

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 2 - Broken Reflections

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.2 **Wordcount:** ~3388 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** City (unnamed) **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 2 — Broken Reflections

The upriver train ran short and stubborn, its cars welded together like a promise made in a hurry. Out the window, the city thinned into warehouses and utility yards, then into gray water that carried bottles and twigs and a single shoe like a story it refused to tell. Mai dozed with her forehead against the glass for five minutes, then woke as if someone had called her name softly from the wrong seat. Ace watched the river and counted things that did not matter—pylons, rusted ladders, dead reeds—making sure the numbers never settled into anything the world could use against her.

They didn't talk much on the ride. Light climbed the sky in thin, tired layers. Their dampener patches itched where they touched skin. The phone stayed quiet; the packet had said enough.

The town announced itself with a monastery spire that wasn't sure which era it belonged to. The station sign had letters spaced wrong, as if a tired hand had nudged them into place and then forgotten to go back. The platform was clean in a way that meant there were rules. A woman in a reflective vest swept a spot that didn't need sweeping and stared pointedly at a pigeon until it took the hint.

"Uplift," the station map insisted in a font that wanted to be helpful. The river curved around the town like an arm too protective to be kind. On the far bank, industrial sheds crouched with their doors half open, showing nothing but the color of shadow.

"Monastery police liaison," Mai read from the phone. "He'll meet us in front of the tourist office."

"Real title?" Ace asked.

"Everything's real if enough people nod," Mai said, and tucked the device away.

They walked through a center too small to pretend it wasn't a village. Souvenir crucifixes on racks, cheap icons with eyes that followed badly, a thrift store window full of mirrors at the wrong angles, a barber shop with a white tile floor and a sign that promised dignity for ten euros. The air smelt faintly of incense and damp stone.

Ace glanced at the thrift store display and then looked away, like a doctor choosing not to prod a bruise during triage. The mirrors were all intact. There was a hairline shimmer across one, like frost or breath that wouldn't pick a side.

"Don't," Mai said, as if Ace had said anything.

"Wouldn't," Ace said.

The tourist office had a cheerful poster of the monastery and a small stack of pamphlets that tried to

make rules look like culture. The liaison was already waiting, easy to spot: a man in a plain black coat that refused to be either priest or cop but flirted with both. Close-cropped hair, square jaw, the posture of someone who kept his spine straight on purpose. His badge was a laminate with a hologram that meant he could open locked doors and then apologize about it later.

“Father-Lieutenant Kaarlo,” he said, as if he’d been named that way at birth. His voice carried the unlovely authority of a church hall used for winter storage. He shook Mai’s hand, then Ace’s, eyes measuring and then reconsidering. He didn’t ask for IDs. He didn’t offer his own. “Thank you for responding so quickly.”

“We’re on a hobby tour of flawed towns,” Ace said mildly. “Yours seemed promising.”

A corner of Kaarlo’s mouth moved, the closest he got to humor. “Three children in forty-eight hours,” he said. “Two returned within a day, confused and nauseous, both claiming they had gotten lost, which is curious in a town where the streets are named and short. One remains missing. Mirrors have shattered in public buildings and shops but not in homes. We’ve roped off the culvert by the east path; a hiker reported ‘hanging thread’ that made his teeth feel loose. Our council wants to call the national office. The abbot wants to call no one. The Foundation called me on a channel that didn’t exist last week. They asked me to observe only.”

Mai’s jacket creaked as she folded her arms. “And you observed?”

“I observed that a child is missing,” he said, even. “And then I made the call that would bring you here.”

Not the wrong kind of man, Ace decided. Maybe not the right kind either, but there was no perfect thing to be in a town whose name refused to sit straight. “Any patterns?” she asked.

He hesitated, then decided to trust the strange pair the invisible office had sent. “Public mirrors. Places where people perform versions of themselves—shops, council hall, the monastery guesthouse. The abbot had a new glass installed in the refectory last month. It’s cracked now. The line runs from the top right corner to just above the bread table.” He paused, decided not to care how that sounded. “The first boy to vanish is the abbot’s nephew.”

Mai’s eyes didn’t change, but the air around her did, sharp as sheet metal. “Where do you want us to start?”

