

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 4 - Shadows of the Order

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.4 **Wordcount:** ~2307 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Rook, Kalyn, Jel, Mendax Theta, The Curator **Location:** The Echo's Wake **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 4 — Shadows of the Order

The ship learned boredom.

It took them half a day to teach it—thread by thread, bead by bead—until the Echo's Wake wore its quiet like an old sweater instead of a borrowed suit. Screws remembered their numbers. Vents forgot to sing on cue. Cameras kept looking where they'd been told to look and did not improvise interest. The etiquette engine paced on the wrong side of the mirror and tired itself out without admitting fatigue.

Rook slept on the crew deck with his boots off and his hand on his chest like a statue that had decided to practice being human. Kalyn sharpened a blade until the edge lost its appetite and became something calmer. Jel drew a horizon line and then, uncertain, added a boat so small you could only see it if you decided to.

Ace and Mai worked the map to the ribs.

They found beads in seams where no one ever put their hands. They found a thread stitched under a gasket with the kind of patience that comes from a man who brings his own lunch to a crime. They found a scrap of paper folded to the size of a coin, tucked behind a breaker, with the words PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE printed in a font that pretended to be polite. Mai removed it. The room did not fall.

Near midnight, under the aft ladder, they found the different thing: a wafer, the size of a thumbnail, sealed into the wall with clear resin that had cured to an honesty you don't get from a rush job. It had a hairline tab you could only see if you looked up from the floor and imagined you were a man who liked the neatness of tabs.

Mai warmed the resin with a breath of heat, lifted the wafer free with tweezers, and held it to the console's local reader without letting the ship know it was being read. The contents populated not as files but as drawers. She opened one.

Index Annex: Collation Notes. Custodian: Curator-of-Index. Venue: Between Decks (general). Subject: SILENT_VESSEL (Ace).

Ace stood with her hands behind her back and let the room be small around them. She said nothing. The silence put weight on the words others had chosen for her and found them thinner than they'd hoped.

Mai opened another drawer.

Ceremonial Confirm / Wake Protocol — Revision 6.3 — Objective: reduce subject resistance by

domesticating consent pattern. — Method: etiquette envelope. — Tokenization: (VOICE/yes) smoothed; edges removed; temperature normalized. — Placement: mnemonic anchors distributed at domestic junctures (screws, clocks, lamps). — Outcome metrics: alignment time reduced by 37% in rehearsal environments; subjects prefer tidy rooms.

Mai's mouth went flat. "Domestic junctures," she said quietly. "Kitchen. Hallway. The places a person touches without thinking."

Ace watched the text like she watched an enemy's wrists. "Rehearsal," she repeated, and the word came out as something that had been bled of sugar.

The next drawer was correspondence in the tidy slant of a man who loved margins.

— to Custodian-of-Index (cc: Clerk-of-Consent) Subject: Subject misfiled (Ace) ...The ship resists in ways it should not. The engineer refuses ornament and makes superstition into tools; recommend cataloging under 'Counter-Ceremony'. The subject's companion refuses stage directions with charm; recommend adjusted hospitality. Between decks remains the appropriate venue. Consent will be assumed; record to reflect reluctance for completeness.

Mai closed the drawer before the body of the letter could finish enjoying itself.

The last drawer was not a drawer at all. It was a coordinate written in the blueprint slang she'd caught in the stolen token: a string that only meant anything to people who thought in bulkheads. Deckless, windowless, off the map by design. An annex.

"Not on the ship," she said. "A place they keep the other halves of the records. A pocket that refuses to be a place by insisting on it."

Ace's eyes warmed with the light that comes on in a hunter when the trail finally admits it has been there all along. "How far?"

"Near," Mai said. "Two hours drift. No lanes. No witnesses."

They went.

Not with fanfare. The ship did not raise its heart rate for this. Ace stood at the auxiliary and watched the dome hold the universe at arm's length; Mai bled power into low, uninteresting lines and set the profile to a familiar nothing neighbors ignore. The Echo's Wake slid like a cautious thought between two ideas that didn't want to touch.

