

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 7 - The Curator Unmasked

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.7 **Wordcount:** ~2510 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Rook, Kalyn, Jel, Mendax Theta, The Curator **Location:** The Echo's Wake **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 7 — The Curator Unmasked

They set the kitchen like a crime that refused to be exciting.

Mai put the kettle on a burner that ran a degree low. She turned the table one notch off square relative to the floor seam and left a chair angled as if someone had stood up halfway through a thought and never sat back down correctly again. The galley clock kept perfect time with its crack at six. The vent gave its mispronounced chime once, the way a person clears their throat when they've decided to speak plainly.

Rook leaned in the doorway and became architecture. Kalyn took the corner by the pantry where shadows lost interest. Jel dried a plate, then another, then a third—straight lines, no spirals. The Echo's Wake wore boredom like a badge.

"He'll come here?" Jel asked, keeping his voice at dishwashing volume.

"He has to," Mai said. "We broke all the other rooms."

Ace adjusted the chair another half-degree. "And we left him a table he can't make into a stage."

The index case arrived before the man did.

It blinked into being on the counter with the domestic audacity of a sugar bowl that knows it belongs. Old leather. Brass corners. The ghost of a library smell. When it opened by itself, the cards inside were not blank. They had been filled with the kind of handwriting that makes a room think it's being reassured.

The Curator stepped into the threshold already annoyed that the air didn't know how to make a welcome of itself.

"Kitchen," he said, voice urbane. "Charming."

"Rude," Mai corrected, pouring water before the kettle had the decency to boil. She set a mug down without offering it.

He looked the room over the way a schoolmaster counts heads. "Venue: domestic," he said, pencil invisible in his tone. "Participant count: five. Mountain, blade, pen, engineer, subject." His gaze caught on the off-axis chair. "Alignment: pending."

Ace smiled like winter. "Say my name."

His eyes softened with gentle rebuke, as if he were indulging a child. “Silent Ves—”

“Ace,” she said, not loud, and the ship refused to echo anything else.

He inclined his head with the patience of a man adjusting for dialect. “Ace,” he repeated, and the word looked wrong in his mouth.

Mai pushed the index case with two fingers so it had to decide whether to scuff the counter or admit it had never learned how. “You brought a box of other people’s yeses,” she said. “Put it away.”

“This,” he said, opening the lid with fondness, “is culture. Agreements curated against incoherence. Without a catalog, consent becomes a kind of weather—eventful, undependable, bad for schedules.”

“Consent is weather,” Ace said. “It changes when the sky does.”

He set a card on the table. The word CONSENT had been written very small in the corner, like a saint’s name carved discreetly where no one would call it ostentatious. “We stole nothing,” he said. “We refined. Rough answers sanded so the machine would not snag. You can be grateful for engineering even if you don’t understand it.”

Mai lifted the card by a corner and turned it until the light caught every lie. “You took a syllable that’s supposed to have temperature and filed it flat,” she said. “Then you pretended people were furniture.”

“Domestic anchors,” Kalyn murmured, almost to herself, and watched his eyes tick at the phrase.

He glanced her way, pleased to be recognized. “Yes. The places you touch without thinking—screws, clocks, lamps. Mnemonics domesticated into habit. We make the venue feel inevitable.”

Rook yawned a yawn so honest it didn’t need lungs.

The Curator put the card back into the index as if tucking a child in. “You’ll find that inevitability is a kindness,” he said, still to the room, not to the people. “Left to themselves, subjects perform their courage too long. They exhaust. They drown in possibilities. The Voice requires melody. We provide it.”

Mai slid a sheet of paper across the table—the copy she had made in the annex, her hand an affidavit against his neatness. “You wrote,” she said, “that if we refuse, you record reluctance and proceed on schedule.”

“Completeness,” he said. “For the archives.”

“You wrote,” she continued, reading him his own doctrine, “that ‘consent will be assumed; record to reflect reluctance for completeness.’”

He smiled, small, sincere. “There. The schedule is a mercy. You see it.”

Ace took the mug, tasted the not-quite-boiled tea, and set it down in a place that would make a stage manager needy. “I see a kidnapping with a calendar.”

He looked at her over the rim of his fondness. “And I see a woman held above the flood by the structure she refuses.”

“Unmask,” Mai said, and the word landed like a cup on a counter.

