

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 9: The Wake Signal — Chapter 8 - Rollback

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 9.8 **Wordcount:** ~1641 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, The Curator **Location:** Foundation Site **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 8: Rollback

The arts building slept with its eyes open. The elevator remembered them again when Mai told it to, and the indicator pretended not to know about a floor it had carried them to twice already today. B2 smelled colder, as if something in the walls had decided to be winter on principle.

The exchange hummed at a volume that would convince anyone not to notice. The municipal map's red pin chose a spot that suggested indifference. The racks kept their honest posture. The room watched.

Mai unpacked the kit she'd built in her head and made on the way: a coil in a wooden frame whose proportions came from the **parallel binding array** schematic; a ground plate cut from a drawer back she'd sanded true; a lead woven with a thin strip of copper foil hand-etched with the inverted lines of the **sigil of waking**—not as a picture, but as an impedance curve. The third piece was stranger: a small sack of ferrite beads wrapped in rough cloth tied with a single knot.

"The ballast," Ace said, recognizing the gesture if not the gear.

"Weight without name," Mai said. She set the coil near the **K-ALPHA / THREE HANDS** panel they'd diagrammed, not touching anything, not completing any circuit that the building could report.

"Third signature won't read voltage," Ace said. "It'll read weight."

"I know," Mai said, calm. "I'm not faking current. I'm faking presence."

Ace moved to the panel and opened it. The three stamp circles waited: two bruised with history, one sanded flat until the paper couldn't remember what ink felt like. The knife handle sat in **HOLD**, the unlabeled detent glinted once, **RELEASE** sulked beyond with its angry chisel scar.

Mai wired the coil to itself, a loop that wouldn't steal power but would sing if the room hummed at it. She set the ground plate on concrete where the crawlspace's draft made old varnish smell like needles. She placed the ferrite sack on the plate and adjusted the knot as if adjusting a word until it refused to be polite.

"Two operational," she said. "One symbolic."

Ace stood on the left, palm open above the first circle without touching. Mai stood on the right and mirrored her above the second. The room felt like it had shrunk. Not smaller—closer. The coil thrummed once like a throat clearing.

"For the third," Mai said, and looked at the flat circle. "We don't have an anchor stamp. We have a memory of one. We have weight. We have a mirror of the inverted sigil. We have a room that

remembers pretending. If it needs a name, it can't have one. If it needs a hand, it gets a shape."

Ace nodded. *You asked for locks,* the older permission repeated, and she didn't need to say **stay** this time because Violet had already become the stillness between beats. Ace exhaled, not deep, not ritual, just steady, and let the idea of a hand—not hers—rest on the plate she wasn't touching.

The coil vibrated. The unlabeled detent on the knife switch warmed as if a thought had leaned on it. The two bruised circles felt like held breath. The sanded circle—not reading current, not reading temperature—registered **weight**.

Mai's voice was barely sound. "On my count."

They didn't count out loud. They counted on the way the metronome hiccuped under the filter they'd cut for it earlier that day. At the next downbeat that wasn't there, Mai inclined her palm. Ace did the same. The knife switch moved to the unlabeled detent with a solid, consequential click.

The room did not dim. The municipal map's pin did not leap. The racks did not flare or go cold. Instead, all the tiny, dishonest corrections the wake process had been teaching the room to make—in labels, in pins, in clocks and coasters—hesitated, then chose **not** to correct. The map let the red pin sit a centimeter off from where it wanted to be and did not shame itself for it. The `TELECOM/STORAGE` sign on the door wobbled, sighed, and decided to be **TELECOM** for a while without promise. The oven clock went wrong and liked it.

Mai kept her palm in place, not touching, until her shoulder ached. Ace did the same until her hand tingled with a pressure that wasn't pressure. The coil's hum sank a fraction of a tone, like a crowd lowering its voice because someone important had entered the room and decided to sit quietly.

"Phase savor," Mai whispered. "It can't find itself long enough to force agreement."

"Rollback?" Ace asked, equally soft.

"Not a full," Mai said. "A notch. We've shaved the beat just enough that every time it tries to complete, it's late to its own conclusion."

