

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 6 - Mai's Shadow

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.6 **Wordcount:** ~3219 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright **Location:** Foundation lab **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 6 — Mai's Shadow

They went back in the way thieves go into their own houses: casual, annoyed, certain of where everything should have been. The donor vans idled like white teeth behind them. Inside, the monastery had adopted the tone of a building being polite at gunpoint.

Bread closet. Hatch. Stairs. The air below had warmed half a degree, the way spaces do when a room learns your name and starts practicing it. The frame stood where they'd left it; the threads, fewer; the waxed mirrors, sulking under Mai's crooked mesh. The grooves in the plaster hummed as if someone had persuaded them to believe again.

Clean Hands was waiting for them, of course. She had taken off the gray dress's gloves and put on nothing. Bare wrists. Doctrine showed up best without jewelry. Her voice climbed out of the dark like a step you forgot and then remembered where your knee is.

"You're late for vespers," she said. "We started without you."

Ace didn't take the bait. She set one clamp on the pillar base with the unnecessary care of a person who enjoys annoying machines. Mai threw the mesh higher across the nearest mirror, pinned it, tuned the disruptor to a patient thrum. The coil under the crossbar remembered the frequency she liked and exhaled a low complaint. The frame creaked like it had a spine.

"Backhaul's choked," Mai reported, glancing at her black square. "It'll still learn, but slower. We're teaching it bad habits."

"Sin is repetition," the woman said mildly. "Virtue is pattern."

"Pattern without consent is a straightjacket," Mai replied, and rolled her wrist once like a boxer pacing ring rope.

The shot came sideways. Not a thread for the patch. Not a neat loop at the throat. The room did something smarter: it flicked every waxed mirror at once to catch Mai in the ragged corner of each, measuring every angle she had ever presented to a reflective surface and compiling that catalog into a demand. Something in the air reached for her like a tailor's hands. The pressure hit so fast that her breath went shallow by reflex.

Ace felt it a half-beat later. Not by ear. In the place under her sternum that knew when a seam had been pulled tight. She stepped, already at Mai's side, two fingers a diagonal along the hinge of her jaw. "Here," she said, the word a doorstop.

Mai's pupils blew wide before they snapped to, stubborn as her. "Pressure," she got out. "Not pull. It's counting me in parallel."

"Then we count wrong," Ace said.

Clean Hands lifted a palm like a conductor. The grooves in the plaster stood to attention. Even-number murmur flooded the room—innocent, stupid, tyrannical. Two four six— The volunteers' wrists thrummed, thread lifting toward the ceiling like cobwebs that had discovered ambition.

Ace covered Mai's mouth with her palm, a ritual learned in a different ruin of a room. Mai's teeth found the base of Ace's thumb and closed—firm, alive. Anchor. Ace bent until her forehead touched Mai's temple and breathed in cadence, a metronome you don't get to buy. "Three," she whispered against skin.

Mai's eyes laughed without light. She tapped Ace's wrist twice: I hear you. She tapped a third time: I'm here.

Ace kept the pressure on. "Seven."

Mai's hands, steady, mirrored the diagonal against Ace's jaw with two fingers: Here. The even-number murmur skittered like an insult that didn't land.

Clean Hands smiled without teeth. "You can't hold her mouth forever," she observed. "Everyone must breathe order eventually."

"Menace," Ace said softly, and Mai's bite deepened enough to turn the word into a vow.

The mirror on pillar two twitched. Not fog. Not frost. Something like a red sheen, a film you feel on your teeth after you've chewed a lie too long. Mai's head cocked like she was listening to instructions in another room.

"Ace," she said against skin. Voice flat. Not hers.

Ace's throat went cold. In her ear, Violet purred an amused agreement that wasn't helping. She shifted her grip, palm still over mouth, fingers biting the hinge harder, mouth at Mai's ear. "Not today," she said. "Not yours."

"—open," Mai said into Ace's palm, the syllable thin as a thread pulled through. Her eyes focused a millimeter to the left of Ace's face, then snapped back, furious at themselves. "It's...borrowing my angle," she ground out when Ace eased enough to let her. "It's using the catalog. It wants me for a yardstick."

Ace tasted iron on the soft pad below her thumb. "Then we break the ruler."

Mai's laugh was a hard click. She shoved the mesh higher one-handed, set the coil deeper under the crossbar with the other, then hurled her disruptor against the frame's brace so the pulse ran up the wood like a private earthquake. The mirrors' red sheen shook, quivered, lost its nerve. The grooves sulked.

Clean Hands' gaze sharpened. "You can't unlearn straight," she said. "Not for long."

Mai's jaw flexed. "Watch me."

The room responded by getting petty. Threads stopped reaching for patches or throats. They slithered low, ankle level, where muscle memory forgets vigilance. Two looped for Ace's Achilles. She hopped wrong. Three-seven-four. One went for Mai's knee. She met it with the hard part of her shin and the

thread recoiled like it had touched an honest thing. Another flicked for the back of her hand, where the dampener had reddened the skin.

