

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 10: Ashfall — Chapter 8 - Voice in the Flame

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 10.8 **Wordcount:** ~2616 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Rook, Kalyn, Jel, The Curator **Location:** The Echo's Wake **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 8 — Voice in the Flame

The first sign was the absence of a sign.

No etiquette. No schedule. No host. Just a weight across the ship's skin, as if the Echo's Wake had sailed from weather into pressure—the way air grows deliberate before a storm decides to be itself.

Mai's hands were already moving. She dimmed the lights to "family" and not "ceremony," killed the polite reverb in the halls, and let the vents mispronounce their chime. Rook took the doorway that made him part of the bulkhead. Kalyn stepped into the shadow that forgot how to flatter knives. Jel wiped a line across the counter and didn't turn it into a spiral.

Ace touched the copper loop at her harness and felt it warm with her own heat. Violet slid from behind the glass and sat where she'd learned to sit—sunlight along bone, the weight of a cat on a windowsill, curious and not hungry.

"Kitchen," Mai said. "We hold here."

The kettle went on. Not for tea. For truth. The small circle of flame under it made a visible fact—the kind of flame that doesn't ask a room to be impressed.

The voice didn't arrive as sound. It arrived as posture.

The air near the ceiling forgot how to be lazy. The dome darkened by a half-shade without losing any stars. The ship's old habit of exhaling politely stalled; the inhale stayed, like manners that had outlived their host.

Ace stood with her fingers on the chair she'd turned wrong and watched that half-shade take an interest in corners. "Speak," she said, not commanding, not inviting. Naming the option.

The first answer was a heat-shimmer above the stovetop that shaped itself according to memory's bad habits. A corridor. White, then the color of breath on glass. A woman's voice choosing polite words and running out of breath and saying true ones. The door that locked from the outside.

— proceed —

Ace didn't step back. "No."

The shimmer didn't tatter. It learned. It tried a different door. The galley clock brightened a fraction; the crack at six lengthened by a millimeter you only saw if you'd fallen in love with the imperfection. The storage cabinet wanted to remember a lamp Ace had bagged and boxed.

— harmonize —

Mai slid between the flame and the shimmer like a metronome choosing its own tempo. “Not music,” she said. “Not here.” She turned the kettle’s flame one click lower. The flame obeyed without being pleased.

The ship held. That was new. Without the Curator’s etiquette, without domestic anchors rehearsing consent for it, the Voice had to find a throat it didn’t own.

It found one: heat.

Ace felt the warmth bloom under her sternum the way it had bloomed a hundred times—only this time it did not belong to the thing outside her. Violet leaned into it. Not prodding. Not pleading. Settling, the way sunlight settles into a room when someone opens a curtain you thought was a wall.

“I’m here,” Ace told her.

Violet didn’t answer with words. She never had. But the glass between them had hairline cracks now, and the warmth didn’t break through; it poured—into rib, into breath, into the small place where yes used to pretend it fit. The copper charm drank heat like it was built for thirst.

The flame under the kettle flinched.

The room offered shape: a spiral drawn in steam, then crossed by three shallow slashes that pretended to be math. The steam tried to keep the scar; moisture forgot and made a cloud instead.

Mai smiled a small, unpretty smile. “You don’t get permanence from cooking,” she said. “You get dinner.”

A flick. The vent spoke in a voice that had been trimmed of temperature. Yes, it said, token-flat.

Ace set the charm on the counter and put her palm over it. The syllable under her skin didn’t move. “We melted that coin,” she said. “Find a new trick.”

The pressure changed pitch by half a knife-width. The room tried a rehearsal without a conductor: a stack of courtesies looking for a body to live in. It found no body willing. Rook yawned—immense, bored, scandalous to ritual. Kalyn stretched with cat-laziness and checked a knife she didn’t intend to use like a person flattens a napkin they have no intention of spilling on. Jel dried another plate and made a straight little street of white along the shelf.

“Case file,” Mai said, calm as making toast. The recorder took her words and put them where they could stand up by themselves. “Wake anomaly. Note eight: First Voice attempting posture through heat, steam, ambient pressure; no etiquette. Tokens unavailable. Domestic anchors retired. Venue: kitchen.”

The Voice heard its name. Names make patterns even when you’ve trained a room out of melody. The shimmer tightened. The flame under the kettle bared its teeth and remembered it was fire.

