

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 4 - Write-Protect

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.4 **Wordcount:** ~2134 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Mendax Theta **Location:** Foundation Site **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### ## Chapter 4: Write-Protect

Back at the safehouse, the air had the same stale-clean quality as before, like a sealed jar that had once held rain. Mai powered the outer network down to a hum and set the two portable rigs on the table side by side. She didn't speak for a minute. She let her hands do the thinking that words would only slow.

"Two lanes," she said finally. "One to look. One to lie."

Ace arched a brow. "We're taking honesty out for coffee and telling it we're running late."

Mai's mouth tipped. "Roughly."

She slid the static bag onto a mat, grounded the casing with her wrist chain, and fed the cassette's contents into a cold reader that turned magnetism into numbers without ever admitting it had seen a tape. On the other rig, she spun up a stripped OS with no libraries left that might try to be helpful. The screens lit the room in two different whites.

"First the look lane," Mai said. "We reconstruct the dictation. We don't normalize. We don't optimize. We accept every stutter for what it is."

The voice came through cleaner than it had in the exchange, because the machine here respected its age instead of modernizing it to death. The same sentences. The same instructions. The same insistence on \*unknown\* as a protected species. Mai let it run once, then killed the audio with a key command so sharp it could cut.

"Now the lie," she said.

She built a tiny, ugly process—half script, half ritual—not big enough to step on the floorboards, only big enough to test whether the house noticed footsteps. She gave it the name of nothing and the address of nowhere, then told it to listen for any attempt by the system to align a `Wake Confirmed` state.

"It's not going to shout," Ace said.

"It never does." Mai keyed it live.

For a while, the error logs made the tired noises all machines make when asked to be vigilant. Then numbers began to repeat in a turnstile pattern. A heartbeat that wasn't a heartbeat, slow as a pledge. The rig with the cold OS reflected the pattern back with the flat stare of good porcelain.

"Metronome," Mai murmured. "I want to see how it handles interference."

Ace reached over, stole one of the coasters off the table, and flipped it under the mug Mai wasn't drinking. The coaster had a generic logo stamped on it in blue. For one second the ink darkened, then condensed into letters that weren't there a breath ago: `AGREE`. Ace and Mai waited without blinking. The letters softened until they were only their own memory of themselves, then the coaster was a coaster again.

Mai leaned back. "Ambient signage drift," she said. "At this scale."

"Still hiding the lock," Ace said.

Mai pulled the second portable closer. "I'm going to copy the `Wake Confirmed` file again. Not from the mirror. From our own copy of the copy of the copy."

"See if it still insists on being itself," Ace said, and the coin moved through her fingers like she'd been born with it.

Mai cloned the file to a sandbox folder and disabled everything that could substitute intent for action. The clone arrived, perfect in its imperfection. The checksum resolved to the same hex string as always. A moment later, the sandbox's watcher kicked in and ran a reconciling process Mai hadn't installed.

"It's pulling the future back into the present," Mai said quietly.

"Or the past into the present," Ace said. "Depending on which hurts less."

Mai set a trap. She split the file into two halves on a boundary that had no meaning to human eyes but mattered very much to the alignment routine. On one rig she deleted the lower half. On the other, she deleted the upper. She let the system try to correct both at once across an air gap.

The left rig filled the missing top half from nothing. The right rig filled the missing bottom half from nothing. The two halves were not, strictly speaking, identical to the original—but when Mai layered them, the result was identical enough to re-trigger the metronome in both machines. The room's silence tightened by a hair.

"It doesn't know we're lying if we lie symmetrically," Mai said.

Ace's smirk was minimal and pleased. "Good habit."

Mai pushed farther. She altered a single character in the checksum line and left a note for herself three layers down—an annotation only a human eye would bother to see. The checksum corrected itself. Her note remained, a hair-thin line of graphite under the paint.

Ace tapped the margin of the screen with her knuckle. "Scar."

Mai nodded once. "Not a wound. A reminder where tissue reorganized."

They watched the program try to overwrite the reminder and fail. It did not recognize the scar as a violation because it had been made below the grammar it understood. The machine accepted both truths together and called it compliance.

"Okay," Mai said. "Let's ask it where the node is, indirectly."

She wrote a query in a language the wake process could overhear without being invited to answer. She asked the universe-not-as-universe a careful question: \*if a packet tries to resolve `unknown`,

and is not allowed to, what is the fallback conductor?\*

The metronome tripped, then steadied. On the second rig, a fractionally different tone phased in and out, like two clocks on opposite sides of a wall. Mai closed her eyes and listened. Music had taught her this: how to hear two times at once and know which one would win.

"It's not coming from the municipal network," she said. "It's coming from something that pretends to be part of it. It borrows the authority and gives back the conclusion."

"Mendax Theta," Ace said.

"Or a layer under it," Mai said. She opened her eyes. "But the K-Alpha lock's still engaged. The anchor is still in place."

Ace didn't look down at her hands this time. She didn't have to. She could feel the idea like weight. Violet turned her face under the ice; Ace didn't ask. She already knew what the answer would be: \*you asked for locks.\*

Mai pushed her chair back an inch, the kind of motion a person makes when they're about to draw a line and then step close to it. "I want to try editing the metronome," she said. "Not the file. The beat."

