

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 3 - Location Unknown

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.3 **Wordcount:** ~2378 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** Foundation Site **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 3: Location Unknown

They reached the arts building before the city had decided what color morning would be. Posters from three exhibitions ago layered the entry like geological time. A side door wore a “NO ACCESS” sign in a font that had gone out of style twice. Mai tested the handle and it failed politely. The service gate around back did not.

“Utilities marked dead,” Mai said, showing Ace a municipal map on her tablet. “So obviously—”

“Alive,” Ace finished, and they slipped through.

The loading corridor smelled like paint that would never dry. At the end, a freight elevator pretended not to know them. Mai tapped its inspection plate, then the panel above the call button. Behind scratched plastic, a second panel waited with a three-pin connector no one in the last twenty years had reason to notice. Mai had a cable for it. The elevator sighed, decided to remember, and opened.

“Basement two,” Mai said.

The button for B2 didn’t exist. The space where it would have been did. Mai pressed that, and the car started down through a floor the indicator didn’t acknowledge. Ace braced one hand on the wall as the weight of the building shifted around them, and counted the beats between cable groans. On three, her shoulders eased. Machines keep time like honest drummers.

B2 was a corridor, cinderblock and excuses. At the end, a door waited with a sign that said `TELECOM`. Ace looked once and read `TELECOM`. She looked again and read `STORAGE`. She didn’t like that. Mai saw it too; the smallest crease appeared between her brows.

“They put the sigil into the building labels,” Mai said softly. “Not literally. Just the logic of it.”

“Make the world agree,” Ace said, and tried the handle. It turned.

The old exchange was a long room with a steel-grate floor and racks in rows, some powered, some not, some pretending not to be. Copper bundles looped like sleeping snakes. Fiber ran in clean lines, then kinked where someone had made a decision without permission. Along the far wall, a municipal patch map large as a bed sheet—acetate on backlit glass—showed street grids and service lines. A single red pin marked nothing in particular. When Ace walked closer, the pin had moved. When she blinked, it was back.

“Don’t chase the furniture,” Mai murmured, and Ace smiled because she’d been about to.

Mai unpacked her meter, the one that didn’t speak anyone’s grammar but hers. She clipped three leads to three things that didn’t want to be spoken to: a dead breaker, a ground strap with paint on it,

and an old analog alarm wire that had been cut and tied off into a loop. The meter hummed like a beehive had learned restraint.

“Foundation power is here,” she said. “But the draw is on a shadow ledger—off-books, two-second delay in reporting.”

“Two seconds is a long time,” Ace said.

“In truth it is.” Mai flicked a switch. The hum changed. “There’s also a low-frequency field layered under the mains. It’s not interference. It’s a metronome.”

“For what?”

Mai tilted her head. “Agreement.”

Ace moved between racks, reading asset tags without reading them—letting them step into her attention if they needed to. Some had Foundation barcodes with honest wear. Some wore municipal metal tags beaten flat and re-stamped. One rack had two tags in the same place, layered, a bruise you could peel if you wanted to get the room angry.

She stopped at a junction cabinet whose door had been screwed shut with security screws that existed primarily to make you feel underqualified. Ace’s forefinger was more qualified. She pried it open and found a panel of fuses that had been replaced by jumpers soldered in place with care. Someone had labeled each jumper in tight block letters. The labels read:

`WAKE.BRIDGE A` `WAKE.BRIDGE B` `WAKE.BRIDGE C`

Mai joined her. “They hard-wired the conclusion,” she said. “No config. No UI. Change only by tools and hands.”

“Hard truths last longer,” Ace said.

“Hard lies do, too.”

A sound rose behind them, small and old: a tape deck accepting a cassette. They turned. In the corner by a cabinet that had been built when people thought beige was a virtue sat a dictation machine, municipal issue. A plastic tag on its base said `PROPERTY OF PUBLIC WORKS`. The machine shouldn’t have had power. It did. A tape had not been there. It was now.

Mai looked at Ace. Ace nodded; go ahead. Mai pressed PLAY.

