

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 6 - Mendax Theta's Choice

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.6 **Wordcount:** ~2679 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Rook, Kalyn, Jel, Mendax Theta, The Curator **Location:** The Echo's Wake **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 6 — Mendax Theta's Choice

Mendax Theta waited where men leave dangerous things they still love.

It wasn't a station so much as a decision welded into orbit: a ring of modules around a husk, the ribs of an old habitat where someone had removed the soft parts and kept the bones to teach a lesson. Quarantine buoys blinked without blinking—dead optics set to suggest attention—and the registry link returned the bureaucratic equivalent of a shrug.

Mai set the Echo's Wake to a line a cautious captain would find boring. "Approach on the ghost lane," she said. "No docking call. No neighbors to reassure."

Ace watched the ring grow out of emptiness. "Just a habit to break."

Rook and Kalyn met them in the forward lock in the quiet armor they wore when they wanted rooms to forget they were there. Jel stayed aboard, hands busy with something that would keep him out of spirals: inventory, then dishes, then the satisfying discipline of straightening labels no one would read.

"Rules," Mai said, handing out the last of the ugly copper charms she'd built like a woman mending a net. "If something asks you to agree, yawn. If something asks you to remember, stretch and forget to answer. If something asks for your name, tell it the ship's."

Rook yawned on principle. Kalyn smiled without smiling and tucked the charm against her pulse.

The lock opened them into air that had been too clean for too long. Mendax Theta preserved sterility the way museums preserve absence: aggressively, politely, at great expense to everyone's nerves. Floor stripes guided good behavior. Wall placards offered comfort in the soothing tone of a ferry explaining where the exits are.

WELCOME TO MENDAX THETA — QUARANTINE IN EFFECT — THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION

"Lies look tidy when you stencil them," Mai said.

Ace tilted her head at the sign and kept moving.

The first anchors weren't beads. They were manners.

The lights brightened as if they recognized a friend. The ambient hum shifted key toward what a human ear will call home. A wall screen slid to life without being asked to and displayed a schedule in the handsome grayscale of a man who thinks in calendars.

VENUE: ANNEXED RING (A)
TIME: NOW
WITNESS: CURATOR
CONSENT: ASSUMED
NOTE: SILENT_VESSEL ACCOMMODATIONS PREPARED

Mai clicked the screen dark at the wall. “Assumption denied,” she said, stamping an invisible form.

They moved in a slow wedge: Ace and Mai at the point, Kalyn ghosting the blind side, Rook covering their backs with the kind of patience that breaks jaws without raising its voice. The corridor turned right because the station wanted them to. Ace turned left. The corridor obliged, surprised into honesty, and offered them a stair labeled MAINTENANCE with a font that had not been designed for guests.

“Between decks,” Ace said.

“Where alignments prefer to occur,” Mai replied, unamused.

They dropped a level.

Mendax Theta had been built with the kind of care that lives in the wrists. Every bracket had the exact same number of holes. Every conduit was tied at the same intervals. Every seam wore its seam-ness like a haircut. It should have been comforting. It was not. It was like standing in a kitchen so clean you couldn’t believe anyone ate there.

“Anchor,” Kalyn murmured, pointing with her chin.

It was thread and beads this time, obedient to the pattern they’d seen on the ship. Fixed under a brace, bonded with a resin that smelled like organized men talking about curing times. Mai wrapped it in copper and crimped it shut; the charm went dumb in a satisfying, small way.

“Another,” Rook said.

They found three more in a span of ten meters. Too many for an honest room. Just enough for a ceremony that wanted to look accidental.

The first door that wasn’t a door opened when they ignored it. A lab. Tables. Cabinets with glass fronts that had learned to enjoy reflections. In the far wall, a panel with the wrong number of screws.

Ace went to it. “Seven,” she said. “There should be eight.” She smiled without liking it. “He’s sloppy under pressure.”

Mai set the sensor. No alarm. No courtesy ping. She lifted the panel and didn’t find a bomb. She found a ledger.

“I hate this man’s handwriting,” she said, and meant it like a curse.

Inside: rehearsal notes kneaded into procedure, the domesticity of coercion dressed up as safety.

— Mendax Theta: designated amplifier — Quarantine perimeter: permeable by courtesy channels — Domestic anchors placed: stairwell, lab, maintenance — Subject (Ace): reluctance recorded; assumed

— Companion (Mai): disruptive; hospitality adjusted — Staff roles: mountain (useful mass), blade (useful sharp), pen (useful soft) — Action: proceed; venue between decks; curate consent

Ace's face went winter. "Useful," she said. "Like cutlery."

Kalyn touched a fingertip to the margin where the pencil had pressed a little deeper, as if a man had smiled at his own cleverness and briefly forgotten to hide it. "We could break his pencil."