He blinked with real surprise for the first time since he’d entered their ship. “Pardon?”

“Your name,” Mai said. “The one your mother said when you were in trouble. The name you wrote on the inside of your first book and crossed out and wrote again because you hated how the letters leaned.”

He breathed in. Not offended—displaced. “Names are unhelpful in archives,” he said, trying the defense of a man who knows it isn’t a defense in this room.

“Helpful here,” Ace said. “We prefer people to functions.”

He looked around the kitchen as if it might give him permission to be a person. The clock ticked its broken six. The chair held its wrong angle. The mountain in the doorway refused to become a door. The blade in the shadow kept its edge disguised as patience. The pen dried another clean plate and put it on a stack that did not waver.

“Eiden,” he said finally, softly. “Eiden Marsh.” His face changed—less control, more human. “Curator-of-Index, yes. But Eiden first, in rooms that allow it.”

Mai nodded once like an engineer filing a part that now had a number. “Good afternoon, Eiden,” she said. “We’re going to break your method.”

He pulled himself back into role the way a man puts a coat on tighter when the wind finds him. “You broke local venues,” he corrected. “And you have damaged a tool. But method is a library, not a room. It persists. You would be wise to let professionals provide your melody. You don’t want the Voice unaccompanied.”

Ace rested her forearms on the table. “And yet you kept telling it to arrive in spaces that aren’t yours,” she said. “You came into our walls with soft shoes and left beads. You filed us under ‘reluctant’ so your calendar could feel brave.”

“Brave,” he repeated, pained. “Schedules are gentle. They keep terror on time.”

Jel set a plate down and spoke without looking up. “Your handwriting presses harder when you lie,” he said. “It digs at the paper.”

Eiden looked at the boy in that teaching way again and caught himself. “I do like you,” he admitted. “You are exactly as soft as we require.”

Rook’s shoulder filled the doorway more completely.

Mai closed the index by placing her palm on the lid. She did it the way you close a feral door—calm, firm, unafraid to be bitten. “We’re retiring terms,” she said. “Audit is gone. Alignment is gone. Consent is retired from procedures and returned to mouths.”

“You don’t get to retire language,” Eiden said mildly. “It is not your union.”

“It is our kitchen,” Ace said. “And this ship is our union.”

He watched her for a long moment and then looked at the kettle, which had decided to boil at last as if it had remembered its job. “You can’t keep the Voice out forever,” he said, almost kind. “You can’t quiet a tide with etiquette. That’s why we exist.”

Mai pushed the index case back toward him and set a small, ugly object next to it: a loop of copper wire into which she had soldered the coin they'd melted, the stolen yes now an honest vein doing work. "You exist because someone taught you to love order more than choice," she said. "We're teaching the room to love people more than schedules."

He gave the charm a long, critical look and didn't quite sneer. "Trinkets."

"Tools," Mai said.

"And what would you like from me, Ms. Mai?" he asked, almost amused. "Permission to misfile yourselves? A certificate of noncompliance? I can draft one. It will comfort you."

"Resignation," Ace said. "Yours."

He laughed, genuinely delighted by what he thought was a joke. "From my vocation? Child, a man doesn't resign from a virtue."

Kalyn's voice came silk-soft from the pantry. "Cataloging other people's consent isn't a virtue. It's a kink."

Eiden swallowed a retort that would have been ungenerous and chose to be superior instead. "Without curation, the Voice will break you," he said. "It will make you artifacts of your own appetite. We keep you legible."

Mai turned the recorder on with a thumb press that made no ceremony at all. "Statement of method," she said crisply, to the air. "Curator Eiden Marsh asserts that consent can be assumed and filed as reluctance; that schedules are mercies; that domestic anchors make venues inevitable; that curation protects subjects from incoherence. Counterstatement: house policy rejects assumption; retires anchoring; denies venue. Conclusion: method cannot proceed."

Eiden's eyes brightened. "You think a tape defeats a choir," he said. "It does not."

"No," Ace said, standing, "the choir defeats itself." She set both hands on the table and leaned in just enough to make his body consider stepping back and choose not to. "We took Mendax Theta from you. We took your annex and bored it. We salted your backups with tedium so the only resurrection available to you is a station that hates music." Her smile didn't change. Her eyes did. "You're out of venues."

