

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 3 - Threads in the Walls

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.3 **Wordcount:** ~3189 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** Cathedral **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 3 — Threads in the Walls

The refectory held its breath the way institutions do when someone important is watching. Bowls stacked in obedient towers, benches aligned like good intentions, the new mirror pretending a crack was just a line and not a choice.

Mai's chalk mark—ugly square, hard diagonal—sat low on the glass like a bad idea that refused to leave. The hairline seam quivered around it, as if reconsidering what a straight path meant.

"Maintenance access?" Ace asked without turning from the mirror.

Karlo pointed with his chin. "Service corridor behind the pantry. It runs the length of the refectory and the scriptorium wall. Cables. Old pipework. Rats that pay rent."

Ace nodded. "Show."

They passed the pantry's door beads—wooden discs the color of patience—and stepped into a narrow corridor that smelled like damp flour and old copper. The ceiling crouched. The walls had been painted too many times with a color named something like 'Blessed Beige.' The paint had forgotten how to be flat.

At first the marks looked like careless work: faint grooves in the plaster, thin and wandering. When Ace stopped and set her palm an inch from the wall, the grooves resolved into lines only because she refused to let them be anything else—parallel, then crossing, then twisting back, shallow as a whisper carved by a fingernail.

"Not cables," Mai said, already kneeling to unroll a strip of sensor mesh. "Not settling cracks. This is intentional."

Her black square hummed without lights, and the mesh on the floor returned numbers that disliked being obedient: tiny fluctuations in static charge, microtremors in the plaster, a temperature drop that wasn't air but attention. The lines in the wall traced a grid, but the distances between them were wrong in a way only a body could feel. Warp and weft, but with the bias bent to a purpose.

"Someone carved thread patterns into the monastery," Ace said. "Because if you carve a loom long enough, a certain kind of thing will decide you want it used."

Karlo's mouth tightened. "The abbey's walls were repaired after a flood last autumn. Volunteers. Contractors."

"Volunteers are the easiest to teach new habits," Mai said mildly. She clicked out three clamps from her tool roll and set them along the baseboard, each with a short length of cord banded in salt.

Imperfect circles pen-marked on their housings looked like a child's try at geometry. "If the pattern tries to pull us, we make it pull wrong."

They moved along the corridor in a slow line: Mai working, Ace listening, Kaarlo occupying the sort of space that made people think twice before they asked questions. The grooves grew denser near a vent grate, the lines entering and exiting like a river mouth. The grate was new chrome slapped onto old stone with a kind of cheerful incompetence.

Mai unscrewed it. Things you unscrew in monasteries should rattle with mice or incense dust. This one exhaled a cool breath that tasted like glass and rain a space had saved for later.

Beyond the grate, the cavity wasn't big, but it went farther than it should have. Something inside it had been strung: not visible thread, but a tension that made the hair along Ace's forearms wake up and point.

There, little blade, Violet crooned, cat-soft. Pluck.

Ace bared her teeth without opening her mouth. "No," she said, and slid one of her blades the length of two fingers into the cavity. The lacquered sheath had left a thin dust line along steel. The dust clung and then recoiled as if insulted.

Mai laid a coil of wire-and-salt near the edge and murmured to her square. The air shifted as the little device exhaled a null-field barely bigger than a breath. The tension in the wall scrunched up like an expression that had been caught.

"Listen," Ace said.

They did. Not to a tone—the Cathedral had taught them the arrogance of tones—but to the near-sound of someone pulling a stitch tight. Once. Once more. Then stopping because the stitch had felt the eyes on it.

Voices reached them from the far end of the corridor: a novice humming under his breath, badly; a second voice speaking numbers like a person trying to remember how to pray. Even numbers. Even, even, even—

Mai met Ace's eyes. "No heroics," she whispered.

"Correct," Ace said, and smiled like a knife being polite.