Ace took it on her forearm, blade flat again, let the filament sing against metal and die from embarrassment. "Kaarlo," she called without looking. "Door."

He was already moving, bar in hands, shoulders square—a bouncer at the threshold of a sacrament. His face said prayer; his stance said not tonight.

The woman didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to. The mirrors flared again, a red fish-scale shimmer. The pressure found a new lever: Mai's memory of glass. Not a hymn. An anti-hymn: all the moments she'd checked whether she looked like herself before stepping into a public space. The room borrowed those quiet acts and tried to make a liturgy.

Mai flinched once. The small kind you only see if you love someone enough to catalog their corners. Her hand trembled and then lied about it. "Ace," she said, calmer than the inside of her cheeks. "I can hold. But I won't be smart in ten minutes. Pain makes people obedient. We need to step back and build this right."

Ace's first answer was a cut waiting to happen. The second was worse: a yes that would leave strangers in the hands of someone who ironed souls. She ground her molars until a nerve threatened to file a complaint.

Violet, delighted: Little blade, you can end it now. Just turn. Just open.

Ace leaned her forehead to Mai's again and let the edges of the green hum in her blade pass through the bone without staying. "I don't want to leave you in here for one breath," she said, so low it could have been a thought. "I don't want to leave them in here for two."

"We don't," Mai said, with the religiosity of engineers. "We leave for fifteen, we come back with a net that ruins math, and we pull the floor out from under her. If I stay, I become a reference. If I become a reference, she gets me for free everywhere there's glass."

Ace swallowed a sound that might have been a plea. "I can anchor you," she said. "I can—"

Mai's eyes were hot iron. "You can't be my dampener and my sword at the same time." She tore the sentence clean with a breath. "I don't get to be brave here. I get to be smart."

Even numbers pressed. Two four six. The room's patience wore the expression of a mall cop. The volunteers' wrists trembled, red bands sliding. The coil under the crossbar snapped once like a thing trying not to scream.

Ace closed her eyes for a beat that a person could live a life inside. When she opened them, she looked like herself again. Smaller than the blade's idea of her. Exact. "Okay," she said. "Fifteen. You don't take your patch off. You don't look at anything that pretends to be helpful. You breathe when you want to count. You let me be rude to everyone."

Mai's mouth kicked at the corner. "Menace," she agreed, and then her hand found the back of Ace's neck and held for exactly the time it takes to rebalance a planet. "Go."

They broke the room on the way out in small ways that mattered: clamps kicked askew, mesh left tangled in a mirror like a bird had won a fight with a window, a chalk square low on the frame where only a cleaner would notice and feel inexplicably tired. Clean Hands watched them retreat with the

look of a woman who knows she will be praised for sending a polite email explaining how the problem persisted.

At the top of the stairs, the Foundation's structural team had multiplied. Clipboards had bred with tablets. Bright lingered at the edge like a conscience unwilling to sit down. The lab-coat man looked relieved to see them leaving. "Good," he said. "We were about to propose a controlled—"

Mai walked past him like a weather system. Ace followed like the pressure change behind it. Kaarlo closed the bread closet and leaned the pry bar against it in a way that would require a small argument to undo.

Back in the light, the world did that thing it does when your inner ear resets: too bright, too honest, too much sky. The donor vans purred. A group of pilgrims ate ice cream and pretended they were tourists. The bells did not ring.

They cut left for the infirmary wing. Inside the storeroom, stone approved their return. The kids were asleep in complicated positions that meant life. The teens were arguing with their eyebrows. The nurse had found a kettle and bullied it into doing miracles. The rash-wrist woman was awake and had decided to live.

Mai leaned both hands on a crate and let air into ribs that had acted like a corset. Her patch had gone from red to angry. Ace took one look and stepped into her space, hands gentle and rude at the same time. She peeled the old patch with the kind of care most people reserve for lace and pressed Bright's ugly spare over the welt with a firmness that told skin who paid rent.

"Look at me," Ace said.

Mai did. For a second all the other rooms left. Ace saw the math in Mai's head slow from sprint to human pace. Saw the pain softening from command to suggestion. She cupped Mai's face and—because they had rules for mornings but this wasn't one—she put her mouth to Mai's mouth. Not a victory. An insistence.

When they parted, Mai's laugh came out shaky and honest. "You're terrible for my professionalism."

"Correct," Ace said, and then the argument they had been earning arrived.

"You wanted to stay," Mai said. Not accusation. Autopsy. "You wanted to bleed in there and call it a plan."

Ace's shoulders went tight. "I wanted to stop a woman who irons people," she said. "Is that a crime now?"

"It's a habit," Mai said, soft as a bolt loosening. "The one where you choose sacrifice because it's easier than waiting for a better hammer."

Ace's jaw worked. "Waiting gets children dead."

"Counting wrong gets them out," Mai shot back, heat finally showing. "I am not a sword you can hold in your off hand while you cut with the other. If I break, you break louder. If I become a reference, she tunes you through me."

