

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 3: Echoes of the Void — Chapter 31 - Retention

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 3.31 **Wordcount:** ~1572 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** Apartment **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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Chapter 31: Retention

They didn't argue about direction. They didn't even fully choose it.

The fissure corridor began to subtly funnel—no clean slopes, no polished walls, but a gradual insistence: this way, this depth, this narrowing.

Mai felt it like a suggestion that had teeth.

Ace felt it as pressure against Violet inside her, as if the valley was poking the resonance to see what reacted.

Mai's overlay ghosted faintly behind her eyes:

ANCHOR: LOCK (PARTIAL)

It pulsed in time with her nausea.

Ace kept one hand on Mai's wrist now more often than not. Not gripping. Not dragging. Just contact—human friction. If the valley wanted Mai as a handle, Ace would keep reminding the universe that Mai was a person.

They moved until the corridor opened into a chamber that was too round.

Not perfectly circular. But round in the way an old well is round—deliberate excavation. A hollow shaped for containment.

The floor was stone, slick and dark.

The walls rose up and vanished into shadow.

And at the far side of the chamber, embedded in the rock like a fossil, was a pale ring.

Not a full circle-room again.

A partial ring.

A frame segment. A crescent.

Like the valley had learned to stop presenting complete symbols and start presenting pieces that implied the whole.

Mai's stomach turned. "Frame."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Source-adjacent."

Mai nodded, breath tight. "Yes."

They approached slowly.

The pale crescent in the wall had faint fibers in it—paper pressed into stone. The edge of it looked like a torn page fused into rock.

Mai could feel her stamp react as they got closer—pressure behind her eyes increasing, like the mark recognized the crescent as a docking point.

Her overlay flickered:

ANCHOR: SYNC

Mai swallowed bile. "No."

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's trying to complete you."

Mai's voice came low. "It's trying to finish the lock."

Ace nodded, eyes hard. "So we don't give it time."

They stepped into the chamber.

And the chamber stamped.

Not Mai's skull this time.

The air.

A heavy, invisible thunk rolled through the space like a door being shut.

Mai flinched.

Ace's shadow surged.

The chamber's floor whitened in a broad circle—paper terrain blooming outward from the center like a spill.

Mai gasped. "No."

Ace's voice went cold. "It wants a sheet."

The whitening didn't stop at the floor. It climbed the walls in faint streaks, creating pale patches that looked like forms trying to print themselves onto rock.

Mai's overlay updated:

RETENTION: INITIATE

Mai's stomach dropped. "Retention."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "New procedure."

Then the chamber produced its tool.

Something slid out of the darkness above—not falling, not dropping. Lowering.

A band.

A wide pale band like a seatbelt made of laminated paper-cloth, printed with faint stitched text that couldn't be read cleanly because it kept shifting.

It lowered toward Mai.

Not toward Ace.

Mai's breath hitched. "No."

Ace stepped forward instantly.

The band redirected toward Ace for half a second—then snapped back toward Mai as if a magnet had corrected it.

The stamp behind Mai's eyes pulsed hard.

The band paused above her head, like a noose deciding where to rest.

Ace's jaw clenched. "It's keyed to your mark."

Mai nodded, voice tight. "Yes."

The band dropped.

Mai moved—fast—stepping sideways, trying to get out from under it.

The band adjusted mid-air, tracking her like a guided restraint.

Ace grabbed Mai's wrist and yanked her toward the chamber edge, away from the whitening floor.

The band followed, lowering with relentless precision.

Mai's breath turned ragged. "It doesn't need flat ground."

Ace's eyes flashed violet. "No. It's the thing that can reach into cracks."

The band snapped downward faster—

and wrapped around Mai's shoulders.

Mai screamed, shocked more by the cold certainty of it than pain.

The band tightened, pinning her arms against her torso.

Ace surged forward, shadow flaring, hand on her hilt—

Mai choked out, "No blades!"

Ace froze for a fraction, muscles trembling.

The band around Mai's shoulders stitched a word into itself, dark thread forming letters that made Mai's stomach turn:

RETAIN

Ace's voice came low and furious. "Get off her."

The band didn't respond.

It tightened.

Mai's overlay flared:

ANCHOR: LOCK — PROGRESS 62%

Mai gagged. "It's—"

She stopped, corrected, forced breath. "It's progressing."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Noise."

Mai tried—tried—to speak fragments, but the band made breathing harder, and the stamp behind her eyes pulsed with each constrained inhale.

Ace didn't wait for her to succeed.

Ace acted ugly.

She didn't cut the band.

She grabbed mud.

There wasn't much mud here—but there was water on the floor edges where the whitening hadn't reached fully. Ace scraped wet grit and dark slime from the boundary line and smeared it onto the band, grinding texture into the laminated surface.

The band shuddered, like it hated contamination.

Ace smeared more, brutal, messy, pushing dirt into the stitched letters until RETAIN blurred.