They reached the end of the service corridor and stopped under a blessedly ordinary junction box. Beyond the door: the scriptorium quick with dust in the light, a handful of lay workers with their sleeves rolled, a cart loaded with mirrors that had no business near books. Three men in plain clothes, wrists banded with red thread thin as forgiven sin. Their faces had the earnestness of people who had been given instructions they believed were for the good of the world.

They were trimming a sheet of mirror to fit an alcove between shelves. Not with tools. With their attention. Their eyes moved along the edges, and the glass shivered fractionally where their gazes passed. One murmured, "Two, four, six." Another said, "It must be straight." The third drew a pattern with a fingertip against air, and where the finger traced, the grooves on the wall answered, deepening invisibly.

Kaarlo swore the way a man swears in church: like the word wanted to be smaller and refused. He reached for the laminate badge and then thought better of it. "Order?" he mouthed.

“Order-adjacent,” Mai muttered. “Newer script. Same catechism.”

Ace stepped forward as if she had walked into the room by mistake and planned to make it other people’s problem. “You’re doing it wrong,” she said conversationally. “Mirrors don’t like even numbers. They prefer prime.”

All three men turned. The one with the pattern still in his hand smiled like a man caught peeling fruit with a borrowed knife. He had the sort of clean-cut face that photographs trusted. Under the red thread, his skin had the rash of someone who’d been wearing a bracelet made of rules.

“We’re just volunteers,” he said. “We’re just helping the abbot make things neat.”

“You’re unweaving people and pretending it’s tidying up,” Ace said, and now the smile was something else.

The man with the numbers lifted his hand and the air between them spidered, not with cracks but with the idea of cracks, a pall of anticipation that wanted to become glass shatter. The grooves in the wall sharpened like they had been told to stand at attention.

Mai’s disruptor pistol came up smooth and unambitious, the runes on its barrel dull with use. She didn’t aim at the men. She aimed at the elbows of the pattern, the invisible joints where the grooves met the air. She fired a short pulse that sounded like a knocked knuckle. The air flexed and miscounted itself.

The man with the pattern twitched as if a dentist had tapped a nerve. “Don’t do that,” he said, earnest and blank. “You’ll make it worse.”

Ace drew one blade. Green at the edge of steel like a memory of wildfire. The men saw it and their breath changed. They moved their hands like magicians about to produce doves and produced thread instead—fine, arterial, from nothing and from the grooves; it looped as if it had been taught the shape of wrists. One strand reached for Kaarlo’s throat.

Ace stepped, and the step was already a cut. The thread parted with a noise that should have been impossible for something that wasn’t quite there: a tiny, wet disappointment. The smell of new plastic again. Kaarlo’s hand went to his neck on instinct, and came away clean.

“Observe only,” he said through his teeth.

“We are,” Ace said. “I am observing their bad taste.”

The red threads multiplied, a cat’s cradle thrown by men who’d never made a mistake and thus didn’t understand reflex. One arced for Mai’s right wrist, eyes for the dampener patch. She let it get close enough to decide it had won and then flicked the disruptor to a low buzz that annoyed circuits and doctrine both. The thread went limp mid-air and dropped like a bored spider.

“Your anchors,” Mai said, and jerked her chin at the men’s wrists.

Ace moved toward the nearest. He had freckles. His pupils vibrated very slightly in a rhythm that wasn’t his. Ace put the flat of her blade against his wrist, cold and firm, and pressed just enough to remind his skin of its job.

“Name,” she said.

He blinked like it hurt. "Joonas," he gasped. The thread trembled, half-tightened, uncertain.

Mai shot another pulse into a corner where two invisible lines had decided they were a good idea. The room's tension shuddered, cords showing for a blink inside plaster—a lattice etched so shallow it was proud of its subtlety.

Kaarlo moved now, quick and deliberate, snatching a cloth from the cart and yanking it over the nearest mirror so it had to be a table again before it could think about being a snare. "Hands where I can see them," he told the third man, and the man obeyed because obedience was the only language he remembered.