The speaker cracked. A voice filled the room in the way voices fill rooms when they’ve been waiting too long—metallic at the edges, human in the middle.

“—check— log begins,” the voice said. Genderless by compression, tired by design. “Location: unknown.”

“Cute,” Ace said under her breath.

“Protocol review,” the voice continued. “MENDAX.THETA K-Alpha lock engaged. Two operational signatures present. Third symbolic anchor applied. Result: wake alignments suppressed at site. Secondary result: ambient signage drift. Recommendation: do not correct drift. Drift hides lock.”

Mai's eyes met Ace's. She didn't need to say it: the door saying `TELECOM` and `STORAGE` and both had been policy.

"Incident notes follow," the voice said. "Auditors from—" a blip, the sound of a redaction cut in, "—expressed concern re: personnel naming in documents. Names removed per instruction. Presence retained. Do not attempt to restore. Do not attempt to name the anchor. Naming alters binding weight."

On instinct, Ace looked down at her hands. They looked like hands.

The tape clicked, like an old machine taking a breath. "Field report," the voice resumed. "Two contractors accompanied. Small. Efficient. The small one requested the lock. The tall one built the lock. Neither identified. Both signed—" another blip cut the words. "Anchor signed. Stamp destroyed per order. Keep the stamp body as ballast."

Ace didn't move, but something in the set of her shoulders acknowledged the geometry of being seen from behind without consent. Mai's expression didn't change. Her fingers tightened just once around the meter's frame.

"Postscript," the voice said. "Wake message continues to attempt alignment via municipal network. Mitigation: redirection to 'unknown' node. Reminder: node must remain 'unknown' in all systems. If the system tries to resolve the node, ritual layer may slip. Do not put a name on it. Location: unknown."

The tape stopped. The machine clicked and ejected the cassette halfway out like a tongue. On the label, someone had written in pencil: `DO NOT FILE`. Under that, fainter, where an eraser hadn't quite erased it: `CUR—` then a smear.

Mai reached to take it. Ace caught her wrist lightly. "Gloves," she said.

"Right," Mai murmured, sliding nitrile on without looking away from the cassette. She lifted it. It was warm, which meant heat where there shouldn't have been, which meant power through a path no one approved. She tipped it toward the overheads. No watermark. No municipal logo. Just the weight of a tool used for something it was not designed to do and happier for it.

She slipped the tape into a static bag and sealed it. "Enough to prove intent," she said. "Not enough to prove who."

Ace glanced at the exchange map. The red pin had migrated a centimeter. She marked its first position in her head, the way you mark positions you might need to die on later.

"What else?" Ace asked.

Mai moved to the back wall. A breaker panel wore a faded label: `AUX LIGHTS`. Under it, smaller, a paper strip: `AUXALTS`. When she blinked, both strips said the same thing. When she didn't blink, they didn't. She opened the panel. Inside: no breakers. A set of binding posts and a block of resin with copper wires sunk into it like veins. Two wires had been cut. Two others had been spliced, then wrapped with cloth tape. On the tape, a sigil had once been drawn in pencil and then erased with a thumb.

"Layered binding," Mai said. "Ritual in parallel, not series. If one fails, the other keeps the beat." She pulled a probe from her roll and touched the resin. The meter murmured like it had put a stethoscope to the opposite of a heart. "Still beating."

Ace looked past her at a stack of sealed crates with municipal serials. The top crate's stencil read `FILTERS`. When Ace stepped left, it read `FOLDERS`. When she stepped right, `FILTERS` again. She stepped back to center and it read nothing.

"Ambient signage drift," she said.

"It hides the lock," Mai echoed the tape. "Beautiful in an ugly way."

Under the panel, a narrow door sat at ankle height, half-hidden by a mop bucket no one had used. Ace nudged the bucket aside with her boot and tried the door. It opened into a crawlspace that didn't care for human proportions. A cold draft came out smelling like old varnish and years no one had admitted to living through.

"Do we go?" Ace asked.

