

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 4 - Survivors' Echoes

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.4 **Wordcount:** ~3511 **Characters:** Ace, Mai **Location:** Unknown **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 4 — Survivors' Echoes

They did not move the children until their breathing stopped catching on the corners of the room. Kaarlo spoke to them the way you speak to birds you want to keep from flying into a window: small voice, small movements, palms plain. Mai said her name once and then said nothing else until the kids had copied the ugly square in chalk onto their own blankets and decided it was a badge.

Ace stood a half-step back from the doorway, watching the shape of the fear rather than the fear itself. The thread that had been strung across the frame had nowhere to anchor. That helped. The room's geometry had let go. That helped more.

When the smallest boy nodded like a soldier consenting to an order he'd invented, they moved. Kaarlo took two of the blankets; Mai took the third and the clamp and the black square of her scanner; Ace took nothing except the air between them and anything that wanted it.

They cut through the pantry, through the beads that would never be able to sound like penance again. Outside the refectory the mirror had found less to do. A shallow ripple still ran from top right toward bread, but it had lost opinion and become a flaw. Mai's diagonal mark sat there like a dare.

"Guesthouse," Kaarlo said quietly. "Room at the end of the hall. Thick walls. No glass."

He was right about the walls; old stone is its own religion. He wasn't quite right about the glass. The basin in the en suite was old porcelain that shone like obedience, and the window had been replaced with safety glass after the flood. Mai snapped a towel off the rack and thumbtacked it over the window with a speed that implied practice. She set a coil of wire-and-salt on the sink and draped a rag over it.

"Good," Ace said. She crouched to the kids' eye line and waited until all three looked at her. "If anything talks to you from something shiny, it's uninvited. If anything counts at you, it's fired. If anything tries to put a thread between your teeth, bite me instead."

That startled all three into small, shocked grins. Mai, standing behind her, hid her own.

Kaarlo sent for a nurse—someone the monastery actually trusted, not an institution that would write reports—and posted a novice outside the door with instructions to take orders from the women with the wrong badges. When he turned back inside, his face wore the expression of a man suddenly aware that the ground floor of faith had shifted under him.

"The abbot will want to know," he said.

"The abbot can want it in writing," Mai replied, already building something out of a metal hanger, a torn pillowcase, and a handful of clips. "He'll get a version that won't let him say the quiet parts out

loud.”

Ace glanced toward the window towel and made it flutter with her palm. “We need to find anyone else they collected,” she said. “Not just kids.”

Kaarlo’s eyes flicked toward the hallway, then the floor, then back to Ace in a triangle that meant he had thought the same thing and hadn’t liked where the thought led. “There’s a basement laundry that’s off-limits after the flood repairs,” he said. “You’d be surprised how often ‘off-limits’ collects people with nowhere else to go.”

“I wouldn’t,” Ace said.

They left the nurse with the children and walked out into a corridor that smelled of hot radiator and monastery soap. The laundry stairs curled down behind a door that liked to stick and announce visitors. At the bottom, the light was the kind that had learned resignation; two bulbs, one flicker, one brave. Big tubs. Bigger sinks. Lines overhead that should have held sheets and held nothing at all. The hum under everything wasn’t electricity.

Half a dozen people looked up when they entered, the way feral cats look up when a familiar footsteps stops being familiar. One older woman with hair tucked under a headscarf; two teens sitting back-to-back like books that knew each other’s stories by weight; a man with the wary hands of a carpenter forced to take a desk job; a girl in a hoodie that didn’t fit and refused to admit it. And there, leaning against a pillar as if it might decide to walk away, a young woman whose wrist bore the faint red rash of a thread that had been worn too long and too firmly.

The older woman saw Kaarlo and made the sign of the cross idly, the way you bless a chair you hope will hold you. “Father-Lieutenant,” she said. “You brought the loud ones.”

“We’re temperate when the world isn’t,” Mai said, and crouched so the hoodie girl could decide if the voice belonged to a problem.

The young woman with the rash lifted her chin. “They call it a support group when it isn’t,” she said. “The choir-mother is good with words. And doors.”

Ace didn’t ask her name. Sometimes names were permission slips the wrong things liked to read. “What did she do to your line?” she asked instead, nodding at the rash.