The second thread leapt for Ace's ankle like a snake with good manners. She stepped wrong on purpose—three, seven, four—and it missed because the world couldn't predict that. Her blade drew an ugly diagonal in the air, and where it passed the thread frayed like cheap rope.

The man called Joonas made a sound that was either a sob or a laugh edited for television. "We're helping," he said, mouth shaking. "The choir-mother said the glass makes us worthy. She said we'd stop wanting the wrong things if the lines were straight."

Mai looked at his wrist, at the red band's irritated skin. "Did she give you that 'bracelet'?"

He nodded too fast. "We met in the community room. She had clean hands. She knew how to count without moving her lips."

"Of course she did," Mai said, almost kind. She holstered the disruptor, reached into her pocket, and produced a stub of chalk and a small adhesive square the color of stubborn dirt. "I'm going to put something over that," she said. "It will itch. If you take it off, I will be disappointed, and you don't have the emotional resilience for that today."

The humor startled a choked noise out of him. He let her press the square over the red thread. She drew a tiny square and diagonal across the patch with quick, ugly strokes. The band under it flexed like something that had been asked to hold still and found the request beneath it.

The third man tried a last throw. He whispered, "Two, four, six," and a fan of filaments flared from the grooves, reaching not for bodies but for the part of a person that stands up straighter when told it's almost correct. Ace half-turned and let the green edge of her blade kiss the air just above them. The filaments blackened like hair caught by a match, and the smell in the scriptorium turned to singed pride.

Kaarlo recovered a pair of zip ties from somewhere that implied he was the sort of priest who didn't wait for faith to handle everything. He bound wrists gently, as if the men might break and spill out apologies. "You'll be processed," he told them. "Not punished. But you won't touch glass again until it remembers what it's for."

"What's it for?" the numbers man asked, bewildered the way a child is when a favorite lie is taken away.

"Checking your teeth after spinach," Kaarlo said briskly. "Not making you a saint."

Something in the wall gave under Mai's palm. She had set one clamp at the base of the alcove and it had found a line to bite. The groove structure thrummed, a web struck hard in one corner that sent its sulk through the weft.

"Below us," she said softly. "There's a pull. A gathering anchor. It's feeding the surface patterns."

"The crypt?" Kaarlo asked.

"Or a crawlspace that pretends it isn't," Mai said. She slid the clamp two centimeters and the floor under their feet seemed to discover it weighed something. "We can cut the local lines, but if the anchor holds, they'll reweave overnight out of habit."

Ace looked at the three volunteers—sweat under silk-screened T-shirts, breathing hard, eyes working at the math of what they'd believed. She looked at the mirror under its cloth, at the cart's stacked sheets, at the grooves waiting for attention like a garden waiting for rain.

"Cut them anyway," she said. "Bad habits cry harder when you take their toys."

Mai nodded, tuned the disruptor's dial with a thumbnail nicked from building the dial. She fired three short pulses into the corners of the alcove. The air rippled along the groove lattice. The lines lost their tautness with a sound like thread being pulled out of a sweater. In the refectory beyond, the mirror's crack twitched and went slacker, less interested in its destination.

The building seemed to take a long inhale and then remember it was stone.

Joonas sagged, his arm hanging from the zip tie as if it had decided to be honest about gravity. "She'll be angry," he whispered. "The choir-mother. She has a loom. She says we don't have to think if we learn to hold the right shape."

Mai's jaw tightened. "Where," she asked, not gentle, "is the loom?"

Joonas stared down, then toward the hallway, then at a point under the floor between them. "There's a hatch behind the refectory bread closet," he said, voice shrinking so it wouldn't be noticed doing the right thing. "Stone steps. A room with no icon. Threads—real ones. And glass. She says the glass there isn't for seeing. It's for measuring."

Kaarlo made a note with a pencil he'd produced from the sort of pocket that lived for pencils. He met Ace's eyes. "We close it," he said, as if the sentence were armor.

"We don't rush it," Mai countered. "Not without dampeners built for a room-size pattern."

