chair and sighted the glass along the dome reflection, hunting warps that shouldn't be there. The crack stayed flat. The glass did what glass should. The wrongness wasn't a fracture; it was a memory that had been dared into existence until the room surrendered and made space for it. "This is insultingly elegant," Mai said, hopping down. "I hate it." Ace drifted a knuckle along Mai's jacket sleeve in passing—hello, I'm here, you're here—and stopped at the storage locker. The old hand lamp waited where they'd logged it, heavy with its small, stolen gravity. "I want to break that," Ace said mildly. "You can," Mai said. "Just not yet." They did the less satisfying thing: bagged it, sealed it, tagged it, and set it into a compartment that Mai had burnished into an honest-to-god quarantine with copper wire, braided line, and a series of stupid charms she'd made out of habit and hunger on nights when the math didn't feel like enough. She didn't apologize for the charms anymore. They worked because she believed in the work. By the time they returned to the bridge, the etiquette engine had found three more doors it liked better than the first three. Mai added three more mirrors. The exchange became elegant, then baroque, then ridiculous—dull courtesies folded into curtsies folded into bows. The signal kept asking for the key. Mai kept offering a blank tablecloth. "Crew status?" Ace asked. Mai pulled the internal and read the quiet rhythms. "Jel is drawing the wrong shape for the right reason. Kalyn is awake because she never sleeps when the air feels like this. Torven is humming. Rook..." She paused. "Rook is standing where he stands when he needs to be a mountain." Ace's mouth curved. "Let him be a mountain. We'll be weather." Mai flagged three internal mic channels that had decided to start contributing to the wrong choir. They weren't emitting the yes. They were harmonizing with its possibility—the way the ear hums when a room begs for a note that hasn't been sung yet. She cut them, rewired them into the sandbox, and gave the mirror more places to please itself. "What do you call a thing that pretends to be polite while it tries to tell you which words are yours?" Mai asked, not really looking for a joke. "A director," Ace said. "The kind who stops actors in the middle of their lines and asks them to say it as if they're someone else." Mai's lips thinned. "Curator, director. Same costume." "Different ego," Ace said. "Same hunger." She paced the bridge once—quiet, precise, the way she moved through a room she wanted to remain. On the second pass her head cocked, and she went to one knee by the auxiliary panel without announcing the decision. This time Mai didn't ask; she just turned, aimed her attention at the space under Ace's hand, and waited. Ace took out the screws—seven of them, the right number here—and lifted the panel. Inside, the emergency breaker sat where it belonged. Next to it, coiled neatly as rope, was a thread of black line tied around a trio of glass beads the size of peppercorns. The beads were clear except for the memory of a candle-flame clouded at each center, frozen there like breath turned visible. Mai crouched beside her. "Ritual hardware," she said, voice flat. "Mnemonic anchor. That thread keeps teaching the room how to behave." Ace's fingers hovered above it, the way they did before a strike that would kill cleanly. She withheld the strike and looked at Mai. "Cut, burn, or break?" she asked. "None," Mai said. "It came in under the etiquette's language. We answer in our own." She opened

