

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 10 - Known Unknowns

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.10 **Wordcount:** ~1984 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright, Mendax Theta, The Curator **Location:** Foundation Site **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### ## Chapter 10: Known Unknowns

Mendax Theta did not exist on the municipal atlas and took offense at being found anyway. The access route the binder described cut through an underpass no one inspected and a culvert records said was filled in. It wasn't. Water whispered in the dark like a rehearsal for talking. They moved by headlamp and map-memory until the culvert became concrete stairs and the stairs became a door so ordinary it disguised the ratio of its hinges.

Inside, the air was the same temperature as the idea of waiting. The lock accepted their notion of three hands because the room remembered them as weight, not people. Light came on like an apology. The **MOCK ARCHIVE** lived here too in its way: rows of readers and racks, consoles that preferred green text, a wall panel labelled **K-ALPHA THREE HANDS with its knife held in HOLD and three circles waiting for what they were due. Mai moved first. She didn't wake consoles. She woke the room's sense of inventory, the layer that kept count so it could claim it hadn't lost anything. "We're not taking," she said under her breath. "We're closing." Ace stood in the same posture she had at the exchange—palm over the first circle, not touching. Mai mirrored her. The ballast substitute—a small sack of ferrite, a ground plate, a coil tuned to absence—found its place without them having to look. Across the room, a service console lit itself to insist on being useful. Mai ignored it. The room decided to be a room again. "Protocols first," Mai said. She brought up the quarantine profile on a terminal that wasn't connected to anything a sane person would name. The file tree made sense only if you read it wrong. The sigil of waking inverted across its headers as impedance and delay, not as a picture. K-ALPHA acknowledged three signatures without ever knowing who had made them. "We're not erasing," Ace said. "We're preventing witnesses from being recruited, and we're sealing the door we used." Mai keyed in a change no one else had a word for: **AUDIT: ALIGNMENT DRIFT ACCEPTED DO NOT TIDY**. She bound it to the quarantine profile at the ritual layer only, where policy and sigil meet and do not cancel. The system tried to help. She forbade it gently.**

On the knife switch, the unlabeled detent warmed—listening for a palm that wasn't there. Ace held the idea of weight where her hand hovered. Violet backed her the way shadow backs light. Mai matched her breath, made the room a metronome they could trust for ten seconds.

"On my count," Mai said, and again there was no audible count, only the click at the edge of a downbeat no one else would feel. Together, they inclined their palms a whisper and let the knife move into the unlabeled detent. The room recognized triune presence: operational, operational, symbolic. The lock accepted **close** as an intransitive verb.

Nothing flared. Everything settled. The "unknown" node didn't resolve. It didn't even try. The quarantine's promise—**catch engineered wakes at the lip**—stayed sworn. The curation layer

elsewhere in the city would still mutter to itself in tidy loops; their notch would keep it murmuring off-time.

Mai released her breath first, then her palm. Ace followed. The coil's hum came down a measure. The **K-ALPHA** panel's circles cooled to the same not-temperature as the rest of the metal.

"Access for others?" Ace asked.

"Closed," Mai said. "Anyone trying will find a room that insists on being storage and a door that doesn't admit it has hinges."

"We leave a scar," Ace said.

"Two," Mai said. She pulled up the internal audit ledger and wrote a line in a place only false records live: **NOT-ACCESS GRANTED TO NOT-SIGNATORY purpose: to remember memory. She didn't sign it. She let the ledger sign itself in the geometry of their absence. On the terminal across the room, a bare window opened without asking. It drew the same sentence in the same careful letters as before: `WAKE ≠ WARNING` `WAKE = AUDIT` Under it, as if embarrassed by its own audacity, a third line wrote itself in paler type: `cur—` The dash hung there like a hand that had gone out for a shake and reconsidered. "Curator is either shy or cut," Ace said. "Either way, not here," Mai said. "Not anymore." She closed the window with the kind of keypress that tells a thing you respect it and are ending its shift. The room agreed. They packed as they had unpacked. On the way out, Ace paused at a desk nobody sat and turned a pen so its clip aligned with the edge of a blotter out of habit. She didn't remember ever having cared about pens. Her hand remembered. "Do you want to know?" Mai asked, not softly but not loud. "Exactly who held the anchor before." "No," Ace said, and smiled like this was the luxury it was. "I want to know we don't have to make the room say our names for the lock to hold." "Then we don't," Mai said. They left Mendax Theta as a room that denied being a room. The culvert breathed them back into city air. Traffic pretended to be meaningful. A pigeon did math with stale bread. By the time they reached the safehouse, the rigs had collected a single souvenir: a one-line audit message in a file that didn't exist: **ALIGNMENT: drift accepted node remains UNKNOWN`** In the margin, characters barely darker than the background settled as if they had always been there: **MTX`** Mai smiled at the screen with professional restraint and a private acknowledgement. "Not an enemy," she said again. "Not a friend," Ace said. "Not yet." They shut the rigs down. They made tea for once because coffee had done enough. They sat on the floor with their backs to the same wall and let the room be a room. "What do we tell Bright?" Mai asked. "That he was right," Ace said. "And that we didn't resolve the node." "And Order?" Ace flipped the coin; it flashed and didn't fall. "They'll plant again. Different soil. Maybe a different sigil under a different name. We'll see the shape." "Curator?" Mai asked. "Either a person who hates doors being left ajar," Ace said, "or a policy that loves tidy endings." She turned her head until their temples almost touched. "Either way, we meet them in the open next time." Mai closed her eyes, leaned that last inch, and let her forehead rest against Ace's. The quiet held. The notch held. The lock held. Inside Ace, under ice that had learned gentleness, Violet turned her face toward the future and did not hunger. You asked for locks, she said, and the words this time were more than memory; they were promise. Ace let herself believe it. "We did." Outside, the city practiced being itself without help. A bus misread its own schedule and kept going. A café left yesterday's doodle on the chalkboard because it liked the curl of the line. Somewhere, a harmonization process filed a form against a reality that refused to be corrected. Somewhere else, a coil in a wooden frame slept until someone pressed too hard**