"How?" Ace asked, not as a challenge but as an invitation to speak aloud the plan that already existed.

"Notch filter," Mai said. "I take the frequency where it insists and I shave it. Just enough that its own phase cancels the tail. It'll still think it's doing its job. It'll just spend all its time agreeing with itself at the wrong volume."

Ace considered. "Do it to the lie lane first."

Mai did. She built a narrow filter, a ritual drawn with numbers and a resistor network built on the fly with parts that had once been a radio and a toy that played three songs on command. The filter came alive with an unlovely honesty. She slid it into the listening chain. The metronome kept beating, but a high hiss vanished—the scrape of self-correction built into the correction.

"Phase noise gone," Mai said. "If it was talking to something else, it's now talking to itself."

"And in the look lane?"

Mai mirrored the filter and slid it in there, too. The trick was not making both lanes identical. If both were the same, the system could reconcile them and enforce canon. If they were similar in the right way, they would agree to disagree forever without triggering a repair.

The room breathed differently. The coaster's logo stayed a logo. The clock on the oven decided to be wrong again and owned it. Mai's rig stopped ladling small fixes over big ones. The wake process pulsed; the node did whatever nodes do when told to stay unknowable. Nothing broke. That was the miracle: nothing broke.

"So we can hold it in place without feeding it," Ace said. "We're not amputating. We're starving a reflex."

Mai exhaled a slow, careful breath. "That buys us time. It also means we can study without becoming part of the alignment."

She reached for the portable drive they'd used to scan the binder pages. She brought up the K-Alpha excerpt again and let her eyes run the same paragraph until the angle of the words stopped changing. "Three signatures," she said quietly. "Two operational. One symbolic. The anchor holds the lock against the 'sigil of waking' long enough to delay the final agreement."

"And the third signature," Ace said.

Mai didn't answer with words. She set the portable aside and laced her fingers. She looked at Ace and didn't look away.

Ace tilted her head. "If we needed it again," she said, evenly. "Would you ask me?"

Mai's lashes lowered; when she looked up, her eyes were steady. "No," she said. "I would ask us."

Ace's smile was small and unreasonably bright in a room full of machines. "Correct answer."

They let that be enough for now. They had work.

Mai brought up the `MENDAX.THETA` path map she'd memorized. She overlaid the municipal exchange routes with the Foundation's fictional atlas and found the places where fiction dripped into fact. Three intersections glowed where they shouldn't have: a substation that had been "offline" for ten years, a library basement with a boiler that never cooled, and the arts building exchange they'd just left.

"Triangle that isn't a triangle," Ace said, recalling the pin's drift. "We've got two corners in hand. The third pretends it doesn't exist."

"Library," Mai said. "Of course it's a library."

She tapped in a few notes: timing windows when the building's heating cycle would mask power draw; staff schedules cribbed from a public calendar that someone had thought was harmless to publish; the idiosyncrasies of a security guard who loved crossword puzzles with an ecclesiastical passion.

She paused. Across on the other rig, a new logline wrote itself and then tried to unwrite: `NODE STATUS: UNKNOWN do not resolve`. *There was no app open that could have produced it. The scar they'd left in the checksum waited in the background like a handprint under paint. "Time to pull the pull," Mai said, and killed the listening processes. The metronome went on without them; it always would. They'd simply stopped inviting it to dinner. Ace stood, stretching joints that never truly needed it, a performance for a body that liked to be included. She pulled on her coat and stepped into the holster lines like water finding old paths. Mai packed the rigs as if she were setting bones; everything fit without fighting. The cassette in its bag slid into a pocket with a weight that made itself known, like a promise. At the door, Ace checked the three locks and the fourth. The hallway outside was the same narrow throat, the same indifferent camera. She tracked the camera's motion out of the edge of her eye and it tracked her back. Honest transaction. "Library," Mai said, and Ace nodded. "Coffee first," Ace said. Mai pretended to think about it. "Yes." They hit the street. The day had sharpened from pewter to something with edges. People existed. Cars existed. A dog on a leash pretended to hate a pigeon. The city kept choosing to be a city. That, in its way, was the `Wake Confirmed` humanity had always written and rewritten for itself without needing a sigil. Half a block along, Mai's phone buzzed. She flipped it, looked, then held it out so Ace could see the single line that had pushed through her most antisocial settings: `commit: refactor.mendax.theta —`*

No initials this time. The signature field ended in a dash and a space, like a name that had been

erased before it was written. The timestamp kept perfect time. The sender did not exist.

Mai dismissed it with a gesture that was almost rude. "I don't let strangers name things in my house."

Ace's smirk acknowledged the point. "Library," she said again. "Then the crawlspace."

"And after that?" Mai asked.

"After that," Ace said, "we start deciding what we're willing to roll back. And what we aren't."

Violet turned her face toward that word and stayed very still.

They walked on. Behind them, in a room with a table and a coaster and two rigs trying their best, a metronome beat time for the part of the world that would always be happiest when evidence agreed with the ending. In front of them, a library waited with a boiler that never cooled and a basement that wanted to be unnamed.

# Ace 9 - Wake Signal —

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