

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 2 - Forgotten Room, Remembered Key

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.2 **Wordcount:** ~2610 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** City (unnamed) **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 2: Forgotten Room, Remembered Key

The rain had turned to a thin mist that clung to the street like breath that wouldn't leave. They walked two blocks in silence and turned down a service alley where dumpsters huddled like animals pretending to be furniture. At the end: a steel door with a municipal sticker half-peeled and a keypad that had lost its numbers years ago to someone's knife.

Mai checked the corners, then the sky—habit. Ace reached beneath the collar of her coat and tugged a small cord. A key slid into her palm: brass, flat cut, a triangular hole at the head. She weighed it, frowned, then held it like she'd held it a thousand times in a memory someone else had filed.

"You remember where it came from?" Mai asked.

"No," Ace said, honest and calm. "But my hand knows its weight."

"Let the hand try."

The lock wasn't at eye level; it was behind the keypad, a panel with two screws that looked like they were just for show. Ace pressed in the lower left corner and felt something yield; the panel popped a little and slid away. The keyhole waited like a throat. The key went in like it had been waiting.

The tumblers moved. The door didn't open; the floor did. A seam barely visible in the concrete shifted with a sigh. A hatch rose three centimeters and stopped, polite and heavy.

Mai crouched, pried it up with a tool that had never been sold to anyone as a pry bar, and revealed stairs made of steel grating and the smell of old paper.

"City records?" Mai guessed.

"Something older." Ace listened. The stairs didn't sing back, which was either good or lying. "Careful on the fourth step."

Mai froze mid-stride and glanced down, then back. "Did you just—"

"Memory in the feet," Ace said. "Or paranoia paying rent."

They descended. The lights came on in sections as if reluctant to waste a single lumen. The room at the bottom was long and low, finished in honest concrete and pipe. No windows. Metal shelving ran in parallel rows with neat labels welded to the ends: numbers, dates, departments. On the closest label, someone had scratched a tiny circle with a line through it, the kind of mark bored workers invent to mean nothing and everything.

Mai lifted the foil pouch from her pocket, placed it on a clean spot of the shelf like an offering, and set up a small tripod light that specialized in looking like it didn't exist. She pulled on nitrile gloves. Ace didn't; paper and skin had an understanding after everything.

"What exactly is this place?" Mai asked.

"Foundation leases spaces inside existing storage," Ace said, tilting her head to read the air. "A room inside a room. If the city floods, this room drains last. If a fire comes, this one starves."

"So. A kept secret that pretends to be an oversight."

"Those are the safest kind."

They found the locker by number, not by memory. It was at the back, chest-high, sealed with a strip of wax under clear tape—a small ritual in a bureaucratic accent. The impression in the wax was clean: not a logo, not a crest; a geometric knot with a line through it. The **sigil of waking** simplified to a civic stamp. Mai breathed out through her nose, then looked up at Ace.

"Want to do the honors?"

"Break the seal?" Ace asked. "You mean: remove the polite lie."

Mai smiled a little. "That one."

Ace slit the tape with the inside edge of a finger that looked like a nail but wasn't. The wax gave, the locker door stuck a second and then opened like it had been waiting for a safe word.

Inside: three archive boxes, a wrapped binder, and a cloth bag tied with a cord that had been knotted by someone whose hands didn't shake. Ace lifted the binder first. The cloth was cool. The weight was right. She felt her face do something she didn't give it permission to do—something like recognition that hurt.

"Ace?" Mai said softly.

"It's nothing," Ace lied gently, because sometimes you do that to steer the ship into water you can see. "Open the boxes."

Mai did, one by one, precise as surgery. Inside: paper copies of incident reports, printed emails turned into affidavits by letterhead, photos clipped to paper with rusted staples that had bled a little into the fibers. The header stamped top right wasn't a department name; it was a code block turned into a bureaucrat's idea of a title: `MENDAX.THETA/KAR/PROTOCOL`.

Mai's eyes sharpened. "KAR... karanteeni," she murmured, defaulting to the word that fit better than quarantine. She corrected herself: "Quarantine protocols."

Ace flipped the binder open. Inside were copies of copies. She recognized her own handwriting on a single tab—just a letter, just a line, just enough to be undeniable. She turned a page. Names leapt and then disappeared under heavy black rectangles. All the signatures had been redacted, not with ink but with physical tape affixed to the copy so that no scanner would capture the underlying name cleanly.