Mai put the ledger back in the wall and the wall back on the ledger. "We'll break his calendar," she said. "Pencils grow back."

They reached the ring's inner corridor. Through a window that expected to display a starfield and instead offered a honest dark, the amplifier chamber sat behind thick glass—a bowl of architecture made to carry a note and multiply it until it had the weight of a fact. Hangers for null coils lined the rim like pews. The floor at the center had a circle etched into it with the ritual modesty of engineers: measured, restrained, exact enough to be wrong in the right way.

Mai's mouth thinned. "It's an ear," she said. "A room that only knows how to listen one way."

Ace nodded once. "We make it deaf."

The door tried to open by itself. Polite. Efficient. The lab's air sucked its teeth with the satisfied sound of pressure equalizing. Mai overrode it and made the equalization slow and slightly insulting. The door opened anyway, but grudgingly, which was almost as good.

Inside, the etiquette announced itself without words. The temperature stepped to the preferred human comfort. The lights showed them their own angles. A small screen on the far wall woke and wrote a sentence in a hand that pretended to be a font.

WELCOME. WE WILL MAKE THIS EASY.

Ace didn't look at it. "Rook," she said. "Keep the door a door."

He set his hand on the jamb and decided the door would be humble. It obeyed.

Mai went to the coil housings and began to lay out her refusal in hardware: detuners not meant for artistry but for stubbornness, resistors arranged like a language nobody pretty would speak, loops that refused to be loops. She didn't sabotage. She made the room bored.

"Explain it to me like I'm trying to be clever," Ace said, half because she liked hearing Mai talk about work and half because talking made the room hear them instead of the other way around.

"Amplifiers like this want to be praised," Mai said, hands moving. "They want to be told they're good at hearing. So we teach it that everything is equally uninteresting. We make all notes the same note. It can't build melody out of monotone. The Voice can scream, and the chamber will yawn."

Kalyn watched the silent screens and the floor that wanted to be a circle. "And if the Voice makes the room... less polite?"

"Then we unplug the room from itself," Mai said. "But we start with poor manners."

The first test was a whisper. Mai injected a noise floor into the coil housings and watched the response on a local analyzer she'd brought because she trusted nothing that lived here. The line went flat. Not quiet. Indifferent. The chamber frowned in the only way a chamber can: by failing to be

pleased.

“Good,” Mai said. “Again.”

The second test was a tone. The third a stack of tones that should have excited a space built to love resonance. The analyzer showed a shrug that meant the rails were working, the coils were intact, and the room had been persuaded to stop enjoying itself.

Ace felt the pressure at her sternum shift the way a tide shifts when it realizes a harbor has been filled with stones. The rehearsed press of — proceed — softened to the suggestion of — consider — and then, annoyed, tried courtesy again.

ALIGNMENT: SCHEDULED
VENUE: AMPLIFIER CHAMBER
NOTICE: WITNESS AWAITS
CONSENT: ASSUMED

Mai didn't bother to switch off the screen. She taped a label over it that said WORK ORDER DELAYED in block letters. Rook's shoulders did a very small thing that counted as laughing if you knew mountains.

Kalyn tilted her head. “If it can still schedule, can it still sing?”

“It can schedule the weather,” Mai said. “It can't make it rain.”

She finished the detuners and looked at Ace. “Two options now,” she said. “Permanent quarantine or ruin.”

Ace looked at the circle on the floor, at the coil housings, at the window where a dead star refused to be interesting. “Quarantine is a favor,” she said. “For them.”

Mai nodded. “Ruin, then.”

“Quietly,” Ace said. “I don't want a show.”

“Quietly,” Mai agreed.

The plan was not dramatic. That was the point. They would not blow the ring—the debris field would feed myths. They would not melt the coils—someone else would build them again with a better varnish and a worse idea. They would detune the feed at the system level, choke the ground to white, salt the ceremonial pathways with static until ceremony learned to find another kitchen. They would make Mendax Theta the kind of broken that seems fine to men who don't know how to listen.

Mai set the sequence that would write boredom into the rails and starve the amplifiers of anything but indifference. She built relays that would fail in ways paperwork respects. She labeled them with language so dull you could file your teeth with it.

Rook held the door against no one. Kalyn placed three small charges in places that would collapse access corridors if someone tried to resurrect the venue and pretend the ruins were a stage. Jel, back on the Wake, sent up a clean list of supplies they did not need anymore, the list so honestly dull it made Ace's eyes sting for a second because this is what survival looks like when you stop asking

rooms to love you. Mai smiled into the comm and told him he was perfect.

In the corner of the amplifier chamber, a new screen woke. Not the station's. The Curator's. The grayscale went friendlier and therefore more insulting.