The annex hid in the lee of a dead thing: a cold brown dwarf that had lost the courage to be a star and now kept its secrets under a blanket of failing light. The maintenance buoy at twenty-four degrees past nowhere had a registry number that returned a shrug. If you asked a port about it, the port would blink slowly and tell you it had been there so long it was a part of the part of space it sat in.

"...there," Mai said, almost affection in it for the way lies age into furniture.

They approached with their speech turned off and their hands light. The buoy didn't wink. It had been built not to. Mai slid a narrow tongue of sensorium along its skin and found a seam that read as a weld if you were sleepy. She wasn't sleepy.

“Under the weld,” she said.

They matched rotation and kissed hull to hull with a bump that belonged to accidental meetings. The docking hatch behaved like a lid on a jar no one had opened since the last time someone opened it. The air that sighed had no smell at all until they taught themselves to smell the paper that had been kept obedient inside it.

Inside, the annex had the audacity to be small.

A corridor. Three doors. No labels. A light that refused to decide whether it came from an old fixture or the habit of rooms lighting themselves for guests. The temperature was exactly impolite to human comfort. It would keep you awake without having to insult you into it.

“Left,” Ace said.

“Because?” Mai asked, not disagreeing.

“Because men who catalog consent like to be predictable until they get to the thing they care about,” Ace said. “Then they turn right.”

They went left.

The room was a museum of habits. Shelves. Boxes. Index cases. Blank cards arranged with painful scruple. A chair perfectly centered under a lamp—the kind of centered that would itch if you let yourself think about angles for too long. The dust was right. That was the wrongness: an honest film on a dishonest history.

Mai opened no boxes at first. She walked the perimeter with her fingertips a centimeter from the wall, the way you touch fire without testing it. She found the first anchor in the baseboard: thread, bead, the ritual hardware of men who insist that a room is a kind of instrument. She crimped it under copper and did not honor it with a prayer.

Ace went to the chair and nudged it half a degree out of true.

“Rude,” she told the lamp, and the lamp agreed by flickering once like a man swallowing an objection.

The second room held the records that mattered. Not numbers; not inventories. Litanies dressed as procedure.

Ceremonial Confirm — Wake Protocol / Subject SILENT_VESSEL (Ace) — Step 1: Gentle preparation (domestic anchors) — Step 2: Etiquette introduction (HARMONIZE; REQUEST: ALIGNMENT) — Step 3: Consent smoothing (VOICE/yes) normalized for machine comfort — Step 4: Venue negotiation (Between Decks) — Step 5: Curator marks attendance; assumptions entered if absent — Step 6: First Voice arrival; melody supplied; rehearsal becomes performance

Mai read without moving her mouth. Ace stood beside her and did not read; she listened to the air learning it was being asked to hold older words. The trick of rooms like this is that they want you to accept that the page is the world. Refusing that is not drama. It is patience.

At the bottom of the page, small type in a voice that had not been designed for human eyes: — Note: if Subject refuses, record reluctance, proceed under care of Custodian-of-Index. Outcome statistically similar; morale improves with schedule adherence.

Mai inhaled and let the air out the way you blow dust off a table. "There," she said. "That's the whole trick. Consent by scheduling."

Ace's mouth went winter. "It's a kidnapping in a calendar."

They made a copy.

Not electronically. Mai didn't trust the wires this place believed in. She used a slate and a stylus and wrote the way she wrote when she wanted her own hands to be evidence later that she had been awake. Ace took photographs with a camera that expected film even when it didn't get any. The camera clicked. The click was not a ritual. It was spite.

The last room wore a plaque on the door that said ANNEX 3 if you looked casually and ANNEX 2 if you stared. Mandela's little fox left its pawprints and ran on. Inside, nothing was a surprise anymore, which is its own flavor of shock.

