

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 1 - The Echo in Plain Text

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.1 **Wordcount:** ~2463 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, The Curator **Location:** Foundation Site **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 1: The Echo in Plain Text

The safehouse hummed like a refrigerator too old to complain out loud. A wall-mounted air filter clicked every forty seconds; a network appliance in the corner ticked whenever it negotiated with the outside like a nervous metronome. Mai had her red jacket half-off, sleeves tied around her waist, lean arms bare to the bluish light of the monitor. She'd stripped the terminal to basics—no wallpaper, no icons, just a dark window with a blinking cursor and the sort of confidence plain text wears like a knife.

Ace stood behind her, shoulder to shoulder, close enough that the scent of solder and rain clung to her skin. She rolled a jade coin across her knuckles while the console scrolled. The coin traced its little orbit and clicked back into her palm. She liked little orbits. They told her the world still had a center.

"Foundation mirror's up," Mai murmured, low and even. "Read-only, ghost partition. If they notice, they'll blame a phantom process from last quarter."

"Phantom processes," Ace said, smirking. "Favorite kind. They never ask for coffee."

Mai's mouth twitched. She entered another command. The log tree unfolded with the soundless inevitability of a tide map. Dates, sizes, checksums. The directory they wanted had a label like a cough someone tried to disguise as a word: ``/archive/_wake/confirm/``.

"Too neat," Mai said. "They tried to bury it under boring."

Ace leaned in. Her reflection ghosted over the glass: small, black-haired, eyes like dark water with violet sparks somewhere deeper down if the light was wrong. She didn't like what neat meant in places like this. Neat meant decisions had already been made and memory rewritten to match.

Mai opened the file.

It wasn't much—no header, no body, simply ``Wake Confirmed`` on one line and a string of hex below it that didn't wear its meaning on its face. The timestamp wore a suit: stamped three years ago to the second, down to microtime that only a machine would notice. The edges of the window sang in low-frequency heartbeats from the building's wiring.

Ace said nothing. She listened to the way the room grew still around certain words.

Mai ran a diff against backups, then checksums, then signatures. The terminal threw back answers in coldblooded certainty and the smallest anomalies like grit in the teeth.

"There," Mai said softly. She pulled the console's font a notch larger—no flourish, no drama. Just a finger tapping once at the last line of a validation block.

`sha256 83c7f9...d4 # MTX`

Ace's smirk sharpened. "That isn't their alphabet."

"No," Mai said. "Not Order's notation, not Foundation's style. Doesn't match known tags or the way their auditors leave breadcrumbs." Her finger hovered above the glass. "MTX. Whoever that is, they touched this after the date says it was born."

"Retro-stamp. Quiet hands."

Mai timed her breath. "Checksum mismatch repaired afterward." Click. A small report bloomed open—a tidy set of auto-corrections that never should have been automatic. "Someone pushed this into the past with enough authority to make the logs obey."

Ace rolled the coin. "So either the file's a ghost that learned to haunt its own birth certificate... or someone outside the usual monsters cared enough to make truth polite."

"I can trace the toolchain, maybe the subnet," Mai said. "But not here. We're peeking inside glass, not touching the shelves."

Ace exhaled through her nose, a little amused, a little wary. "Keep MTX in your pocket. We pin this wall later."

The cursor blinked. Mai pulled metadata like a magician palming extra cards: creation vector, ownership masks, the list of processes that had permission to look but not see. A pattern emerged like bruises under skin—Foundation quarantine bit flipping on and off in an interval that was almost musical, and under it, a second signature she hadn't expected to see outside wardwork.

"Order's **sigil of waking**," Mai said, not looking away. "They braided their seal into a system flag."

Ace's fingers stilled around the coin. "Foundation married it?"

"Or grafted it," Mai said. She zoomed into the binary portion where the flag broke apart into numbers that felt like a ritual disguised as arithmetic. Her face tilted, silver hair casting soft shadows down her cheeks. "This isn't a file. It's a... prompt. A standing order for the system to arrange itself into a conclusion."

"Wake Confirmed," Ace said. "Conclusion first, evidence second."

Mai's expression was the sort Ace trusted most: the one that meant curiosity and danger had traded places. "If we try to copy it out, it'll reassert its canonical form. Like touching a sigil drawn on water—image holds, hand comes out wet, sigil is still perfect."