Ace's mouth curved—relief, satisfaction, the unexpected comfort of a plan surviving contact with a room. "Scars?"

Mai eased her palm back a finger's width. "Leave one," she said. She tuned the coil's loop with a thumbnail, an adjustment that would mean nothing to anyone who didn't sit at this table in this room with this hunger. The coil held the new song. The unlabeled detent accepted their lack of touch as continued presence.

Ace looked toward the crawlspace door. The draft had changed; it smelled now like old paper that had gotten tired of pretending to be blank. "The node?"

Mai shook her head. "Unknown stays unknown. If we resolve it, we give the ritual truth to chew."

Ace nodded. "Then we don't."

They waited three beats longer than necessary because patience is part of the lock. Then they stepped back in the same second. The coil thrummed, slower. The knife handle shivered between **HOLD** and the unlabeled detent and—on no schedule the building could publish—settled back into **HOLD** with the stubbornness of a story deciding to be a different story and daring the audience to

leave.

The room didn't change. The room had already changed.

Mai closed the panel. She left the coil in place, unpowered, the way you leave a book on a table face down to keep a page. She packed the plate and the ferrite sack and tied the knot with a small, decisive tug.

"Listen," Ace said.

They did. No metronome—there had never been one for the human ear—but the absence of the scrim, the hush where constant small corrections used to rustle. The municipal map kept the pin where it had drifted and wasn't embarrassed. The indicator above the elevator admitted they were on **B2** for two seconds before getting shy and pretending it hadn't said anything.

Mai exhaled, long and careful. "We've stopped it from re-asserting every time a new witness wanders by. It will still be true where it's already true. But it won't recruit."

"And our scar?" Ace asked.

Mai lifted her phone. On the black screen, nothing wrote itself, which was the loudest thing it could have done. She opened the checksum copy they'd cut at the safehouse earlier. Her graphite line under the paint sat exactly where she'd left it. She added another, thinner, in a place the policy couldn't see: a flick of the stylus in a pixel that a sane renderer would round away. It stayed.

"Scar holds," she said. "We can get back in. Others won't even know there's a door."

Ace's eyes warmed. "And if Curator's automation tries to harmonize again?"

"It'll harmonize with the wrong note," Mai said. "It will spend all its effort agreeing with a version of itself that never quite arrives."

A breath under ice shifted—approval, or the idea of it. Ace didn't smile at Violet. She didn't need to. **Stay** had been obeyed without being spoken. Locks had been used without anyone screaming.

They left the exchange as they'd found it, plus one coil the room would forget until the exact moment it needed to remember. In the elevator, the indicator picked **B1**, then **L**, then turned itself off out of embarrassment. On the loading dock, the air had the particular emptiness that follows small, honest victories.

Halfway to the street, Mai's phone buzzed in the pocket she hadn't put it in. She fished it out. A single-line message sat in a place no messaging app could reach:

*`AUDIT: alignment drift accepted maintain unknown` Under it, for a second and only then, three letters burned in pale gray as if someone had written them on the back of her eyelids: **MTX**. Mai didn't show the screen. She just met Ace's eyes. "Friend?" Ace asked. "Not tonight," Mai said. "But not an enemy either." They walked until the building felt like it belonged to someone else again. The city, invited to correct its own small errors, politely refused. A bus stop sign with a painted scratch kept the scratch. A café chalkboard menu misspelled something and left it. The world held two truths in the same frame without breaking a sweat. At the corner, Ace stopped and turned her face to the sky like she was checking the weather on a station only she could hear. "We made a notch," she said. "Now we see who notices the silence." "Curator," Mai said. "If they're a person, they'll adjust. If they're a policy, it'll keep filing memos to itself." "And Order?" Mai's jaw set in the way that meant*

fear and anger had decided to share a chair and be useful. "They'll plant again. Different soil. We'll be there." "Good," Ace said. They didn't high five. They didn't hug. They walked shoulder to shoulder because that had always been the point. Behind them, under art and concrete and a city that kept its own time, the lock held. The wake process kept trying to finish, and the metronome kept showing up late to its own party, and for once that was enough. # Ace 9 - Wake Signal —

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