“The thrift store,” he said, nodding at the window Ace hadn’t wanted to look into. “One of the children ran past it. The owner says something moved in the glass.”

Ace could have said the glass doesn’t move. She left the sentence in her head where it belonged. “Walk us,” she said.

Inside, the store smelled of old wool and disinfectant, of wood polish under surrender. A line of mirrors leaned against a wall like guests facing the wrong table. Some frames were gilded plastic, some were wood that had known a better life, one was metal filigree that looked sharpened at the edges. The owner was the kind of man whose face had memorized sorrow until good news looked like a rumor. He nodded at Kaarlo, then at the women, then at his own hands, as if apologizing for them.

“Closed sign goes on and stays on,” he said by way of greeting. “Don’t want the glass to decide it belongs to someone passing by.”

Mai moved carefully, making herself obvious to the room. Her left hand hovered near her holster

without drawing attention to the holster. Her right hand held the little black square she used for scans—no screen, no lights, a device that preferred not to be noticed unless you were looking for it. She angled it toward the first mirror, paused, then another.

Ace didn't look directly into anything that could throw her back at herself. She watched their edges. She watched the owner's face in the curve of a frame that wasn't meant to reflect. She watched the floorboards, which told the truth more often than walls did.

"Show us what happened," Kaarlo said gently.

The owner pointed to a circular mirror shoulder-high, its frame cheap and proud of it. "A hairline crack there," he said, "like from heat. Then it...webbed. Not out, like a star. In. Like a spider drawing threads together. The boy stopped running. He stepped closer, hands still over his ears. He said something I didn't hear, and then he flinched like someone pulled his hair, and then he ran again, and the threads were gone."

"Threads," Mai repeated. She crouched, set her scanner on the floor in front of the mirror, opened a compartment, slid out a small coil of something that looked like wire wrapped around salt. She placed it to the left of the mirror's base as if she were pinning a map. "You've cleaned since?"

"I clean every day," the owner said, offended in a way that had nothing to do with accusation. "But not there. I thought it might matter that the dust stayed the way it was."

"It matters," Mai said. She unfolded a square of black cloth and dabbed at the baseboard near the mirror's foot, then lifted the cloth to the light. Something glinted that wasn't dust.

Ace leaned in. Not glass. Not sand. A filament, fine as a hair pulled from a lover's coat, but red when it should have been brown or nothing. It caught light like it wanted to hold it and failed.

"May I?" Ace asked, and lifted the thread with a blade tip she had no business exposing in a shop. It clung with static for a second and then let go, draping itself like a vein across steel.

There, little blade, Violet purred in a voice that had learned patience. Pull.

"No," Ace said, and the owner flinched at the sudden word but didn't ask to whom she'd said it.

Mai slid the cloth into a pocket that was lined to deny static its rights. "Field residue reads wrong," she said, glancing at the scanner's plain face, which had no display but spoke to her anyway. "It's not heat fracture. It's tensile. Something tried to tension the glass the way you'd tension a stringed instrument."

"Music?" Kaarlo asked, peering as if sense might appear if he got close enough.

"Closer to weaving," Mai said. "Closer to knitting something out of the way you look at yourself."

The circular mirror breathed in the way dead things didn't. Not a movement, exactly. A consensus shift. Ace took one step to her left, then another, making her angle wrong. She raised her free hand and touched the diagonal scar beneath her shirt with two fingers, like a checkpoint.

"Dampeners up," Mai said softly.

Kaarlo cleared his throat. "Dampeners?"

"Ugly little patches," Mai said, and showed him hers at her wrist. "They make it harder for some

things to measure us. Imperfection as PPE.”

Kaarlo nodded, absorbing the doctrine. “Why mirrors?”

“Because you go to them asking to be told who you are,” Ace said, eyes on the edges of the frames, on the corners where a craftsman’s hand had decided the day was over. “And that’s good hunting ground for anything that wants to answer.”

She put her palm an inch from the glass without touching. The air had weight there, the way bridges have weight even when no one is crossing. Under it, she could hear it—that wrong-not-quite-tone, that underwater pluck the packet had carried. It made the muscles at the base of her skull want to soften. She hardened them instead.