The woman looked down at her wrist as if it were a stubborn child. “Told me I could stop deciding,” she said. “Said if I wore discipline like a brace, the numbers in my head would stack instead of spilling.”

“And did they?” Mai asked gently.

“For a while.” The woman’s mouth twitched. It didn’t decide what shape to land on. “Then the mirror I use to check whether my face is still mine started asking for tips.”

Ace stood still for a heartbeat. Violet, amused and not unkind: There is a cost to tidy. She pressed the thought away with a thumb along her own diagonal scar and walked forward until the woman could see her clearly and choose. “We are going to make it worse before we make it better,” she said plainly. “If your line pulls, it will pull hard.”

The woman laughed, the small kind that comes out with the air you meant to save. “The thing about being pulled all your life,” she said, “is that you build calluses in the wrong places. I can take worse.”

Mai reached out without touching and set her fingers a half-inch above the woman's wrist. The dampener patch on her own skin began to itch the way a tooth aches after ice. The wrong pressure in her sinuses returned, pushed, hollowed, pressed. She didn't move her hand. "Do you hear anything?" she asked. "Voices. Counting. Words that wear the right clothes and carry stolen IDs."

The woman's eyes unfocused for a second as if cued. "Sometimes," she admitted. "Like the echo in an empty gym, when someone bounces a ball in the next room. Not words. Just the feeling I'm supposed to be somewhere straighter."

Mai's jaw worked. "It's trying me," she said quietly to Ace. "Smaller pushes than upstairs, but more...curated. Like it knows what I'll notice." She laid the coil-and-salt assembly on the table and clipped two lines to it, then two to the metal legs of the sink. "Kaarlo—kill the breaker feeding this room. If the anchor below is sampling us through the building ground, I'd like to give it a boring meal."

He pulled two switches on a panel that had been labeled by an optimist. The bulbs surrendered. Mai's square exhaled a thin wash of not-dark. Sometimes devices help because you teach them to be rude to the wrong kind of silence.

The teen pair shifted; the girl in the hoodie scraped her fingers along her own wrist in the way of someone trying not to scratch. Ace caught the motion and set a chalk square on the table with the diagonal already cut through. "If you want, mark your sleeve. It's stupid and ugly and you can hate it. That's the point."

The hoodie girl took the chalk like a dare. She drew the mark crookedly and then went over the diagonal hard enough to tear the fabric. "I don't like straight lines," she muttered.

"Correct," Ace said.

Mai sat across from the rash-wrist woman and took out the putty knife again. "I can cut what's close to the skin," she said. "I can't cut what's happy to live in the air. When I lift, it will talk. Don't answer."

The woman nodded once, fierce. "Go."

Mai slid the blade under nothing and lifted. The air went tense in a small circle around the wrist, then cried a sound only dampeners hear. The woman's breath hitched. Someone behind them whispered a number and swallowed it like a mistake. The coil snapped once, pulling a line of something too thin to be material into ground.

Ace stood behind Mai's shoulder, eyes on the corners of the room, on the edges where light failed to be honest. The laundry had one wall with a line of glass bricks, the old kind that turned people into smudges and decided that was art. In those bricks, for a flick, Ace saw not her shape nor Mai's nor anyone's—she saw a chalk circle and a bowl of cloudy oil, a pair of hands that were not a priest's nor a mother's but had been practicing both. It was a picture she had put away months ago and locked with a bad joke and a worse mark.

There, little blade, Violet said very softly, not teasing. That is not today.

Ace's hand went to her sternum and traced the diagonal under cotton. "Not today," she agreed, and the frosted bricks returned to being bad decorators.

Mai exhaled. The woman's hand sagged as the pressure lifted and then returned, a smaller wave that couldn't remember how to crest. "You'll be sore," Mai said. "Don't take off the square. If you start

wanting to, breathe until you want less.”

“I used to think breathing was cheating,” the woman said, wobbling a smile. “I’ll cheat.”

Kaarlo, in the dim, had his phone face-down on the table, as if refusing a mirror’s invitation. It buzzed itself into bad manners. He bent, checked, and frowned hard enough to file an official complaint with his forehead.

“City police have fielded two Foundation vehicles in town limits,” he said. “Marked like donors, not operators. The alert says they’re here to ‘assist with post-flood structural assessments.’” He didn’t look up when he added: “Cantor listed in the footer as legacy protocol.”

