

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 3 - The Curator Steps Forward

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.3 **Wordcount:** ~2911 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Rook, Kalyn, Jel, The Curator **Location:** The Echo's Wake **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 3 — The Curator Steps Forward

Between decks was a lung the ship forgot to use.

No panels labeled it. No blueprint admitted it. It lived in the thickness between floors, a ribbed crawlspace latticed with cable runs and the braided veins of air. When the latch released, the smell was of dry insulation and old glue—the museum scent of objects that have been kept obedient for too long.

Rook stood at the junction like an idea carved into load-bearing steel. The light brushed his cheek and got bored. When a figure moved down the conduit toward him—too thin to be a worker, too clean to belong here—Rook did what he'd been told. He yawned.

The man paused, one shoe on a rung, one hand on a rail. He had a museum docent's coat, mended in small, competent stitches. Ink bled faintly into the cuticles of his fingers. His hair had never forgiven the last comb. He did not look at Rook as if at a threat; he looked at him as if at a misplaced placard.

"How... undignified," the man said mildly.

Rook yawned again, wider, and scratched the side of his neck with the slow seriousness of a cat deciding not to hunt.

The man blinked once, the way you blink when dust pretends it isn't dust. Then he moved on, feet quiet on the rungs. The ship had more spine than he'd expected; you could hear it in the way his breath shortened when the vent baffle mispronounced a chime on purpose.

The cargo bay waited the way rooms wait for confessions. Mai had dimmed it to the kind of light that made strangers uncomfortable about their shoes. Ace had set a chair a degree and a half off axis in the center and left a second empty chair against the wall, as if the room had grown tired of being symmetrical. A quarantine box sat on a crate, the old hand lamp inside like a trapped story. The air hung still but not stale; it had the held quality of a hush that belonged to someone and would be returned intact.

He didn't enter by the door. Of course he didn't. He was standing where he wanted to be when they turned their heads—a librarian revealed by the decision to look left instead of right. That was his trick: to be found by arrangement, not arrival.

"Good evening," he said, as if the hour had been negotiated with the sun.

Ace regarded him with polite indifference. Mai regarded the distances between objects as if they were the words he meant to speak.

"You've been walking in our walls," Mai said. Not a question.

"I've been preparing the venue," he corrected gently. His voice had page edges in it. "Between decks is where alignments prefer to occur. The space between things is the only honest place." His eyes slid toward the off-axis chair. "You've... decorated."

Ace tapped the back of that chair with one finger. "Sit if you like," she said. "But it will keep your posture honest."

"That won't be necessary." He didn't sit. He set a small, old-fashioned index case on the crate as if placing a hand on the shoulder of a child to make it still. When he opened it, the cards inside were blank. The blankness had been organized with pain. "A formality. We like to have things in order. It soothes everyone."

"Order," Ace said softly, tasting the word for teeth. "We were wondering when you'd come to claim your capital O."

He smiled, not with his mouth, but with the small extension of kindness men offer rooms before they rearrange them. "Curator-of-Index," he said. "I tend the catalog of consents. I place them where they belong. You've been difficult to shelve."

Mai's hand hovered over the console unit she'd wheeled to the bay and wired into the ship like a portable spine. "We've been misfiled on purpose."

"Misfiling," he said with the patient sadness of a man describing a stain. "A kind of rebellion that believes itself clever because it knows where the labels should go." He lifted a coin from the index—no coin, not metal, just the suggestion of roundness. The syllable inside it hummed faintly like a throat wanting a word. "I believe you were looking for this."

He held out the yes.

Ace didn't take it. She looked at his hand the way you look at a fork placed on the wrong side of the plate by someone determined you won't notice. "You found a recording."

"We curated it," he said. "We smoothed it. We made it humane." He rolled the syllable across his thumb; it shone without reflecting. "Consent doesn't need to be complicated to be binding."

Mai's laugh was a single exhale sawed square. "Consent that can be curated isn't consent," she said. "It's cataloging a theft."

"Ms. Mai," he said warmly, delighted to be allowed to use her name. "You make devices out of superstition and mathematics in equal measure and ask them to do what in either discipline would be impolite. You, of all people, understand that ceremony is a tool. Ceremony simplifies."

Mai tilted her head. "Ceremony hides."

"From what?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"Choice," Ace said.

He turned to her as if she were a specimen that had named itself. "You are our favorite file," he admitted. "So much noise arranged into a shape that could carry meaning without falling through the

floor. We found you; we proofed you; we built the room around you. The First Voice picked you because you're loud enough to be silent correctly."

Ace's eyes didn't change. Her mouth did, a fraction. "You don't get to use our metaphors."