“Mai,” she said, in the tone that meant I am not the only thing in the room.

“I have it,” Mai said. She slid her square a half inch. The coil of wire and salt thrummed like something anxious in a pocket. “It’s not broadcasting. It’s listening.”

“What to?” Kaarlo asked.

“People,” Mai said simply. “Attention. Eyes. The little flinch people make when they decide they need fixing before they go outside. It’s pulling on that.”

Ace’s mouth twisted around a thought she didn’t say out loud: mercy of sameness. She pointed at the mirror with the tip of her blade, not touching, not tempting any rules she hadn’t written herself. “Show us the culvert,” she said to Kaarlo. “And keep the refectory for last.”

They left the owner with a polite lie about calling if anything changed. Outside, the air tasted like river iron. As they walked, Mai’s jaw clenched once, twice, a tiny staccato.

“Pain?” Ace asked quietly.

“Pressure,” Mai said. “Like when a plane decides your sinuses are a challenge.” She tapped the dampener patch as if it were sulking. “It’s tracking me, not us.”

Ace’s hand brushed the back of Mai’s, a contact so fleeting it could have been a mistake. “You are not a station,” she said. “You’re the train.”

Mai made a noise that could have been a laugh. “Romantic. Mildly threatening.”

“Correct.”

The culvert hunched at the town’s edge where the water crawled under a concrete knee and came out embarrassed. Red-and-white tape fluttered like a bad rosary. Someone had propped a sign against one post that read DO NOT APPROACH in three languages and one dialect of municipal passive aggression.

Kaarlo ducked under the tape like rules were a formality he honored by inconveniencing himself. “Hiker said it was hanging from there,” he said, pointing to the lip where water made a line like old breath. “He felt his fillings ache.”

Ace crouched and peered into the dark that wasn’t quite; sunlight stretched in, thin-armed, failing to reach the bend. The sound was what culverts always sounded like—water arguing with itself, the echo of small tragedies. And then, under that, a sensation that was almost acoustic but not proud enough

to call itself that: the sense of something under tension whose anchor was somewhere else entirely.

A thread hung for a second. Not a drip. Not a root. Red the way a word can be red even if color is complicated in shadow. It swung left and then right without breeze. Then it was gone.

Mai swore under her breath. Not a big word. One of the precise little ones she deployed when a screw stripped at the exact wrong half-turn. She reached into her tool roll, pulled out a clamp with padded jaws and a length of cord etched with sigils that looked hand-drawn and were. "If it shows again," she said, "I can pin it long enough to answer a few questions."

"It knows we're here," Ace said, not as paranoia but as weather. "And it knows which of us tastes more like system."

"Flattering," Mai said dryly, and crouched beside her. She eased the clamp open and held it ready, her eyes on the lip, her breath slow enough to teach a class.

There was a smell for a second, the ghost of a hospital corridor and new plastic. The thread winked back into the light. Mai snapped the clamp shut with the clean sound of a decision.

The cord went taut, a line from clamp to Mai's wrist as if the device had decided the shortest route to ground was the person who had dared. Mai's pupils flared wide, a black that swallowed her irises and held them hostage. For an instant her head tilted, the exact angle of someone listening to instructions being given in another room.

Ace's hand was already on Mai's jaw, two fingers pressing a diagonal along the hinge. "Stay," she said, a whisper that pretended it was not a command.

Mai blinked, once, twice, and the tension bled out of the line. The thread twitched in the clamp like a living hair and then went slack with a sound too light to be relief. Mai exhaled and set the clamp down on the concrete with careful contempt.

"Okay," she said, voice hoarse as if she'd spoken too long. "It's not line-of-sight only. It's keyed on attention. It pulls on the idea of you as a problem to solve."

"I am an answer," Ace said, automatic as a reflexive muscle.

"You're a menace," Mai said, automatic as an antidote. She swallowed. "It tried to count me."

"Count you how?" Kaarlo asked, standing as if he didn't trust his knees to remember the trick if he stopped.