Mai’s gaze flicked to Ace and then to the door. “Of course it is,” she said. “Observe only? Trap. They want to observe us being observed.”

Ace’s phone buzzed in reply, as if news traveled by a private nerve between bad ideas. She pulled it out and palmed the screen so it couldn’t see her face. One line, no header, the punctuation of a man who apologized after he set fires in the right places:

CANTOR/3 revived. field doc updated with your names against my advice. do not let them measure you. do not let them separate you. if pinned, bite down and count primes. —B

Mai looked around the room, then to the coil, then to the faces that had started to choose trust and would be punished for it by anyone whose doctrine required gratitude only upward. “We need to move these people to a place that doesn’t give the anchor free samples,” she said. “And we need to do it before a team with clean clipboards decides we’re the anomaly.”

“The monastery has a storeroom in the old infirmary wing,” Kaarlo said. “Stone. No power. No windows. The abbot hates it because it reminds him that bodies are work.”

“Perfect,” Ace said. “Bodies are work. We are union.”

They moved in pairs, slow and unremarkable, like people who had just finished a laundry shift and were too tired to do anything interesting. Kaarlo had a gift for guiding without herding. The teens carried the clamp and the coil like contraband textbooks. The hoodie girl held tight to the torn chalk square on her sleeve as if it might bite anything that tried to get her wrist again. The rash-wrist woman walked between Ace and Mai, eyes forward, mouth set.

On the way up, the corridor’s wall grooves hummed again, a faint petulance. Mai glanced at them and tuned her disruptor to a different wrong. She fired once, and the sound it made was a bored door buzzer. The grooves faltered; the pattern sulked. Someone upstairs dropped a tray and the clatter broke the air into honest pieces.

In the infirmary storeroom, the stone made its own argument for existing. Old cots leaned in a row. A cabinet with glass doors had been covered by brown paper and tape that had dried to a crackle. Someone had left a saint’s print propped drunk at an angle; its eyes had learned not to follow.

“This’ll do,” Mai said, scanning the room’s edges. She set the coil on an upside-down crate and ran two lines to the cot frames. “No mirrors. The only reflection in here is the kind produced by people who talk to each other.”

Ace set the chalk square on the doorframe, low and ugly. She drew the diagonal through it with the kind of pressure that breaks pencils. The hooded girl copied it on the cot frame, then on the side of a

crate, then on her own shoe. Small locations for a small rebellion.

The nurse arrived with tea that didn't solve anything and a look that had learned patience on night shifts. She checked the kids quickly, checked the rash-wrist woman with the same brisk tenderness, and handed Ace a packet of bandages as if it were a treaty offering. "If anyone collapses," she said, "it's because they were holding the line for too long. That destroys posture."

"We'll make them sit down," Ace promised.

Mai's square flickered in her hand; it had nothing to do with light. She stuck it in her pocket and leaned one shoulder against the cool stone. "Pressure's back," she said softly. "Less this time. It's sampling, not pulling."

"Can you stand?" Ace asked, too casual for it to be only conversation.

"I can stand until I'm polite," Mai said, and then let the line of her body soften a fraction so Ace could see where the strain landed. "It's learning my angle. That means it has a profile, which means the anchor below is either running a cheap model or it's feeding data off-site."

"Threads into networks," Ace said, and made a face like she'd tasted bad policy. "Digital choir."

"Probably only a pilot project," Mai said, which made Ace laugh in a way that wasn't nice.

Karlo checked his phone again and made a decision he would have to explain later. He shut it off, slid it under a cot, and stepped on it lightly, as if giving it a time-out. "If the Foundation steps foot on this floor," he said, "they'll have to do it without a man with a laminate holding a door for them."

Ace looked at him. "You can still be fired," she said.

"I will confess to that," he replied.

The teens exchanged a look that had nothing to do with adults and everything to do with who would throw the first stolen apple if men with clipboards came in. The hoodie girl practiced drawing the diagonal with a finger in the air, over and over, a quiet metronome with teeth.

The rash-wrist woman—who still hadn't given a name and didn't need to—sat and stared at the cot frame until it admitted it could be a talisman. "She'll come," she said, meaning the choir-mother. "She likes to pick up what she thinks is hers."

"Let her try," Ace said mildly. "I'm bad at sharing."