A table. A narrow drawer. A ledger thick with the weight of other people's obedience.

Mai opened the ledger to the ribbon. A note in the Curator's hand, affectionate as a correction.

Subject Ace (SILENT_VESSEL): — audit completed; consent token normalized; domestic anchors placed; rehearsal compliant; alignment pending. — companion Mai: disruptive intelligence; converts superstition into methodology; charm prevalence high; hospitality adjusted. — crew: mountain (stable), blade (wakeful), pen (impressionable). — Mendax Theta: designated amplifier; access maintained despite quarantine. — recommendation: proceed.

They didn't look at each other for a full ten seconds. It felt like leaving a door politely shut in the face of a weather you didn't want to let in.

"Mendax Theta," Ace said at last. Not for the first time. For the first time like a verdict. "Of course."

"It's in their schedule," Mai said. "An amplifier waiting for a song."

"Not waiting," Ace said. "Expecting."

They took what they needed and did what they had come to do: they made the annex forget it had been important. Mai found each anchor and wrapped it in copper until it had to be a machine, not a charm. She turned two tiny screws inside the lamp until it decided it was tired and took an honest nap. She loosened a hinge. She tuned a chime wrong. She wrote DO NOT BELIEVE under the plaque and then erased it, and the erasure did more good than the words.

In the doorway, Ace paused and looked back at the chair under the lamp. She did not straighten it.

"Leave it rude," she said.

On the way out, the annex tried once to be helpful. A screen they hadn't noticed lit in a corner with the delicate confidence of a host who knows the answer before he asks the question.

VENUE: BETWEEN DECKS
TIME: NOW
WITNESS: CURATOR

CONSENT: ASSUMED

Mai reached over without breaking stride and switched the screen off at the wall. "Assumption denied," she said, like a clerk stamping a form. The switch clicked. The sound belonged to a world she preferred.

They drifted off the buoy like a thought someone decided not to think anymore. The brown dwarf rolled under them with the gravity of a thing that had given up on brightness and found a different dignity. The Echo's Wake took them back into the quiet it had learned and wore well.

On the bridge, the hall of mirrors waited. Mai stood at the console with the slate in her hands and the ledger in her head. Ace leaned a shoulder to the rail and watched the dark.

"Say it," Ace said.

Mai glanced at her. "Which part?"

"The part you are saving to tell me in a kinder room."

Mai didn't pretend she didn't know. "They built a ritual that works even when you don't agree," she said. "They make refusal an aesthetic. They file it under 'reluctant' and proceed. The only way to break it is to change the room until it refuses to be a venue."

"And us?"

Mai's eyes held hers. "We stop being their subject. We stop letting their names be furniture. We call you Ace until the room has no memory of any other label. We call my charms tools until every engineer is bored by them."

Ace's mouth tilted. "You do love to make engineers bored."

"I love to make rooms loyal," Mai said.

They stood there until the ship decided to accept the ledger's weight without hiding it in its bones. They let the quiet be long enough to become honest again.

On the console, the etiquette engine tried a new trick. The message arrived without curtsy, stripped of everything except schedule.

ALIGNMENT: SCHEDULED

VENUE: BETWEEN DECKS

NOTICE: MENDAX THETA — ACCESS CONFIRMED

Mai's jaw set. "No."

Ace's hand slid to the charm at her harness—a loop of copper ugly in its confidence and warm from her body heat. She felt Violet like sunshine through a window on the day you decide not to leave the house after all.

"Next," Ace said.

"Mendax Theta," Mai answered.

The ship didn't sigh. It lifted its head the way animals do when the tone in a room changes from waiting to deciding. The galley clock kept perfect time with a crack that refused to heal. The panel with seven screws stayed honest. The old lamp slept.

And somewhere in the ductwork, in a space that had never been a place until men like the Curator named it, the air cooled by one unshared degree as a librarian starved on principle turned a page and realized there were fewer pages than last time. —

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