the kit she wore like a second spine and took out a coil of thin copper, a stub of solder, and a chalk that wasn't chalk. The charm she made wasn't pretty. She wrapped the beads with copper and soldered it in a way that would make a real engineer cry and a real priest roll his eyes, then drew a small, deliberate square around it with the chalk and set the square inside another square with a gap she left unclosed. "Make a decision," she murmured to the ship. "Make one that isn't theirs." Ace waited. The tone under her skin shifted again, this time not toward heat but toward breath. She felt Violet listening, patient and very still, like a cat on a windowsill watching the light move across a wall. The air pressure ticked. The ship didn't sigh. It exhaled. In the sandbox, the etiquette flinched. It came back fast with an apology written as a question. > HARMONIZE REQUEST: SILENT_VESSEL ALIGNMENT > NOTE: THE CURATOR AWAITS OFFER: CORRECTION (VOICE/yes) Mai's eyes cooled. "He wants to give the yes back to us so we can hand it to him like it was ours." "Take it," Ace said. Mai blinked once. "You want it?" "I want to know what it thinks it stole." Mai reached into the mirror and accepted the offer with a noncommittal nod the signal mistook for gratitude. The syllable arrived stripped of its formal wear, still without temperature, still without a history. Mai held it up between thumb and forefinger like a coin. She weighed it. She turned it over. On the second turn, a hairline engraving blinked at her—so faint the display only caught it when she leaned the file window until the light hit at a stupid angle. It wasn't letters. It was coordinates written in a notation that belonged to people who lived inside blueprints. Deck. Section. Panel. Fastener count. Mai read them aloud. Ace's mouth tilted in something that wasn't a smile and wasn't not. They went back to the eight screws. Mai set a sensor on the seam that would scream if the panel tried to notice it was being noticed. Ace took out a driver and twisted slow enough that the ship's attention wouldn't snag. Two turns into the fourth screw, Mai's console pinged innocently: environmental cycle complete, please ignore. She didn't ignore it. She sent the cycle to the sandbox and left the real air alone. The panel came off without theatrics. Behind it: not a bomb. Not a board. Nothing that could blow a hole in the wall or erase their names and write new ones. Just a coil of the same black thread, three more glass beads, and something else tucked in as if ashamed—thin paper laminated against decades of climate and the bad moods of ships. A hand-drawn diagram. Spiral. Three slashes. The curl of a line labeled with a single word in a hand that had practiced neatness as an act of devotion. AUDIT Mai held it by the corner, as if touching more of it would grant it more power than it had earned. "Someone came on board," she said. "Someone set this, physically." Ace's attention sharpened, went clinical. "When?" "The day we decided to call the signal an audit," Mai said. "We made the room. They furnished it." They bagged the thread and the beads. Mai photographed the diagram, then slipped it into a second bag and sealed it with two strips of tape and a label that said DO NOT BELIEVE in a handwriting that wasn't neat at all. "Everything about this is small," she said. "Everything about this is domestic. Courtesies. Cracks. Beads in a wall. And the voice they want to use to make it legal." Ace nodded once, a soldier's nod to a plan she likes because it insults her opponent. "So we refuse small," she said. "In small ways. In every room. Until there isn't anywhere polite to be." "Quiet refusal protocol," Mai said, trying the name in her mouth. Ace liked it. The way her eyes warmed said so. They worked the ship thread by thread. Not ripping. Not purging. Refusing. Mai closed gaps and left new ones in places that made no sense to anything that wasn't living here. She took microphones out of their habits and told them to stay dumb. She put cameras back on fixed lenses because fixed lenses are too boring to desire. She rewired two annunciators so they would mispronounce a chime in a way the etiquette couldn't parse, but a person could hear and know what it meant: stay. Ace moved door to door and listened to screws. She tapped plastic and told which panels had been removed by hands that didn't belong. She found a tiny smear of adhesive on a hinge someone had glued because they didn't know the hinge liked to creak, and she cleaned it with three slow strokes. The sound that came back when she swung the door open—small, complaining—belonged to the ship the way a scar belongs to a knee. At the end of the second hour, the sandbox stopped receiving apologies. The last message arrived without pretense. > ALIGNMENT REQUIRED

HOST: CURATOR > VENUE: BETWEEN DECKS

CONSENT: ASSUMED "Between decks," Mai said, and tasted the old courier slang for a place that isn't on a map because it's not supposed to be a place. Crawlspace, conduit, the ligament between bones. "He's already here," Ace said. Mai glanced toward the crew channels and read the mountain standing where a man stood. She spoke into the internal on a band that would land in one ear and one ear only. "Rook," she said. "Between decks. Section C. Panel twelve. Do not engage. If you see a man who looks like a librarian who forgot to eat, do not speak to him. If he speaks to you, yawn." "Copy," Rook said, and did not ask why. Mountains rarely do. Ace stood with her hands flat on the console, looking at nothing, because nothing was often honest when everything else wanted to be interesting. "When he shows," she said, "he'll ask us to come to him." "We won't," Mai said. "He'll ask us to bring the yes." "We don't have one," Mai said. "We have a coin with no country. We'll melt it into wire." Ace's smirk was small and bright as a knife edge in a lamplight. "You're very pretty when you're mean." Mai's eyes flicked sideways, equally sharp. "I learned from the best." They didn't call the crew to stations. They didn't arm the ship. They didn't hang banners or set a table. Mai dimmed the lights to a level that made strangers feel unwelcome and family feel at home. Ace set a chair in the middle of the cargo bay and turned it slightly off center, because people who like rituals hate when the room is not symmetrical. "Case file," Mai said softly to the recorder as they walked. "Wake anomaly. Note three: The signal is not a key. It is a costume. The consent it wears is forged from a stolen syllable. The host names himself Curator and requests alignment between decks. We decline. We invite him into a space that refuses to be a stage." They reached the bay. The Echo's Wake held itself steady and very, very still. "Stop being polite," Ace told the ship, not unkindly. Somewhere, the wrong clock ticked once, like a clearing throat. The door to between decks unlatched with the particular, satisfied click of a story choosing to arrive on their schedule for once. — <html><small><p align=center> © 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.</p> </small></html> Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

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

Permanent link:

https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace10:ace_10_ch_2_the_fractured_signal

Last update: **17/03/2026 06:02**