"Then use mine," he said easily. He set the yes on the crate. The syllable darkened, obedient as a sleep training exercise. "This goes with you. We only ask that you carry it into the place between decks where alignments occur. One step. One nod. It will comfort the machine, and the machine will comfort you. That is all consent is: mutual comfort."

"Your machine," Mai said. "Your comfort."

He inclined his head to accept the correction without ceding the premise. "We have worked very hard to make this easy for you."

Ace stepped close enough that politeness required him to either step back or pretend he didn't have to. He chose the second, because ritual enjoys endurance.

"We live here," she said, low. "You set beads in our walls, drew spirals behind our panels, cracked our clock and told it not to bleed. You walked our ship with soft shoes and called that respect." Her hands stayed open. "You are a guest who rearranged a kitchen while the family slept."

"And left it cleaner," he said, almost hurt.

Mai slid a solder cup onto the quarantine lid beside the old hand lamp and clicked a portable iron to heat. She lifted the coin-not-coin with tongs and held it above the little pool of brightness until the syllable inside stopped pretending to be a solid and remembered it was a suggestion. It folded. It flowed. She fed it into copper like a thin vein that already belonged to something stronger.

The Curator watched with an expression like a schoolmaster loving a child's mistake because it would make the correction more memorable. "Destroying the token does not destroy the event," he said, tenderly. "A yes is not a device. It is a record of your nature."

Mai wrapped the wire around the charm's frame and crimped it shut with a small, tired satisfaction. "Then your catalog is wrong about our nature," she said. "Please make a note."

He opened the index and selected a card that still smelled faintly of the box it had arrived in. He wrote with a thin pencil that made precise, unfriendly lines. He set the card aside without filing it. "We are not an enemy," he said into the room, to no one personal. "We are a method. We prevent the Voice from becoming incoherent. We create a pattern it can sing through. Without us, the audition becomes noise. You drown in possibilities. We provide melody."

Ace reached up and turned the off-axis chair another half degree the wrong way. He didn't look at her hands. He couldn't stop noticing the angle. "You had melody," she said. "We survived it."

He spread his fingers in a square: four neat corners. "You rehearsed it," he said. "You performed quite well. But you know how rehearsals work. You discover where the seams catch. You fix them. Now we do it properly."

"When?" Ace asked.

"Between decks," he said. His smile returned. "Now."

The vent above his head chimed, as if to bless the moment. It mispronounced itself—a little hiccup Mai had taught it. The Curator frowned at the ceiling the way a man frowns at a violin that refuses to stay tuned in a damp room.

“Consent is assumed,” he continued, smoothing the air. “You came here. You are in my venue. Your refusal is an aesthetic choice; it cannot alter the record.” He pinched his index finger and thumb together, turning an invisible page. “We will mark it ‘reluctant’ and proceed.”

Rook’s yawn rolled out of the conduit again. Not loud. Not showy. Enormous in its refusal to be invited to rule-bound time. The Curator’s eye twitched.

“You keep the company of men who mistake animal comfort for moral clarity,” he said dryly.

“We keep the company of people who breathe,” Ace said. “Breathing is inconvenient to rituals.”

“Not ours,” he said. “We make room for it.” He took a step—not physically forward, but forward in the way a presence can become slightly heavier in a space by insisting the space acknowledge it. The temperature dipped by a degree that would be unnoticeable if you measured with a tool and was undeniable if you measured with skin. “Venue: between decks,” he repeated kindly. “Alignment: Silent Vessel. Witness: Curator-of-Index.” A short, satisfied nod. “Proceed.”

Mai didn’t move. “Venue,” she said, as if reading a label aloud for a blind thing, “here.” Her thumb tapped a control. The bay’s reverb vanished. Words fell to the floor where they were spoken and refused to travel. The ship had no ears for echoes.

The Curator’s mouth opened, then closed, as if he’d snapped a thread with his teeth and found the ends didn’t know each other anymore. “Very good,” he said. “You think you are clever.”

“We think we are home,” Mai said.

He looked to Ace instead, because some men only feel tall when a woman meets them at a height not offered. “Subject,” he said, almost tender.

“Ace,” she corrected.

“Silent Vessel,” he offered, as if pronouncing a true name.

“Ace,” she said again, and something in the way the syllable sat in the room declared jurisdiction.

He flexed his fingers, shook away the small personal offense. “This is not adversarial,” he said. “If it were, you would be poor at it. You prefer to refuse the terms of engagement instead of winning by them. Which is charming. And doomed.” His eyes softened with the relief of an explanation finally permitted. “We domesticate the Voice so that it does not eat you. We give you a key so your bones recognize the door. This is caretaking.”

Mai slid the new charm across the crate to Ace. Ace picked it up. It was ugly in a confident way—the confidence of a tool that believes in use more than in praise. She tucked it into the inner line of her harness where another person might keep a prayer.