Mai rolled her shoulders as if she were warming up for a fight where the weapon would be choosing the wrong number and meaning it. "Once we get the room-size dampeners built," she said, eyes on Ace, "we go to the hatch behind the bread closet."

"The loom," Ace said.

"The loom," Karlo echoed, and the word sounded wrong in his mouth in a way that pleased Ace. Words should not be comfortable when they were borrowed.

Ace checked the time and found that the day had eaten itself into an hour that meant the first Foundation team would already have a parking space. She took the bandages from the nurse and tucked them into Mai's pocket as if specters yielded to gauze. "Eat," she said to the room, because people forget. "Pretend this is normal. Normal confuses certain predators."

The nurse made a noise that might have been agreement and might have been exhausted laughter. She poured tea that tasted like the kind of comfort that doesn't ask you to stop hurting first.

Ace walked to the paper-covered cabinet and, without lifting the paper, drew a small square and a diagonal exactly where someone would reach to open it without thinking. She felt the tension in the air consider that and find somewhere else to go sulk.

Mai leaned close, close enough that her breath alchemized tea into something like a memory of rain. "You're hearing Violet," she said, not a question.

"A little," Ace admitted. "She's being useful. I hate it when she's useful."

Mai's smile was thin and delighted. "We'll bribe her ego later. For now: build me something ugly out of perfectly good parts, would you? I need a mesh that ruins symmetry on contact."

Ace's smirk came back, clean and feral. "Menace," she said.

"Correct," Mai said, and kissed the diagonal under Ace's collarbone with two fingers, quick as a signature no one else could read.

They worked while the room relearned how to be a room. The laundry group—no longer precisely a group and not yet a community—settled around the coil's quiet pulse. Kaarlo paced the doorway like a threshold hired a bouncer. The nurse bullied tea into being a treatment plan. The teens argued with their eyes about who would be the scout. The hoodie girl slept with her hand on her chalked sleeve and her mouth set in the shape of someone who had decided to be harder to count.

Ace fashioned an asymmetry net out of hanger wire, tape, and the pillowcase—the mesh holes uneven, the corners wrong on purpose, a thing that would make any measuring system trip and swear. Mai tuned the disruptor to a low murmur that vibrated the cot frames into a solidarity they hadn't signed up for but would honor anyway.

Ace's phone buzzed one more time, insistent enough to be rude. She glanced. Another line from the same man who knew how to set tables on fire and then apologize for the heat:

eyes inbound from south road. observe nothing alone. —B

Ace showed it to Mai. "We won't," she said.

Mai set the mesh on her shoulder like a cape you'd wear to a costume party where the theme was 'ruin arithmetic.' "We have an anchor to insult," she said. "And if Cantor wants to watch, it can learn how ugly looks when it wins."

Kaarlo unlocked the infirmary door and waited for them to move first, an act of deference the old building understood and approved. The stone underfoot felt less like a sermon and more like an ally.

"Bread closet hatch," Ace said, checking the lines of her body the way a musician checks an instrument before you play at a funeral. "Then we go down."

Mai's dampener patch itched like a prophecy. "And we cut the song out of the walls."

"Not a song," Ace said, almost tender. "A bad weave."

They stepped out into the corridor. The monastery's noises had changed—more footsteps, more voices trying very hard to be polite, the distant cough of a vehicle that didn't belong to monks.

Somewhere a bell rang and then rang again as if it had been asked a question it couldn't answer on the first try.

Ace and Mai walked the way they always did: a half step apart, close enough to borrow balance, separate enough to have both hands free for work. Kaarlo matched their pace without pretending to lead. Behind them, the storeroom door held the chalk diagonal like a guard with a crooked spear.

On the refectory threshold, Ace paused and looked once at the covered mirror. Its crack had slid an inch toward bread and then, apparently, changed its mind. She imagined a woman with clean hands standing at a loom under the floor, annoyed at supplies that didn't lie the way the pattern demanded.

"Good," Ace murmured. "Be annoyed."

Mai touched her wrist. "Ready?"

"Always," Ace said. Then, because they had promised to keep it noisy, she added, "Three."

Mai's laugh was quiet and made of iron. "Seven."

They headed for the bread closet and the hatch behind it, where threads waited to be taught what a wrong number could do. —

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