"Also correct," Ace said. She sheathed her blade. The green went out like a lamp that still warmed the hand above it. "We cut what we can reach. Then we go find the people she took this from."

"The missing child," Kaarlo said.

"And others," Ace said. She turned her head slightly, listening in the way her body did when the city had a seam. Not the Cathedral's drowning note. A thin, insistent rhythm like someone knocking on wood out of habit. Three. Two. One. Again, hopeful and wrong.

Mai heard it a heartbeat later and closed her eyes as if the sound needed darkness to be honest. "North side," she murmured. "Off the service corridor. Between kitchen and store room."

Kaarlo looked toward the pantry, toward where the walls in old buildings made bargains with each other to hide things between. "There's a disused cold room," he said. "We blocked it after the flood. The door sticks."

"Doors love to pretend they're in charge," Ace said, and moved.

They retraced through Blessed Beige and the pantry, past the beads that clicked like minor absolutions. The cold room door had been painted shut at the hinge edge, paint bulged like a scar. Someone had chalked an X on the lintel months ago, the kind of mark a caretaker made to remember a promise to fix something.

Ace pressed her ear to the wood. The knock came again. Three. Two. One. Slowed, patient. Not a ritual. A code knocked by someone who didn't trust their mouth.

Mai's palm settled flat against the door. The dampener patch on her wrist itched hard enough to be persuasion. "There's a line across the frame," she said. "One strand. If we open without cutting it, it tells the anchor we like the game."

"I can cut from the hinge," Kaarlo said, already rolling his sleeves.

"Allow me," Mai said, and produced a thin-bladed putty knife a painter would be proud of. She nicked away the bulge of paint with a tenderness that would have embarrassed her if doors had opinions. "Anchor line's at chest height."

Ace drew the chalk square and diagonal on the wood low and to the left, so a person stepping out would see it first thing and know a certain kind of enemy had been here and lost. The knock from inside paused as if considering whether the mark counted as company.

Mai found the thread by the way the knife didn't want to pass. She slid steel under the invisible and lifted gently. The line kissed the blade with static and then parted, whining a mosquito's idea of sadness. Somewhere under their feet, a tension shifted to find a new grip and didn't.

"Ready," Mai said.

Kaarlo put his shoulder to the door. It gave up with a groan that sounded theatrical. Cold air breathed out smelling of damp salt and the patience of potatoes. Darkness clicked out of the way a step at a time as Mai's square spilled a thin fan of light.

A pair of eyes blinked at them from the far corner—wide, rimmed red, set in a face the size of a child's fist. Then a second pair, a third. Not just the missing boy. Two more. All three wrapped in blankets meant for storage, not people, the knees-to-chest posture of creatures who have been told to make themselves into smaller problems.

Ace did not move forward. She did not reach out hands. She said, "Hello," as if she were asking a question whose answer they could own. "We're wrong for you in the good way. Count with me?"

A small pause, the kind with teeth. Then, from the closest child, a whisper steadier than it had any right to be. "Three."

Mai's voice, low, precise. "Two."

"One," the second child breathed, and the third nodded hard enough to count as the rest.

The room's bad shape loosened. The knocked rhythm inside Ace's chest matched the one on the wood and then took the lead.

Kaarlo swallowed something complicated and knelt just outside the threshold, palms up, empty as a statement. "I'm Kaarlo," he said. "We'll go slow."

Mai's light folded itself smaller so it would stop looking like interrogation. She glanced at Ace, and the look said everything they had promised each other about not breaking people while trying to save them.

Ace's hand found the chalk again. She drew a square and a diagonal on the floor by the threshold. "This is a way out," she said to the children and to whatever was listening under the floor. "Everything else is just a wall pretending to be a door."

The thread that hadn't been cut yet made a decision somewhere below and tried to pull. It found no purchase. The ugly mark on the stone stared it down.

"Okay," Mai said softly, as if to a nervous cat and an angry loom at once. "We're going to make some noise." —

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