

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 7 - Who Planted the Wake

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.7 **Wordcount:** ~1077 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Mendax Theta, The Curator **Location:** Foundation Site **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### ## Chapter 7: Who Planted the Wake

They took the long way back, not because distance helped but because angles did. Safehouse lights came up to half and stayed there, a truce. Mai slid into her chair, opened the “lie lane,” and called up the municipal mirror’s duller twin: a scrubbed image of the Foundation’s change-control ledger that only recorded what it could prove and kept forgetting what it didn’t like.

“We won’t ask for the file,” Mai said. “We’ll ask who believed in it.”

She filtered for approvals with no corresponding tickets—sign-offs that existed without requests. The list came back brief; people do fewer sins when the form won’t let them. Three items. Two belonged to a compliance officer who loved rubber stamps. The third had no owner, no department, just a project tag:

*‘CURATION post-facto harmonization` Ace leaned on the table with her forearms, watching the cursor flash like a pulse she could sync to if she wanted. “Curator,” she said, tasting the word. “Not a name. A function.” Mai expanded the tag. A skeletal workflow unfolded: **collect, conform, commit**. On the **commit** step, a partial comment survived where redaction had hit late and lazy: `commit: harmonize “Wake Confirmed” across witness sets Cur—`*

The rest was smudged. The signature block below it wasn’t empty; it was **not**-empty, a rectangle a shade darker than the background, as if someone had colored in absence with a pencil until the paper warmed.

“They used Foundation machinery to do Order’s work,” Mai said. “And called it curation, because that makes violence polite.”

“Whoever Curator is,” Ace said, “they know how to make a room agree with a label.”

Mai let her eyes half-close and listened the way she listens to bad speakers in good rooms. “And they needed Mendax Theta to keep **their** edit from breaking the world. Lock out the last step. Keep the node unknowable. Hold the wake at the edge of finishing so it looks finished from far away.”

Ace’s lips tilted. “A fake sunset.”

Mai scooped the three approvals into a separate pane and pivoted tracks: not names, but habits. She graphed the time-of-day marks, the exact seconds things happened, and the way follow-up processes lagged or ran ahead. Patterns reveal people even when names keep secrets. This one worked at hours that suggested nothing human and everything scheduled: 03:03, 06:06, 09:09—the kind of symmetry no administrator with children and a dog ever chooses.

Mai traced the edges with a finger an inch above the glass. “Automated curation,” she said. “Person

as policy. Or person as a rule set they left behind.”

“Or a person who wanted to look like a rule set,” Ace said. “Either way, we don’t catch them by arguing on that level.”

Mai called up the clipped “DO NOT FILE” cassette note again and ran a spectral match against the dictation idiosyncrasies. The machine’s motor had a specific flutter at the end of words, the kind that says somebody serviced it once and never again. The **Cur**—smear at the label’s edge had graphite from a pencil brand the city procurement office didn’t buy. Not a lead, not tonight. A promise that hand and habit existed.

She switched contexts. “Order,” she said, and reached for their simplest, ugliest folder—the one where they kept glyphs and sigils as hashes so they wouldn’t have to look at them to know them. She overlaid the **sigil of waking** in its clean geometry against the municipal power cadence and watched the two sets interlock at intervals that weren’t coincidences. In four places, the lines should have crossed; in three, Mendax’s K-Alpha lock had dragged them apart. In the fourth, a waiver existed: the exchange room under the arts building, the crawlspace with the plate that said **NODE: —** and meant **do not name me** in a grammar the world understood.

“Order engineered the wake,” Mai said. “Foundation let it through the first gate and kept it from finishing at the last, using Mendax as a buffer. Curator harmonized the witnesses so the middle looked inevitable.”

“All it needed after that was time,” Ace said, fingers idly walking the jade coin. “People believe a thing more if it keeps happening while they live near it.”

Mai pulled the “unknown” node’s power trace and laid it under the metronome. If the wake alignment was a drum, the node was the room: reverb that made the drum sound true. She marked the nodes where the room got bigger and smaller—maintenance cycles, winter mornings—and the way the alignment tried to match it.

Her phone, face down on the table, buzzed once. She flipped it. A notification that wasn’t from any app scrolled and shivered: `LOCATION: UNKNOWN` *maintain drift*. Under it, a small italic footnote winked into existence and out again: ``cur—`` Mai put the phone down like she was shelving a book in the wrong aisle because the right aisle had teeth. “They’re watching their own lock,” she said. “Either Curator’s still live, or the curation policy is.” Ace breathed a small laugh through her nose. “And MTX?” Mai brought up the checksum scar she’d left—her graphite line under the paint. It still sat where she’d put it. The wake process still didn’t see it; it still offended nothing the policy could detect. “Present,” she said, and didn’t elaborate. Ace accepted the quiet. Mai straightened, eyes clear again. “We have the pieces. Order planted the wake. Foundation—some of it—made a buffer instead of a barricade. Curator harmonized. Mendax Theta locked the last step. The node under the exchange refuses to have a name. If we want to stop the process from consuming fresh witnesses, we have to weaken the harmonization and hold the lock without feeding the ritual more truth.” “We did the first half,” Ace said. “Starved the metronome.” “And now the second,” Mai said. Her fingers tapped a rhythm that wasn’t the room’s. “Rollback. Not a full. A notch. Enough to stop it from crawling forward by habit. Enough to leave us a scar to study.” \*You asked for locks,\* the not-voice murmured, not an objection. A memory of permission. Ace’s stare softened without losing edges. “We’ll need three hands,” she said. Mai nodded toward the toolbox. “Two are ours. The third is weight. We build it.” Ace smiled—a small, grateful thing shown to one person and no cameras. “Then we go call a sunset back a few minutes.” They packed light and went. — © 2025-2026. “World of Ace, Mai and Shammy” and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts

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Last update: **17/03/2026 06:02**