Mai lay down and peered in. The beam of her headlamp found conduit, then darkness, then a small metal plate bolted to the floor of the crawlspace with an engraving so shallow the lamp had to be at the right angle to get it. `NODE: —`. The line for the node number was there and it wasn't. Someone had poured clear epoxy over the empty field until it had become the field.

"We'll fit," Mai said. "But I don't think it wants us yet."

Ace believed rooms when they said no. She closed the door softly, like you close a sleeping child's door when you aren't sure sleep will stay.

They returned to the racks. Mai traced the WAKE.BRIDGE jumpers with a fingertip above the insulation and hummed to herself in a scale Ace had learned meant *I'm thinking in three dimensions*. She took a photo and then another from a slightly wrong angle so she'd notice later which one she'd meant.

"What do you make of 'Location: unknown' as a node?" Ace asked.

"A sink," Mai said. "If a system can't resolve a destination, it sends the packet into nowhere. But you can make a nowhere that's actually a somewhere if you build it under the floorboards. Which they did."

"The tape said not to name the anchor," Ace said. "So the node never gets a name."

"And so the wake process can't finish aligning," Mai said. "Because the last step is 'announce the where.' It keeps reaching and never quite touching." She paused. "But we touched it. We're here."

"We're not *naming* it," Ace said. "That matters."

Mai looked at her in that way that said *you're right and I also hate that you're right*.

They packed what they'd take: the photograph of the bridge wiring, the reading logs from the meter, the tape sealed in its bag. Mai sketched the drift pattern of the red pin on the map—a triangle that wasn't, lines that refused to meet at the expected angle. She wrote nothing on the paper to avoid tempting the building into correcting her handwriting.

At the door, Ace looked back once. The sign said `TELECOM`. A moment later, `STORAGE`. When the elevator opened for them, the indicator briefly claimed they were on B1, then admitted to nothing, then graciously decided it had never lied.

On the ride up, Ace asked, "Do you think the voice was a person or the building?"

Mai considered, serious. "Both. People leave their shapes in tools. Tools repeat those shapes when no one is looking."

Ace nodded, filed it where she filed things she might need to say to Violet later as proof that the world had rules beyond hunger.

The elevator doors parted on a gallery filled with canvases too clean to be loved yet. A docent swirled by in soft shoes, followed by a child pointing at a sculpture of a chair that was not a chair. The red pin on the exchange map had moved again in Ace's memory, as if it were following them by staying where it was.

Outside, the day had finally chosen a color: washed pewter, the kind that makes traffic lights look like religion. They walked until the building was another thing behind them that could swear it had never met them.

"Back to the safehouse," Mai said. "We log what we can without letting it talk us into agreeing with itself."

"And then the node," Ace said.

Mai glanced sideways. "You want to go in the crawlspace?"

"Eventually." Ace rolled the jade coin across her knuckles, skin remembering weight. "But not before we're sure we can close the door behind us."

Mai nodded. They crossed the street. A bus hissed, angry that no one loved it properly. A newsstand sold yesterday's paper with today's price. Mai's phone buzzed with a notification from a server that should not have been able to reach her in this mode. She looked. The screen displayed a single line before the sandboxed app crushed it to static:

*`NODE STATUS: UNKNOWN do not resolve` She showed it to Ace. "Polite," Ace said. "Insistent," Mai said. They didn't answer. They let the message be the message and kept walking. Two blocks later, Mai stopped and looked back the way some people look up for weather. "Do you feel that?" she asked. Ace did. Not a pressure, exactly. More a sense that a word had been placed on the table between two other words and both had made room. She closed her eyes and listened toward the place inside her chest where ice and heat met. *You asked for locks,* said the not-voice. *Some locks want to be used.* "Not yet," Ace whispered without moving her lips. When she opened her eyes, Mai was watching her with the kind of smile that exists only for two people. "Good," Mai said, and didn't have to explain what she meant. They turned the last corner toward the safehouse. The city accepted them back like it accepted any weather. Behind them, under art and concrete, a red pin held still on a map and moved when no one looked. In the room they'd left, a tape machine clicked once as if deciding whether to speak again and chose, for now, to keep its breath. # Ace 9 - Wake Signal —*

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