DO NOT DO THIS
NOTE: WITHOUT VENUE, FIRST VOICE BECOMES INCOHERENT
NOTE: WITHOUT MELODY YOU WILL DROWN
OFFER: ASSISTANCE

Ace stepped in front of the screen until it had no view but her face. "We learned to swim," she said, and the mic caught the shape of her mouth and sent it nowhere.

The offer changed costume.

COMPROMISE: YOU KEEP YOUR SHIP
COMPROMISE: WE KEEP OUR ROOM
COMPROMISE: RELUCTANCE RECORDED

Mai's fingers danced—ugly, sure. "You don't get to negotiate furniture," she said. "The kitchen is ours."

She punched the last commitment.

The sound the station made was almost polite. Coils that wanted to live on the edge of song were asked to hum at a register only machines respect. Rails that liked to carry intention were fed intention's corpse. The circle on the floor lost the minor holiness men had drawn into it with their careful compasses. White noise filled ceremonial pathways the way fog fills alleys and miracle stories stop for the day.

Rook let the door become a door without his hand. It stayed humble.

Kalyn touched the static with an ear trained to hear moods. "Ugly," she said, approving.

"Effective," Mai said.

The Curator tried one last time, his message shedding clothes as it ran out of options.

ALIGNMENT REQUIRED
VENUE: BETWEEN DECKS
CONSENT: ASSUMED
WITNESS: CURATOR
WARNING: YOU WILL REGRET—

Mai turned the screen off at the wall. The off switch clicked; the click belonged to a saner world.

Ace studied the chamber the way you look at a field after snow: uninteresting on purpose, useful if you stop asking for poetry. "Is it done?" she asked.

Mai checked the analyzer and the quiet map she'd stitched across the system. She listened to the hum and found it steady and unlovely. She tried to make the room sing with a note she knew would make bad rooms shiver. The room yawned.

"It's done," she said. "Mendax Theta is deaf. If someone tries to make it listen, it will misunderstand on purpose."

"Backups?" Ace asked.

"I salted the backups with tedium," Mai said. "If they restore, they get a station that hates music."

"Then we leave," Ace said.

They took nothing except what they'd brought and the names they had come to retire. On the way to the lock, Mai stopped at a placard that thanked them for their cooperation and wrote PLEASE DO NOT BELIEVE in Sharpie and then, thoughtfully, erased it. The erasure was the thing.

At the lock, the station tried one last instrument: gravity. A subtle tug at the hips. A suggestion that it would be easier to stay.

Rook yawned. Kalyn stretched. Ace smiled at the room like you smile at a lover you liked better when they told the truth.

"Stop being polite," she told Mendax Theta.

The tug let go.

They crossed back into the Wake. The lock cycled. The air welcomed them without trying to be their friend. The galley clock ticked the same crack at six. The panel with seven screws kept its number. Jel's voice came up on the internal with a list of pointless tasks finished in an order that made him proud because it was his.

Mai plugged the analyzer into the Wake's console and watched the absence of a note move across the screen like weather improving. The hall of mirrors in the sandbox reflected polite doors shutting one by one with the finality of schedules cancelled by a strike no one would cross.

A single message arrived, late to its own ceremony.

NOTICE: MENDAX THETA — ACCESS UNRELIABLE
SUGGESTION: VENUE CHANGE
HOST: CURATOR
VENUE: BETWEEN DECKS
CONSENT: ASSUMED

Ace's smirk sharpened. "He can't stop saying the line."

"He can learn to be bored," Mai said. She sent the message into the sandbox, where it would be kept company by its own echo until it forgot it wanted one.

"Case file," she told the recorder, because rooms deserve their summaries. "Wake anomaly. Note six: Mendax Theta ruined without spectacle. Amplifier deafened; rails salted with monotone; ceremonial circle unmade. Backups bored. Result: no venue. Schedule collapses into its own calendar."

Rook's voice came gentle across the internal. "Home?"

“Home,” Ace said.

Kalyn cleaned her blade on a cloth that didn’t need it. “He’ll come to our kitchen,” she said. “He’ll hate it.”

Mai shut her eyes for one count of five and opened them with the warmth back where it belonged. “Good,” she said. “I make terrible tea for men who catalog other people’s consent.”

The Echo’s Wake turned on a line through unbusy dark. The brown dwarf fell behind without a sound. In the dome, space did what it always does when you stop asking it to be meaningful: it kept being there.

Ace touched the charm at her harness and felt the small, confident ugliness of wire that used to be a stolen syllable. Violet lay like sunlight along her ribs—watchful, companionable, uninterested in hunger.

“Next,” Ace said.

Mai pulled up a file and a map and the kind of resolve that doesn’t ask a room if it has permission. “The Curator,” she said. “Unmasked, unhosted, and very much out of venues.” —

© 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.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

From:

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

Permanent link:

https://datavault.ws/doku.php/canon:ace10:ace_10_ch_6_mendax_theta_s_choice

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