Mai's overlay flickered. The progress number stuttered.

62%... 61%... 62%...

Good.

But the band adapted.

Its surface tightened, shedding some of the grime like a raincoat.

It pulled itself tighter around Mai's shoulders, compressing her.

Mai's vision tunneled. The stamp pulsed harder.

Ace's eyes went prismatic violet—Violet pushing close, furious.

Mai choked out, "Ace—don't—"

Ace's voice came low and shaking with rage. "I'm here."

Mai forced breath. "No clean—"

Ace's teeth bared. "I know."

Ace looked around the chamber—pale crescent in the wall, whitening floor, patches climbing upward.

The restraint wasn't the main tool.

The crescent was.

A docking frame feeding the retention band.

So Ace stopped fighting the band directly.

She went for the source.

Ace sprinted—two steps—toward the pale crescent embedded in the wall.

Mai tried to shout, but the band crushed her lungs too tightly for volume.

Ace reached the crescent and slammed the flat of her katana into it like a hammer.

The impact rang ugly, metal on fused pulp-stone.

The crescent cracked.

Not cleanly.

It splintered, fibers tearing.

Ace hit it again—brutal, sideways, crushing.

The crescent fractured further, pieces flaking off like dried paper.

The chamber convulsed.

The whitening floor flickered.

The band around Mai's shoulders shuddered, tightening reflexively as if trying to finish the lock before the feed died.

Mai's overlay flashed:

ANCHOR: LOCK — PROGRESS 78%

Mai gagged, eyes watering.

Ace struck the crescent again—harder.

It cracked into multiple jagged fragments.

The stitched text on the band blurred.

Mai's overlay spasmed:

78%... 77%... 78%... ERROR...

Ace slammed the blade again.

The crescent finally broke off in chunks, falling to the floor with wet paper-thuds.

The chamber's pressure released slightly—like a power source had been interrupted.

The band around Mai loosened.

Not fully—still present—but slackened enough that Mai could breathe.

Mai coughed, gasping.

Ace dropped her blade tip, eyes blazing, and immediately went back to the band with her hands—ugly, direct—prying, twisting, forcing it to tangle rather than tighten.

Mai choked out, "Yes—mess—"

Ace nodded, breath harsh. "Mess."

She yanked the band sideways, forcing it to fold over itself, creating a knot of laminated material that couldn't lay flat and tighten properly.

The band convulsed, trying to reorient.

Ace shoved grit and broken crescent pulp into the fold, jamming it.

Mai's overlay flickered, the progress indicator collapsing into nonsense.

LOCK... ???...

Then the overlay dimmed slightly.

The band slackened further and slid off Mai's shoulders, dropping to the whitening floor like a dead belt.

Mai collapsed to her knees, coughing, breath ragged, scarf slipping.

Ace crouched beside her instantly, one hand on her wrist, the other hovering near her shoulder—ready to catch her if she fainted.

Mai's voice came out broken but steady. "It tried to lock me."

Ace's voice was low, furious. "Yes."

Mai's breathing shook. "And you broke the feed."

Ace nodded once. "Yes."

Mai swallowed hard, eyes wet and hard. "But it got to—"

She stopped, corrected, forced herself. "It got close."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Too close."

Mai's overlay still floated faintly behind her eyes, but the numbers were gone. The stamp remained partial—claimed, not completed.

Mai whispered, exhausted, "We need full removal."

Ace didn't deny it.

She looked at the broken crescent fragments on the floor—paper fused into stone, torn and smashed.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "This was a relay."

Mai nodded weakly. "Not the core."

Ace's voice was cold. "Then the core is deeper."

Mai coughed once, then forced herself upright.

Ace's hand stayed on her wrist.

Mai's voice came low and hard. "It will try retention again."

Ace nodded. "Yes."

Mai: "Different tool."

Ace: "Stronger."

Mai swallowed. "And it will keep using my mark as the key."

Ace's jaw clenched. "Then we either break the key... or we break the lock mechanism."

Mai's mouth twitched, grim. "Or both."

Ace helped Mai stand.

Mai's knees shook, but she stood.

They didn't stay in the chamber. They left it fast, moving deeper into the fissure corridor before the valley could reroute another retention band into place.

Behind them, the whitening floor dimmed, retreating slightly—like the system was conserving resources for the next attempt.

And in the valley's invisible log, the record updated with quiet, bureaucratic fury:

RETENTION: INTERRUPTED — RELAY DAMAGED — REATTEMPT REQUIRED

Required.

Which meant it would happen again.

But now Ace and Mai had something they didn't have before:

A confirmed truth.

The stamp wasn't just "in Mai."

It had infrastructure.

Relays.

Docking frames.

Feed lines.

And infrastructure could be destroyed.

Ugly.

Piece by piece.

Until the valley ran out of places to print its hands. —

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