**on the wrong heartbeat. They didn't pin the board that night. They didn't plot. They cleaned the table. They wrote Ace 9 — Wake Signal at the bottom of a page and drew a line under it. On the edge of the page, where no ink should have held, three pale letters ghosted themselves into the fibers in a hand they were learning to recognize: MTX Ace tapped the corner with one finger, once, like a greeting across a street. Mai saw, nodded, and didn't make it a conversation. "Tomorrow," Mai said, "we start on the ones who plant." "And the one who tidies," Ace said. They turned the lights out. The locks worked the way locks should: quietly, thoroughly, without needing applause. The file that had insisted it had always been true slept on its scar. The room made a place for two people to breathe. Ace & Mai were still here. That was the point. The rest would come looking. # Ace 9 - Wake Signal ## Tag: Maintenance Window The records center kept night the way good servants keep secrets—politely, thoroughly. Motion sensors did their small theater as a single figure crossed between compact stacks. No cameras panned; they were reading the wrong aisle by design. A workstation woke without showing a login. It preferred green on black. The figure's hands moved like someone who had learned to write before they learned to type, and never forgot either. `CURATION post-facto harmonization` `status: retry` `phase: off-beat ( $\Delta t = +0.07s$ )` `action: escalate? y/N` The cursor blinked. The figure did not press Y. They opened an audit pane only the policy could see and watched it argue with itself in immaculate grammar. The municipal cadence no longer let the last step land. A notch, somewhere, had made the room late to its own conclusion. On a second screen—no cable attached, no power reported—a sentence wrote itself in careful letters. `WAKE ≠ WARNING` `WAKE = AUDIT` The figure regarded it as you regard a painting hung slightly too low on purpose. A glass pencil rolled between their fingers. They lifted it to the corner where the system usually asked for a name and laid the tip down as if to sign. Cur— They stopped. They turned the pencil in their hand until graphite looked like shadow and shadow looked like graphite. Then they set the pencil down exactly parallel to the keyboard and closed the pane with a keystroke that left no mark. `action: escalate? y/N` The cursor blinked again. N. They typed instead: `reschedule harmonization manual review observe drift`. Enter. The policy nodded to itself—pleased to have a form to file—and began taking attendance in a room that wouldn't resolve. Across the stacks, a drawer labeled MOCK RECORDS resisted, then accepted a hand. The figure lifted a ledger that had not been there moments ago and added a line in the same neat hand as all the others: VARIANCE: alignment drift persists under K-ALPHA notch ACTION: do not tidy maintain unknown test alternate seal (Variant B) No signature. Presence retained. On the way out, the figure passed a service desk with a bell that said RING FOR NO ONE. They pressed it once with a fingertip that sounded like a pencil on paper. The bell obeyed and then thought better of it. At the door, a maintenance placard read TELECOM. The figure looked long enough for it to try STORAGE, then longer until it tired of both and settled for being metal. Outside, the city had chosen a clean pre-dawn. Streetlights timed out in obedient cascades. Somewhere under art and concrete, a coil slept between beats. Somewhere else, a node kept being unknown with professional pride. In a different room, where a safehouse still smelled faintly of solder and tea, a dark monitor brightened just enough to write three letters in the margin of a file that didn't exist and should not have been able to speak. MTX Then it went black, as if embarrassed to have said hello. — Ace woke a minute before her alarm because habits are a kind of grace. She listened to a quiet that had learned to mean \*held\*, and smiled into it. Mai breathed in the next room, even and certain. Violet turned her face under the ice—attentive, unhungry. Morning would bring the ones who plant and the one who tidies. Doors would need closing. Names would try to be said. They had locks. Ace rolled the jade coin across her knuckles. It clicked back into her palm on the beat she and the room now agreed to share. — <html><small><p align=center> © 2025-2026. "World of Ace, Mai and Shammy" and all original characters,**

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