In the heat-tremor, a mouth: the idea of one; the suggestion of lips that had learned to form words because the air prefers mouths to vents. It opened. No sound. Only the weight of expectation.

“A rehearsal,” Ace murmured to it, remembering. “Not the performance.”

The mouth smiled. Not kind. Not cruel. Meaning: finally, you say the line we like.

Mai turned the kettle off. The sudden quiet where a small song should be made the room admit how much silence it had been stealing for itself.

“No,” she said. “Our lines are ours.”

Ace drew one blade.

No flourish. No promise of spectacle. The green heat came as a fact: a long, contained hiss of light, the color of a forest you can't burn down. The flame gathered along the steel like a thought remembering its best articulation.

The Voice leaned toward it the way cold leans toward a window.

“Speak,” Ace told it again, and this time the ask had terms. “In the open. Not from a schedule. Not from a kitchen you don't own.”

The heat shimmer wrinkled like someone trying not to look at a light because they'd promised themselves they would ignore it. The mouth shaped a word it had used too many times.

— align —

“Posture,” Ace said.

— proceed —

“No.”

The blade's green made a line across her face that could have been a scar or a blessing. Violet nested into the line, fitting her warmth to its heat without demanding to be the only story. Ace felt the adjustment like a joint learning it had been out of true for years and choosing, finally, to sit where bone had always wanted bone.

She turned the blade so that its light lay in a long stripe across the table. The stripe touched the index case's ghost, the crack at six, the off-axis chair, the clean plate, a mountain's forearm. The room chose the line over the mouth.

The Voice came closer.

Pressure, not breath. Intention, not consent. It touched the blade the way weather touches a wire. The green flame took the touch and did not yield. It made a sound that ears don't do justice to—like frost trying to speak summer.

Mai's hands were already giving the room something to be besides a stage. She docked a coil into a portable board, built a crude harmonic sink from ugly resistors and two alligator clips with a dent in one that only she could see. She set the board on the counter and tied it to the stove's iron with copper wire that had been a token last week and was a tool today.

“What does it do?” Jel whispered, forgetting to keep his voice dishwashing-small.

“Makes the room bad at hearing itself,” Mai said. “If it can't admire its own voice, it forgets why it walked in.”

“Like a choir with no mirror,” Rook rumbled.

“Exactly,” Mai said, pleased.

The heat over the blade coalesced. Not shape, not yet—more like the urge to be seen pressed through a sieve. The kitchen light bent by a degree a person wouldn’t notice unless they’d taught rooms to be honest. Kalyn rolled her shoulder to keep her knife from taking it personally.

“Try a word you didn’t steal,” Ace said softly.

The mouth rethreaded.

— hunger —

“No,” Ace said, and it wasn’t refusal for the sake of refusal. It was taxonomic: you don’t get to misname appetite.

— witness —

“We retired your host,” Mai said. “If you want a witness, use your own eyes.”

The pressure took a breath it hadn’t earned. The galley clock ticked the same tick it had been ticking since the last time it had been whole. The crack didn’t lengthen. It didn’t heal. It simply existed, stubborn as a rule that stopped being useful without becoming wrong.

Ace set the blade’s tip above the stove and let the green heat drink from the blue. The shimmer reached for the column and found a narrow path. Not possession. Not purchase. A bottleneck. A hurricane trying a chimney.

“Let’s see you honest,” Ace murmured.

It came the only way it could when the room refused to say please for it.

Not a face. Not an icon. A direction. A pressure gradient with will. It gathered along the green, tried to use the blade’s column as a throat, and discovered what all bad guests discover: the kitchen has its own voice.

Mai tapped the sink. A hum with no music entered the iron and spread through the stovetop. The hum had the temperament of work: unglamorous, relentless, friendly only to people who lifted things because they needed moving.

The ship’s bones vibrated, tiny and true. Between decks—where men like Eiden had drawn a venue with pencils—the ligaments of the hull said no in all the places that had been taught to nod.

The Voice took an interest in Ace as a problem. The pressure learned the shape of her sternum and pressed there, not cruel, not kind, just the way a wave recognizes a rock and thinks dominance and isn’t wrong about volume. It offered a weather report disguised as promise.

— drown —

Ace’s smile cut winter into kindness. “We learned to swim.”

Violet poured a little more light through the cracks in the glass. The warmth became co-conspirator

instead of climate: a shoulder pressed to Ace's from the inside.

"Are you with me?" Ace asked, eyes on Mai, voice for the thing behind her ribs.