Ace dragged a chair with her foot and sat sideways on it, arms folded along the backrest. "Do it."

Mai smiled without humor and cloned the directory to a local sandbox. For a second, the file existed as a duplicate: `Wake Confirmed` and that tidy string of hex. The system's watchdog stirred. On the cloned machine, the text's spacing shifted by an imperceptible hair. The checksum line glitched and then righted itself, slotting back into the exact pattern from before.

"See?" Mai whispered. She didn't have to whisper. The safehouse didn't care. But she always did when the world insisted on making its own truth. "Write-protect enforced by history."

Ace listened again—past air filters, past street traffic bleeding through cheap insulation. There's a moment in rooms like this where you can hear what isn't there if you lean correctly. Something about the file's existence made the silence precise.

You asked for locks, something warm and cold at once said at the back of her head, more tone than words, more suggestion than voice.

"Stay," Ace said, gently, to the place inside her chest that wasn't just her. Not a scold. Not a plea. A promise made small enough to fit into the breath between syllables. The answer came as the sense of a smile pressed through ice.

Mai glanced up. "Violet?"

Ace's mouth curved. "Behaving."

"Good," Mai said, and the good held more meaning than the word.

She brought up the edit trail. There was no edit trail, not where human hands could see—only a sequence of system-level reconstructions that pointed to certain sealed nodes. It was like staring at a ledger that balanced itself by eating the leftover numbers. And there, in the footnote no footnote should have, a second glimpse of that tag:

*`commit: refactor.mendax.theta MTX` Mai didn't say anything this time. She just breathed in and out and kept reading. "Make a copy of the copy," Ace said. "Separate machine. Air-gap the second after you pull." Mai was already doing it. The second machine's fan made a moth-soft sound in the ducted quiet. She moved the file, and this time, underneath the compliance, a ripple remained—half a character width, a fractional discord like a note played by a string no one thought was wound that tight. "There," she said, and highlighted a nothing. To Ace's eyes, it looked like the empty space between two words. Mai toggled a view the way only Mai did: not from options, not from any button. She coaxed an overlay out of the text and let the machine reveal the difference. Underlay numbers. A watermark woven into the whitespace. "Foundation's quarantine bit," Mai said. "And someone else's hand redirecting it. These are mutually exclusive flags. They shouldn't both be true, but they are." "Someone taught the system to hold two breaths at once," Ace said. "Order's ritual and Foundation's rule kissing behind the bleachers." Mai's laugh was brief and disbelieving. "And someone called MTX had the nerve to leave initials on the bench." The terminal's clock slipped one second forward, then back—no, not back, Ace realized. It caught up to where it had always been. Her coin stopped between index and middle finger, balanced on the edge. "What does it want?" Ace asked. Mai set her elbows on the desk and, for once, didn't reach for the keyboard. She watched the file like it might blink if she did. "If I'm right, the file isn't announcing a thing that happened. It's demanding alignment. 'Wake Confirmed' means *align the logs, adjust the witnesses, make the world agree with the sentence.*" "Who benefits?" "The one who wrote the sentence," Mai said. Her eyes softened, and that softness was never weakness—just a decision to look at something without blinking. "Or the one who wanted us to find it." "Curator?" Ace said, tasting a name that belonged to another day and another room. She didn't know where the name came from; it didn't matter. Words stuck to this sort of truth at their own pace. "Too soon," Mai said. Her voice gentled further. "Let's not construct an enemy out of echoes. Not yet." Ace reached out without thinking and touched the back of Mai's hand. Her fingers were cool from living inside code. Mai turned her palm up like it was an old ritual they'd used a thousand times and a new one they were still perfecting. They stayed like that for a heartbeat or three. "Do you want to try to edit it?" Ace asked. "Not here," Mai said. "This mirror is patient but not deaf. We poke, it screams, someone notices, and we're arguing about good intentions in a white room with no door handles." Ace made a small face. "Hate those rooms." "Me too." The cursor blinked again. Mai closed the file, then reopened it, then closed it again as if repetition might teach it*