"Like a test I didn't study for," Mai said. She shook out her hand. "I'll build a soft null field we can carry. We need to reduce how much of us it can measure. Kaarlo—anything in town that changed in the last month that would make a lot of people look at themselves?"

"The refectory mirror," he said immediately. "New glass, so that visiting donors could see what their money maintained."

"And selfies were banned where?" Ace asked.

"The council building after a meeting was disrupted by phones," he said, grim. "Not because of this. Because the mayor hates seeing his own face while he speaks."

Ace smiled in a way that had nothing to do with mirth. "A city that bans vanity to keep order is a city

that hands you a new kind of mirror," she said. "Let's go meet the abbot. Then we visit the council hall. Then, if the day still insists on being cheerful, we'll eat something and decide whether to be arrested."

Kaarlo nodded, a soldier reassigning his day. He started back toward the monastery path, then hesitated. "If...if this is what you think it is—threads and...listening—what does it want?"

"To make you match," Mai said, standing with the clamp in her hand like a captured idea. "To stitch the wrong people to the wrong patterns so everything lies the same way."

Kaarlo's eyes went to Ace. She tilted her head, considered. "And to see if anyone bites when the thread is put between their teeth," she said. "We won't."

They walked back along the river. The water looked up at them and pretended indifference. The monastery on the hill put on its best face in the hard noon light, every edge proud of its right angles. Bells rang, but not for them. Ace didn't look at the refectory windows. She traced a diagonal on her own wrist with a thumbnail and let the itch of the dampener stand in for prayer.

At the gate, a novice in a robe too new tried to intercept them and decided against it when Kaarlo nodded the way men nod when the conversation is over. The inner courtyard smelled of clean stone and boiled vegetables. A cat lay exactly where it was not allowed to be and blinked with the confidence of a creature that understood forgiveness as policy.

The abbot met them in a room full of framed certificates. He had the thin look of a man who had dieted on obedience. His smile was meant to be welcoming and ended up being accounting. He shook Kaarlo's hand and then offered Ace and Mai the kind of handshake that kept a ledger.

"I am grateful for your assistance," he said, glancing at the badge he could only see when it was convenient. "We prefer to keep matters of the spirit within the spirit's domain."

"Mirrors are not a sacrament," Mai said politely.

"Everything reflects," the abbot said, a little too fast.

Ace looked past him to the refectory door and the long room beyond, tables placed exactly, a new mirror at the far wall catching light like a net. There was a crack from the top right down toward the bread table, just as Kaarlo had said, a line that hadn't finished deciding where it wanted to go.

"Observe only," Ace said, as if to herself.

Mai's mouth quirked. "We'll observe so hard it will count as a crime," she murmured back.

They stepped into the refectory together. The mirror waited, patient and wrong. The air had that weighted quiet of rooms where people eat because they were told to. Ace tilted her head until her reflection, if it had one, would have been clipped to an elbow and then to nothing. Mai set the clamp on the end of a table like talisman and lifted her square, eyes half-lidded the way they went when she listened to the world's inside voice.

The crack in the glass twitched, not visibly, but in the way a seam can hum if you have the right scar to hear it. Violet's whisper rolled very softly around the edge of Ace's thoughts: Little blade, the web is poorly made. One tug.

"Not yours," Ace said, under her breath.

“Pardon?” the abbot asked.

“She talks to herself,” Mai said, and smiled in a way that suggested the habit had saved lives. “We’ll need ten minutes. Then we’ll tell you whether your donors bought a window or a mistake.”

The abbot frowned in a measured way, the sort they taught in seminaries. “I will...see to the kitchen,” he said, and left through a door that liked to pretend it had only one purpose.

Karlo stayed by the threshold, hands at his sides, alert without invitation. “Ten minutes,” he said, to remind himself.

Mai took out a stub of chalk from her pocket. She drew a small, ugly square near the bottom corner of the mirror, low and off-center, where no one would think to polish. Then, with a quick, blunt stroke, she slashed a diagonal through it.

Ace felt the room breathe wrong and then right, like a rhythm finding its limp. “Hello,” she said to the crack, and for a heartbeat it was not a line in glass but a thread, waiting to be pulled, hoping they had brought teeth.

They hadn’t. —

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