The answer was heat braided to heat. It was not a roar; it was the gift of a single degree in the right place.

"Yes," Ace said aloud—but her yes had temperature. It carried history. No catalog could file it flat.

The pressure flickered. Not fear. Surprise. It had forgotten that some words, in some mouths, are too heavy to steal.

"Case file," Mai said, the recorder a ballast. "Wake anomaly. Note nine: First Voice enters via heat—chooses flame as conduit when denied etiquette. Subject refuses alignment; substitutes posture; Violet integrated as heat braid. Harmonic sink engaged; kitchen grounded."

The mouth tried one of its old tricks—a gift disguised as formality.

— permission to proceed —

"No," Ace said. "Ask permission to listen."

Silence. Not the rehearsed kind. The kind that happens when a room hears itself not echoing and decides to stop lying.

"Try again," Mai said gently. "Different question."

The pressure fell away from the blade and came back lower, closer to the level where living happens.

— listen —

"Good," Ace said. "Now listen hard."

She set the flat of the blade on the counter, point away from anyone's body, and let the green lull to a line instead of a spire. The heat tremor made itself narrow, precise, obedient to physics because there was no ritual left to borrow manners from. It learned the kitchen's vocabulary without being taught: chair, mug, counter, hand, breath.

Violet settled completely. No glass left. No claws. Just a warmth that belonged because Ace said it did.

A smaller shape attempted to sneak in at the edge of the room—a memory chosen for sugar: a basement flood that had never happened, a hand lamp that had never been theirs, a stair coughing smoke. Jel's hand went to the old lamp out of habit, found a quarantine box instead, and blinked as the picture broke like a bubble with no boy inside it.

"Not real," he murmured, and put the dish towel down in a straight, honest line.

The Voice learned quickly without a Curator slowing it down with "should." It tried noise; the sink ate it. It tried symmetry; the chair insulted it. It tried schedule; the wall switch clicked off the screen that dared to wake and ask for a time.

It tried a last old word, soft, resentful.

— witness —

Mai touched her chest. "Here," she said.

Ace touched hers. "Here."

The pressure eased, not because it had been defeated but because it had found no furniture to stand on. A tide cannot sit. It either rises or withdraws. Faced with a kitchen that refused to be a venue, it chose to stand outside and breathe.

The kettle had cooled. Mai turned the flame off and left the burner warm, a gentle circle like a thumbnail-sized sun going to bed on a good day. The blade's green dimmed to a line and went out with a soft sound Ace liked because it sounded like a promise that had been kept without spectacle.

They didn't celebrate. Celebration is a ritual, too, and rituals give bad guests ideas.

Mai checked the map—quiet, not clean. The ship would keep wanting to mirror things as long as the thing outside wanted to be mirrored. She reset the sink to a low, steady boredom. Rook became a man again and set the chair a trifle more wrong. Kalyn sheathed the knife with a whisper that informed the air what metal is for. Jel washed the last plate and stacked it where a plate belongs.

Ace rested both hands on the counter and looked down at the charm—ugly, sure, honest for days. "We'll need the bay," she said. "And the mirrors killed. No corridors. No doors to knock on. Just us."

Mai nodded. "We built the kitchen. Next we build the room where it ends."

"Between decks?" Jel asked, the way you ask if a storm is going to be weather or a name.

"No," Mai said. "Between us."

The ship listened and liked the sound of that.

Ace touched the place under her sternum where heat had braided to heat. Violet lay there as if she had always belonged and Ace had simply forgotten how to say so.

"Tomorrow," Ace said.

"Tomorrow," Mai agreed.

The Echo's Wake didn't exhale yet. It held its breath for the right reason and learned that there is a difference between suspense and patience. Somewhere in the ductwork a bead lost its courage and rolled into a drain. The galley clock kept perfect time with a crack that had stopped auditioning for importance and started aging into character.

In the sandbox, the last polite door winked out like a sign in a town that had learned to make its own weather.

"Case file," Mai said at last, because rooms love endings as much as people do. "Wake anomaly. Note ten: Voice accepted listening terms in kitchen; no consent assumed; no venue ceded. Violet integrated without conflict. Next: final room. No audience."

Ace lifted her eyes to the dome and found all the stars exactly where they had been when the night started. She smiled the small, winter-bright smile that had become a kind of home.

"Next," she said, and the ship understood the word in its bones. —

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