"Cute," Mai said. "Analog redaction for a digital age."

"Sticks better in court," Ace said, and then wondered why she'd said it like she'd said it.

Mai set the tripod light to a frequency that wasn't visible so much as present. She pulled a thin sheet from her bag—a flexible film with a surface that looked like it wanted to be velvet and technology changed its mind. She slid it over the page and held the light at an angle. The black rectangles didn't whiten. They did something else instead: bled faint halos at the edges. In the halo, lettering ghosted back, too faint for a camera but not for eyes that wanted.

"The tape adhesive took some toner with it," Mai said, clinical and pleased. "Not enough to read it plainly. Enough to read it stubbornly."

She leaned in. The first line under the redaction resolved as a backward relief: `MAI —` The last name was a smear that could have been anything and was enough. Mai's mouth tightened in a complicated line—anger and humor and the relief of solving a petty puzzle.

Below it, another name. The letters had bled into each other, but the shape of them was something Ace's body knew. Her thumb grazed the page without touching it.

"Ace," Mai said, not asking.

"Looks like." Ace's voice didn't shift, and that was an effort. She studied the date—two years and change ago—and the location code: a mash of letters and numbers that didn't match any city locator she knew, which meant it belonged to the Foundation's internal atlas.

Mai slid to the protocol block. "Here," she said. "Three signatures required to initialize K-Alpha lock on `MENDAX.THETA` quarantine. Two "operational"—one Foundation, one field. Third "symbolic"—the anchor."

"The anchor," Ace repeated. She didn't like the way that word fit. She'd seen anchors; they were honest weights. Symbolic anchors dragged a different way.

Mai skimmed. "The symbolic signature loads a binding—ritual layer. Looks like... a partial overlay of the sigil of waking. But inverted. A seal against the outcome the sigil would normally enforce."

"Hold waking still," Ace said. "Make the 'confirm' wait."

Mai flipped to the last page. The signatures were there in spirit: `— —`, `— —`, and below them a seal that had been impressed into the paper hard enough to bruise fibers, then sanded down to remove detail. Even erased, it looked like a circle that didn't accept being a circle.

"The third signer's name is fully removed," Mai said. She didn't sound surprised. She didn't sound resigned either. "Foundation kept the presence, deleted the person."

"The anchor signed and then became ballast."

Mai huffed a breath that might have been a laugh if it had more room. "Poetic."

"Lazy," Ace said. "If you're going to erase a person, at least do it with some craftsmanship."

Mai looked at her sideways. "You ever worry we've said that more than once?"

"I worry when I can't remember if we meant it."

They worked the boxes. Paper is honest about its age. Some sheets were too new to match the dates

stamped on them. Others were exactly as old as they claimed. In one folder, a map printed from a plotting program showed a cluster of coordinates under city utilities. The legend said “maintenance,” and the font said “don’t look.” One dot was circled—once in blue, once in pencil, and once—the pressure pattern suggested—in the absence of any instrument at all, just a pressed fingertip.

Mai held that page differently, like it might bruise. “This one,” she said, and didn’t justify it. She didn’t have to. Compasses live in some people’s bones.

Ace reached for the cloth bag. The cord came loose with a pull that had known where to resist. Inside: a small metal stamp with a handle worn smooth by use that couldn’t have been hers. The face of the stamp had been ground flat. The handle carried letters sacrificed to friction. Ace brought it close to the light and tilted it. The ghost of the design lived under the scarring: a circle cut by a line, and fine work around the edge that had once been language.

“The anchor stamp,” Ace said. “Or a prop for a stamp.”

Mai set the stamp down and lifted the last item taped to the bag’s inside: a Polaroid. The image had tinted pink with age. It showed this room from higher up, as if the camera had been held by someone standing on the ladder. Two figures at the locker, backs to the camera. One small, hair like spilled ink. One taller, silver against the concrete light. No faces. Anyone could have been anyone if you didn’t already know.

Mai’s throat moved. “They documented the act and erased the actors.”

“Proof for someone who couldn’t be named,” Ace said. She slid the photo back into the bag with an impulse that surprised her—protective, not clandestine. Some artifacts are better at choosing their keepers than people are.

“Pulls?” Mai asked, professional again by increments. “What do we copy, what do we leave?”