*manners. When she stood, the chair creaked, her jacket's tied sleeves swinging against her hips. She unplugged the portable drive, sealed it in a foil pouch, did the little thumb-flick that settled its clasp. She moved with precise economy—the way Ace loved to watch, as if Mai were an equation written with breath. “We have enough to know what it's doing,” Mai said. “Not enough to know why.” Ace nodded once. “Enough to know where to go next?” Mai's eyes cut to a block of directories a level up: a cluster with a name that didn't want to be looked at, styled like a misprint. ``_mendax.theta``. The icon (there were no icons here) somehow communicated weight. Mai selected it; the console acknowledged nothing; the directory nonetheless opened on the right side of the screen as if out of respect for stubbornness. “Of course you were here,” Mai said softly to the unattended archive. “Of course you were named for lying.” Folders nested into folders like a set of boxes carved from bone. The deeper they went, the less the interface adhered to any standard. Some labels shifted while they read them. On one pane, the breadcrumb trail in the console header stuttered and corrected itself as if embarrassed. “Don't fall in love,” Ace said lightly. “I only flirt with architectures,” Mai said, which made Ace's smirk for real. She scrolled again—and found a small ledger of access events that **shouldn't** have survived any cleanse, tucked under a filing code Foundation never used. The last three entries were anonymized, but the fourth-from-last had a fragment the anonymizer hadn't devoured: ``—/proc/ghost/.../commit: refactor.mendax.theta MTX``*

They looked at it without blinking for the space of two breaths.

Mai touched the screen. “Whoever MTX is, they weren't just reading,” she said. “They were rearranging the room **while inside it**.”

Ace felt the coin's edge again, a bite into her palm that wasn't pain. “Someone else who thinks in scars.”

The safehouse ticked. Outside, a tram sang iron on iron and passed on. Time did its honest best. Inside, the file stayed as it was asked to be.

“Pull what we can. Don't chase,” Ace said. “We go physically where this points when we're ready. If this is a gate, it has a door that isn't made of text.”

Mai copied a map—the sort old code calls a table and new code calls an index and ritual scholars call a schema. She printed nothing, saved nothing normal. She memorized patterns instead; Ace saw it happen, the way Mai's eyes changed when she chose to remember like a camera remembers, exact as frost.

“Done,” Mai said, and closed the mirror with the practiced cruelty of someone who's killed processes for their own good. The window vanished. The room breathed out, loud as a sigh.

Ace stood, chair pushed back with the smooth scrape of wood on cheap tile. “Hungry?”

Mai considered. “Coffee first. Then a thing with actual vitamins so you don't live on adrenaline and sarcasm.” She reached for her jacket sleeves, retied them, then slipped the jacket back on properly because the night was crawling and she liked the comfort of its weight.

Ace caught a thread on the desk's corner with her fingernail and tugged, reflex more than thought. The thread came away with a small static pop. Somewhere deep in the building, a relay clicked as if in response.

“Don't anthropomorphize the wiring,” Mai said, amused and tired.

“Can’t help it. It started it.”

They shut the lights, leaving the network’s rack units blinking to themselves, each a tiny city with its own idea of sun and moon. On the way out, Ace checked the three locks she always checked and the fourth she only checked when *something* had looked back. She paused with her hand on the door.

Violet?

A presence turned its face toward her under the ice. Not pressure. Not heat. The idea of a hand open and still.

You asked for locks, the thought repeated, but Ace realized the shape of the answer wasn’t admonition. It was memory.

“I know,” she said. Mai looked over, question unspoken.

“Just thinking about doors,” Ace said, and opened one.

In the hallway’s dim, a security camera tracked their motion with all the indifference money can buy. The night smelled like dust and cheap plastic, and the cleansing rain had passed; what remained was the fragile clean that follows violence. They walked. At the turn, Mai tapped Ace’s knuckles once, a habit they’d invented to say *here* without making it a ceremony.

“MTX,” Mai said quietly, as if testing the weight of the letters on her tongue. “Add it to the board?”

“Top right corner,” Ace said. “Small. Just enough to annoy me if I forget.”

Mai’s smile this time reached her eyes. “Perfect.”

They stepped out into the street. The city had gone reflective after dark, windows returning the world in cheaper metal. Somewhere, a server would insist that `Wake Confirmed` had always been true. Somewhere else, a name the system didn’t recognize had signed something anyway. Both could be true. For the moment.

They headed for coffee. The file waited, polite as a trap.

Ace 9 - Wake Signal —

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