“You invite the Voice into our kitchen,” Ace said. “Then you arrest us for refusing to call it a dinner guest.”

He inclined his head, openly pleased by the metaphor now that it was his. "We set the table. You bring the appetite."

Ace smiled, small and winter-bright. "We ate already," she said.

He didn't like that answer. It named a world where he had not been the one to portion the plates. "First Voice will arrive regardless," he said, cool again. "Better it arrive to a place that understands how to lay a knife beside a spoon without insult."

Mai's console ticked under her hand. Not an alert. A completion. She had finished the quiet refusal map. Every little sabotage hummed together like a choir that had remembered it didn't have to sing the tune printed on the page. Microphones stayed dumb. Cameras stayed honest. Vents mispronounced. Screws reclaimed their number. On the crew deck, Jel turned a spiral into a line and didn't know why it felt like waking; Kalyn found a bead stuck to the heel of her boot and smiled without smiling, then flicked it down the trash chute with the bored contempt of a champion.

The Curator knew, because men like him always feel the room running out of patience before anyone says so. He closed the index by placing his palm flat on the lid. The box made a very small sound of disappointment.

"This is recorded," he said. "You were invited. You declined with style. We mark it."

"Mark it," Mai said. "Spell our names right."

He raised a finger as if to wag it and then, charmed against his better judgment, didn't. "You will come between decks," he said, not as a future but as a description he wanted to make true by tone. "There is only so much courage one can perform in front of a chair turned charmingly the wrong way."

Ace tipped the chair another almost-nothing. "We'll let you know if we need an audience," she said. "You'll know we do if the lights come up."

He lifted the index. He did not pick up the yes. It had become wire; it had been melted into something he could not file. That was the insult that would linger. "Venue remains open," he said. "We are patient. The Voice is patient. Good night."

"Hold on," Mai said.

He paused, and the pause admitted that part of him was relieved to be asked to stay.

"You left a diagram behind our panel," she said. "Spiral, three slashes. You labeled it with our stolen word. I bagged it. It's mine now."

He smiled. "The mark isn't yours."

Mai looked at the bay as if to confirm with the beams that had held her when she slept badly. "It is," she said. "Everything inside this hull is ours. Even the things we refuse."

He considered arguing and decided to be magnanimous instead. "Very well," he said, and meant not at all. "Keep the drawing. Memorabilia comforts the difficult."

He took a step and ceased to require the door, because he preferred to leave by being no longer important.

When the space he'd occupied grew ordinary again, the ship breathed without noticing it had been careful not to. The between-decks hatch sealed with the polite finality of a book shut by someone who knows where they stopped.

Mai exhaled for the first time in a minute that had taken an hour to cross.

"Case file," she said softly, letting the recorder have the words so the room wouldn't have to. "Wake anomaly. Note four: Host identifies as Curator-of-Index. Method: etiquette as coercion. Venue demanded between decks; venue refused. 'Consent' presented as collectible token; token deconstructed; pattern re-wired. Outcome: invitation remains. Counter-outcome: house keeps its own table."

Ace stood with her palms flat on the crate, head bent, eyes on nothing. The heat behind glass shifted once—acknowledgment, not pressure. Violet listened like a cat at a window, the world on the other side of the glass less interesting than the place the sun had found on the floor.

"Next," Ace said.

Mai looked at her. The question was practical. The answer would be, too.

"We trace every physical insertion point," Mai said. "We pull every bead, every thread. We sand the ghost prints from our screws without pretending they weren't there. We make the ship bored again."

"And when he asks us to come between decks?"

Mai's smile was quick and mean and beautiful. "We invite him to the kitchen and offer him nothing."

Ace's answering smile was softer and just as mean. "You're very pretty when you're mean."

"I learned from the best," Mai said.

They left the bay with the lights low. Behind them, the off-axis chair sat like a small, stubborn refusal. The old hand lamp slept in its box, dreaming someone else's memory. On the crew deck, Rook stretched like a mountain remembering it had valleys. Jel turned a page and drew a straight horizon, surprised to find there was room for sky above it. Kalyn sharpened a blade and let the sound inform the ship that it could not be cataloged.

In the corridor, the galley clock ticked, crack intact, keeping time without asking permission. The panel with eight screws counted itself and blushed. Seven.

In the bridge dome, the stars kept their distance. The mirror corridor sat in the sandbox like a hall of politely shut doors that would stay shut until someone knocked with a name that belonged here. The etiquette engine waited on the other side of the wall in a room without chairs.

The Echo's Wake did not exhale yet. It had learned the virtue of holding breath for the right reason.

Ace and Mai went to work teaching it where to spend its air. —

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