“All protocols and the map,” Ace said, tapping the circled dot. “Photos we keep original. The stamp... photograph it, don’t take it. If the world checks, we want the room to look like the story it thinks it tells.”

Mai nodded and unfolded a thin scanner that looked like a bookmark. It drank paper without touching it, swallowing images and returning nothing to show it had eaten. She handled each sheet the way she handled most things: like it might cut, and that would be fine, but not tonight. When she reached the page with the redacted signatures again, she hesitated.

“Do we restore it?” she asked. “Even for us?”

Ace thought of doors and of the way Violet had smiled under ice. She thought of the way the system had held two contradictory flags and called it obedience. “Not yet,” she said. “If we know too much now, we’ll try to use it now. And I don’t want to be that predictable.”

Mai accepted that with a soft grunt, the one that acknowledged restraint as a form of skill. She scanned the map last. When she finished, she rolled the scanner back into nothing, killed the light, and stood still to listen to the room’s opinion of their work.

The room approved. Or it didn’t notice. Sometimes those are the same.

They reboxed everything the way they’d found it; Ace re-taped the seal with surgical neatness and re-

seated the wax like a museum restorer who didn't mind lying to an exhibit if it meant no one would break the glass. She closed the locker. The air felt different—emptier in the right way, like a chest after a held breath out.

On the stairs, the fourth step still waited to misbehave. Mai skipped it. At the top, Ace locked the hatch with the key. Her palm recalled the exact angle you had to turn to make the tumblers accept the end of a story.

"You going to tell me when you first carried that key?" Mai asked, casual as a coffee order.

"When I remember," Ace said, equally casual. "Or when I stop needing to."

Mai accepted both answers as if they were the same. Outside, the mist had thickened enough to be called weather. The city did its late shift: fewer lights, more honesty.

They ducked under a broken neon sign and into a narrow diner that existed primarily so other places could pretend not to know it. Coffee steamed. Eggs happened to other people in a corner. Ace chose a booth where the back wall held still when she stared at it.

Mai slid in opposite and unfolded the printed map without making it look like a printed map. She traced a finger along the line of utilities and stopped where the circled dot insisted.

"Here," she said. "Old telecom exchange under a municipal arts building they keep renovating. No one admits it still has power."

"Which means it does," Ace said. "And which means something else eats the bill."

Mai sipped coffee. She drank like she read—measured, attentive. "If `MENDAX.THETA` was meant to catch false herätteet—false awakenings, engineered prompts—then the exchange could be the place they wired as the net."

"Or the place they cut the first hole."

"And taped it over with rituals and system flags." Mai's eyes warmed, the way they always did when a map started to match a world. "We bring a clean drive, a meter that doesn't speak the same grammar, and earplugs for the lies."

"And a snack," Ace said.

Mai's mouth tilted. "Obviously."

The bell over the diner door jangled. Two men in city vests entered arguing amiably about whose turn it was to hate the weather. The world stayed ordinary on purpose. Ace liked it like that. Ordinary was a good place to hide truth from people who didn't want it anyway.

She looked down at the map again. A faint outline had appeared where Mai's finger had rested a little too long—skin heat coaxing invisible ink. It wasn't ink. It was a watermark laid in the paper at manufacture: a thin circle cut by a line. For a heartbeat Ace thought of the stamp. Then she realized the mark was older, part of a batch of stationary that had been purchased under a department code no one would question and no one would remember.

"Sigil of waking everywhere once you know how to tilt your head," Mai said. She hadn't looked up from her cup. "They wanted the world to agree with them."

“And we wanted it locked,” Ace said.

Mai met her gaze. “We still do.”

Ace nodded. “We go at first light.”

Mai’s hand found Ace’s under the table and squeezed once, the way you do when the future is a hallway and you can already hear someone breathing at the other end. Ace squeezed back. She didn’t look at Violet; she didn’t need to. The ice was quiet. The locks held.

On the way out, the diner’s TV mumbled news that wasn’t, and the window glass showed them back to themselves twice. Outside, a bus hissed to a stop and opened its doors for no one. The city’s heartbeat continued, honest and mechanical.

They turned north toward the arts building and the exchange below it, walking like they’d been there before and were going back to collect whatever they’d left behind on purpose.

Ace 9 - Wake Signal —

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