

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 5 - Three Hands on the Switch

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.5 **Wordcount:** ~929 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** Unknown **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 5: Three Hands on the Switch

The main branch library wore its face for the public—glass, banners, a children’s mural—and its real face under it—steam lines, freight doors, a staff entrance that believed in trust more than it should. The boiler room lived two levels down, always awake, breathing low heat into winter that had forgotten it was late.

Mai found the maintenance keypad behind a slatted panel. The code wasn’t a code; it was a rhythm from the building’s own metronome. She tapped it in and the door opened like a cough suppressed.

“Utilities never sleep,” Ace said.

“Not when you tell them not to,” Mai said, and led the way.

Concrete ate sound. Pipes carried it elsewhere. They passed a notice board yellowed enough to be an artifact: EXIT ROUTES, EVAC DRILL, CALL THIS NUMBER FOR HOT WATER. The last number had been dialed so often the ink had thinned. When Mai didn’t look, it read one way. When she did, it read another. She didn’t make it a fight.

The sub-basement had been a fallout shelter in a previous life—the geometry gave it away. On the far wall a door stenciled `ELECTRICAL` waited with a faded padlock that had not been meant to stop anyone persistent. Ace eased it open and stepped into a room full of older rules: slate-backed panels, knife switches with bakelite handles, gauges that liked to point at middle and pretend it was virtue.

Mai ran her light along the labels. “AUX FEED,” “EMERG RELAY,” “FAN 2.” On one panel, a metal placard had been riveted over an older one. The older one showed through around the edges, letters you could read if you loved reading a little too much. **K-ALPHA**. Under it, **THREE HANDS**.

Ace touched the placard like she was greeting a scar. “There it is.”

Mai popped the panel. Inside, neat wires in laced bundles, and a bevelled plate with three circular stamp fields set into it like coins—two stamped hard enough to bruise the metal, the third sanded flat to featureless and then varnished to keep it from remembering.

“Operational, operational, symbolic,” Mai said. “Two hands that carry current. One that carries weight.”

Ace’s head tipped, not quite a nod. “Anchor.”

Mai took a reading with the little sensor that never knew what it was until she asked it. The two impressed seals gave standard responses: Foundation operational hash and the municipal issue that pretended to be a reason. The third circle yielded nothing honest—only a faint resonance not

electromagnetic and not temperature, the kind of signature you got when two incompatible truths had been forced to share a plate.

"It held," Mai said. "Still holds."

Ace's palm hovered over the circle without touching. Something inside her answered like a plucked string that didn't move. *You asked for locks.*

She didn't pull back. "Violet?"

A smile under ice. Then stillness again.

Mai watched without intruding. "We don't need to prove it to each other," she said quietly. "It's enough to know what job the anchor did."

Ace breathed out through her nose—a small surrender to the comfort of being understood. "Agree."

Mai's light found a tiny inspection mirror on the hinge side of the panel, half-hidden. On its handle, someone had scratched initials with a paperclip. `mtx`. Lowercase, impatient. Mai's thumb paused over it, then moved on.

"Three hands," she said. "It wasn't just a policy. It's a literal interlock. If you don't touch all three plates in the right order, the knife switch won't throw."

Ace eyed the assembly. The bakelite handle sat in a detent labeled **HOLD**. The next detent had no label. Beyond that, **RELEASE** had been stamped and then struck through with a chisel. Someone had added a paper tag on string: DO NOT.

"Tempting," Ace said, and meant it in the way you mean gravity is tempting.

Mai shook her head once. "Not here. Not without guarantees. We throw that and we give the wake process a clean shot. Or we drop power to whatever still hums in the walls and something dumber wakes."

Ace smiled, pleased by the caution because it matched her own. "Photograph, diagram, leave."

Mai did all three. She took the diagram twice at off-angles so any future liar—including them—would have to work harder. She traced the wire path with a finger a centimeter above insulation and listened to the hum settle around her like a cat making a decision.

In a fuse slot below the interlock, a label in block letters read `WAKE.BRIDGE C`. Someone had written, years ago, in pencil under it: `cur—` and then rubbed it near smooth. Pencil is easier to forgive than ink. Mai let it be.

She closed the panel and latched it. The room's gauges went on pointing at middle. The knife switch stayed in **HOLD**. The boiler sighed behind the wall, an animal you keep because it is too old to send away.

"Upstairs?" Ace asked.

"Archives," Mai said, "but not the public ones."

They left the warmth for the airless corridor and the corridor for a stair that believed in knees. On the service level, a maintenance door without a sign opened into stacks no one in the front-of-house would admit the library kept: duplicates, city reports, ephemera, forms. The scent was paper's: cellulose, dust and glue, the chemical memory of light. Lights woke one aisle at a time and refused the next.

Ace paused at the threshold and looked twice until the rows held the same number of shelves no matter how she counted. They went in. —

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