"Between decks," he offered softly, clinging to his line like a prayer.

"We renamed it kitchen," Mai said.

He looked genuinely tired then, and for a heartbeat the coat of role slipped and the person under it blinked at a world that would not be arranged. "You are very good," he said to Mai, not flattering. "If we had found you sooner, we might have made you gentle."

"You did," Mai said. "And then I learned to be mean for the right reasons."

Eiden closed the index case. The motion had grief in it he hadn't intended to show. "Fine," he said. "If you won't allow a proper room, the Voice will come to an improper one. You will still need to breathe. The flood does not consult archives."

“Good,” Ace said. “We prefer it honest.”

His mouth made a brave shape. “Then my function is concluded.”

“Not yet,” Mai said. She slid a thin case across the table. Inside: the annex copies, the ledger fragments, the procedure rewritten in her hand, ugly and human. “You will transmit this to every clerk who files under you. You will mark the Index: method compromised; venues unreliable; tokens corrupted; Mendax Theta ruined; assumptions denied. You will write your name at the bottom so no one can pretend the record filed itself. Then you will retire.”

He laughed again, softer, brittle. “You can’t fire me from the choir.”

“You can resign,” Ace said. “Or we make you a problem for men who prefer schedules. They dislike problems.” She tipped her head. “Which would you rather be—an apostate, or a backlog?”

He looked at the mountain in the doorway and calculated what doors are when they have wills. He looked at the blade in the pantry and knew sharp things never need to raise their voice. He looked at the boy with the dish and saw a line where a spiral used to be. He looked at the woman with the solder burns and the ugly charm, and he looked at the subject who refused to be a subject and understood that rooms have politics.

“Eiden,” Mai said, quiet enough that the room leaned in. “Be a person. Just once in your own notes.”

He took the case.

He signed.

It wasn’t a conversion. The ink didn’t weep. The ship didn’t bless him. He wrote his name because there are days when a man sees a wall he cannot catalog and decides not to use his head to test its structural integrity. He slid the case back, neat, the way men give back weapons they don’t intend to use again.

“I will not apologize,” he said, human and tired. “We kept worse floods from worse rooms.”

“Then stop making kitchens into rivers,” Ace said.

He closed his eyes once like a librarian shelving an argument and opened them with the coat back on.

“Venue remains open,” he said, because habit is a religion. “You will still be expected between decks.”

“We’ll be in the kitchen,” Mai said. “Bring your worst etiquette.”

The index case vanished the way a prop does when the script runs out of stage directions. Eiden stayed one more breath. He looked at the off-axis chair as if it were a wound, then at the crack in the clock as if it were a scar he finally understood not to heal. He met Ace’s eyes and found no contempt there, which annoyed him more than contempt would have.

“Goodbye,” he said.

“Good night,” Ace corrected, because kitchens deserve nights, not farewells.

He left like a thought changed mid-sentence.

The kettle decided to sing belatedly. Mai took it off the heat and poured water over new leaves, because you get a second cup when you do something hard without spectacle. Jel stacked his last plate and wiped the counter in a straight line. Rook became a man again. Kalyn emboldened a shadow with a small, satisfied tilt of her chin.

Mai turned the recorder back on. “Case file,” she said. “Wake anomaly. Note seven: Curator-of-Index identified as Eiden Marsh. Method admitted; resignation recorded; index notified. Result: curation network deprived of host authority on this vessel. Venue: retired. Kitchen: open.”

Ace lifted the mug and tasted the tea, which was no longer insultingly early. “We took his calendar,” she said.

“And his coat,” Mai said.

“Incoming,” Rook murmured, eyes on the internal—no alarm, just a pressure change in the ship’s bones that meant truth had decided to stop knocking. The dome dimmed by a shade as if a cloud had crossed a sun the ship did not have.

Mai set the mug down and reached for the console with hands steady from all the wrong reasons. The mirror corridor in the sandbox canted, then flattened, then shattered with the sedate hush of a set being struck by carpenters who’ve done this before.

No etiquette. No schedule. No host. Just a shape in the line where pressure meets will.

Ace felt the warmth behind the glass move to the windowsill and sit very still, tail curled around its feet.

“Next,” Ace said, gentle with the word.

Mai didn’t look away from the dark. “The Voice,” she said. “Without a conductor.” —

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