

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 6 - Mock Archive

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.6 **Wordcount:** ~1330 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Mendax Theta **Location:** City (unnamed) **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 6: Mock Archive

The first desk wore a bell with a sign that said RING FOR NO ONE. Mai smiled at that in the quiet part of her mouth and stepped past. A rolling ladder sat against a bay labeled MUNICIPAL INDEX, only the `I` and the `D` insisted on trading places when you blinked. On a side table: a card catalog drawer with a typed label, **ACCESSION ERRATA**. Ace pulled it out. The cards inside had been arranged out of order on purpose; if you riffled forward they moved back. If you read backward they came right.

“So we ask wrong,” Mai said.

“Like Mendax wants,” Ace said.

Mai set her meter down and didn't turn it on. She opened a terminal at a desk machine older than faith and keyed in a query in the library's internal catalog system, spelling nothing properly, asking for what did **not** exist: `~mendax.theta` `!wake.confirmed` `-anchor`.

The screen answered in green letters with the cheerfulness of bureaucracy: **NO SUCH RECORDS** and, underneath because the system liked to be helpful, **SEE ALSO: SHELF 9B, MOCK RECORDS**.

Ace's smirk was audible. “There it is.”

Shelf 9B held binders with titles like a dare: **MINUTES (NOT), POLICY (COUNTERFEIT), LOGS (FALSE)**. Mai took **LOGS (FALSE)** because she respects self-awareness in the wild. Inside, each page wore a heading that stated something that had not happened in a meeting no one had scheduled. In the margins, someone had written corrections that were also lies, pointing toward a truth that pretended not to be present.

Mai ran her palm along the page without touching. “If you ask what happened,” she said, “it gives you fiction. If you ask what didn't happen, it points at a gap.”

Ace slid **MINUTES (NOT)** across. “Let's ask for the gap, then.”

Mai flipped to the index at the back that announced itself as an **INDEX TO OMISSIONS**. The longest entry read: **ON NAMING THE ANCHOR: NO DISCUSSION RECORDED**. Under it, in tiny type, **see also: DELIBERATE UNNAMING**. A cross-reference sent them to **POLICY (COUNTERFEIT)**, where a clipped-in paper with a municipal header explained, in words that had been deliberately chosen to mean nothing, why some signatures must never be signatures.

Someone had written a note under that in neat pencil: *Because names stick to rituals. Because weight needs anonymity to be weight.*

Mai breathed out. “They didn't want anyone to even think the title, much less say it.”

“And still the lock holds,” Ace said.

They worked their way through the binders in the wrong order until the wrong answers made a map. Mendax Theta’s purpose emerged in negative space: a catcher’s mitt strung with ritual wire, mounted under the floorboards of municipal networks to catch engineered “wakes” before they finished aligning, to keep the world from being forced to agree.

On a shelf that shouldn’t have had drawers, a drawer that shouldn’t have had a label said **NOT-CURATOR**. Inside: dividers with tabs typed **NOT-STAFF, NOT-COMPLIANCE, NOT-AUDIT**. Ace rifled and found what she’d been looking for without knowing it: a card that read **NOT-SIGNATORY** with a clipped-on slip showing a job title that had been erased and replaced twice, and a tiny rubber stamp impression in the corner: a circle cut by a line—the sigil of waking—overstruck once with a diagonal that turned it into **not** itself.

Mai held the card to the light. The stock had a watermark: municipal crest. Over it, a fainter second watermark like a shadow: a circle and a line. She flipped the card and saw, almost invisible in the fibers, a pencil mark: `mtx?` Someone’s question, not an answer. She put the card back where it belonged—where it didn’t.

“Why keep this?” Ace murmured. “Why not burn the whole aisle?”

Mai’s hand followed the air over the drawer. “Because the lock works better if the mock remembers how to be convincing. Lies need props.”

“And because someone wanted us to find it,” Ace said. “Not just us-us. Us-whoever we are this time.”

Mai gave a small, involuntary smile. “Consoling.”

They followed the cross-references to a microfiche cabinet pretending to be a printer stand. Inside, a fiche sleeve labeled **FALSE METERS** carried a set of scan codes that weren’t codes until you looked at them through the wrong lens. Mai slid the sleeve into a reader that hadn’t been maintained since now and turned the dial backward. The text on the screen resolved into schematics for a **PARALLEL BINDING ARRAY**: two circuits that kept the beat even when one was cut, just as she’d seen in the exchange panel. In the margin someone had typed: **IF THE NODE RESOLVES, THE RITUAL FAILS**. Beneath it, by hand: **so don’t give the node a name**.

“Not resolving the node keeps the wake process arguing with itself,” Mai said softly. “Like we did upstairs.”

“And it needs three hands to start and to stop,” Ace said, looking at the stamp circles burned into her memory. “Not two. Never two.”

They moved to the last aisle, where **MOCK RECORDS** had been marked in three languages and one that wasn’t. The rolling ladder squeaked once and then, when Ace looked at it, apologized by being silent. On the top shelf, a ledger lay across two binders as if taking a nap where it wasn’t supposed to. The spine read **AUDIT (DELIBERATE)**.

Mai climbed. She opened the ledger and found a page where every line had been drawn by a careful hand. Columns: DATE, SITE, VARIANCE, ACTION. Rows of neat entries, all with **LOCATION: UNKNOWN** wherever it might have mattered. At the bottom of the page, a row with no date, no site, only a variance field that read **MESSAGE PERSISTENCE AT 3 SIGMA** and an action **REDIRECT TO UNKNOWN MAINTAIN DRIFT****. *In the right margin, in the smallest letters the pen could make, a signature that had been begun and then stopped: `Cur—` Mai closed the ledger,*

hands steady. “Enough,” she said. “Enough,” Ace agreed. They put everything back so well it looked like neglect. On the way out, the bell at the empty desk chimed once by itself and then, because even bells know shame, did not do it again. Up the service stairs, the boiler’s breath felt better after paper’s silence. They kept their own silence until they hit street air that had decided to be honest gray. Mai walked three steps and stopped the way she does when a plan ticks into place behind her eyes. “The crawlspace,” she said. “The node plate under the exchange. We don’t name it. We do look at what it’s plugged into.” She glanced at Ace. “Three hands on the switch, three hands in the room. Two operational, one symbolic. If we have to pull back hard, we’ll need all three again.” Ace rolled the jade coin and made it stop dead on the knuckle. “You planning to invite a third?” “I’m planning to make the room think we did,” Mai said. “Mock archive taught us: ask wrong, get right. We can build a fake hand if we model the weight correctly.” Ace’s grin showed just enough teeth. “Beautiful.” Mai’s phone, sealed in its rude mode, buzzed once in a tone she hadn’t programmed. She slid it out. A single-line text sat on a screen with no app: `RING FOR NO ONE`. Under it, a footnote blinked and then stopped: `NODE STATUS: UNKNOWN do not resolve`. Mai locked the screen and put the phone away like she was returning a library book. “Noted,” she said, and the word landed like a small stone in a deep well. Ace’s hand brushed her shoulder as they crossed the street—habit, inventory, affection. The city kept waking in ways that needed no sigil and no audit. Under it, something tried to make the evidence agree with an ending it had already chosen. Between those, they walked—two operational signatures and an anchor that refused to be named—even to themselves. # Ace 9 - Wake Signal —

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