Silence stacked in neat bricks. Ace broke it with both hands. "I am afraid," she said. "Not of her loom. Of losing you to something that calls itself tidy. I can fight a room. I can't fight your absence."

Mai blinked once, twice; the tell she had when a sentence found a place to live. “Good,” she said, dry. “Keep being afraid. It makes you careful.” Her fingers slid up to the back of Ace’s neck again, smaller now. “And trust me when I say retreat is not surrender.”

Ace’s grin cut sideways and then softened into something that knew its own teeth. “I hate it when you’re right.”

“You picked me for it,” Mai said. She kissed the diagonal under Ace’s collarbone with two fingers. “Fifteen minutes. I build the field. You check Kaarlo’s exits and make sure no one politely escorts us to a room with nice chairs.”

“On it,” Ace said. “Then we go back and break her geometry.”

“Then we go back,” Mai echoed, and already her hands were tearing pillowcases into ribbons, knotting wire, soldering the new patch into the coil’s grounded gut like she was teaching it to swear. She worked quickly, ugly on purpose: mesh holes uneven, coils at incorrect intervals, clamps taped at bad angles—everything a measuring system would trip over.

Ace took Kaarlo and walked the corridors with the briskness of an infection you didn’t plan to treat. They blocked one door with a stack of hymnals that had never quite learned the right songs. They chalked low squares on skirting boards where mops wouldn’t.

When Ace came back, Mai had built a field kit that looked like a junk drawer had decided to start a union. The teens stared at it with touching respect. The nurse asked if it would interfere with pacemakers and Mai said, solemn as the officiant at a wedding, “Only the obedient ones.”

The rash-wrist woman stood. “I can walk,” she said. “I can hold a clip. I won’t go below. But I can stand at a doorway and lie to anyone with a clipboard.”

“Promotion on your first day,” Ace said. “We offer poor benefits and too much truth.”

Mai lifted the kit. The patch on her wrist had cooled to a tolerable ache; the new one itched like it had opinions. She rolled her shoulders like she was remembering they belonged to her. “Ready?”

“Always,” Ace said, and because they had promised not to forget, she added, “Three.”

“Seven,” Mai said, half a smile. The hoodie girl whispered “four” after them like a charm.

They moved. The monastery’s air had thickened with men explaining themselves to stone. At the bread closet, a Foundation tech stood with a device that wanted to be a Geiger counter for sin. Kaarlo covered him in bureaucracy and gentle heresy while Ace and Mai slipped past. Hatch. Stairs. The room met them with the smell of resin and control.

Clean Hands had company now: two more volunteers, the numbers man and Joonas with his fresh square sticker on his wrist; a mirror technician who had mistaken instruments for ethics; and four new threads running like grabbed veins from the frame to the wax.

Mai set the field with the speed of triage: clamp, coil, mesh, wrong-angle bracket. She thumbed the disruptor to a pulse so low it sounded like doubt and let it bleed into the anchor. The mirrors lost courage. The grooves pouted.

Then the room got personal. The mirrors flared red again—but not at Mai. Ace heard a sound she hated immediately: Mai’s voice, counting even numbers in Ace’s head.

Two.

Four.

Six.

It wasn't Mai. It was the room, echoing Mai's catalog at Ace, throwing her partner's tone back at her like a rock through a window. For a second the neatness of that trick took a bite. Then Ace laughed, short and mean.

"Wrong voice," she said, and put her hand to her own mouth, covering, pressure a diagonal. She bit the base of her own thumb and felt the bite say I belong to us. The even count cracked. Violet all but purred with approval at the self-violence. Ace let her, the way you let a cat rub against your shin as a tax.

Mai's eyes asked a question. Ace tilted her chin: I'm here. The answer worked.

Clean Hands saw it land and did not like learning. She reached, pinched the air like she was taking a loose thread from a sweater. The volunteers tightened on cue. Threads sang. The frame flexed. The room decided to be a ruler again.

Mai kicked the coil. The pulse flattened the decision into confusion. "Now," she said.

They cut. Not elegantly. Not heroically. Ugly. Practical. Ace's blade was a straight line applied to liars. Mai's mesh was a bad net dropped over good math. Kaarlo held the door like a sacrament again. Joonas sobbed once and then went silent with determination. The numbers man whispered "two four six" and then, haltingly, "three," and the red band on his wrist loosened as if fabric could be ashamed.

The anchor shed another lie. The threads slackened. The wax smeared. The frame creaked in a way that meant a future maintenance request. It wasn't victory. It was a change of slope.

Mai swayed once, not from the room; from the cost. Ace caught her elbow with the hand that hadn't been bit and grinned with her eyes too bright. "Fifteen," she said.

"Thirteen," Mai corrected, petty about numbers for the first time in an hour. It felt like proof of life.

Up the stairs, a voice with a badge attached to it tried to sound reasonable at Kaarlo. He sounded unreasonable back, which sometimes is the most reasonable thing. Bright's silhouette cut a cigarette in half and threw both halves away.

Clean Hands did not try to follow. Not yet. She stood by her frame, bare wrists offered like a dare, and called up, "You think you can keep your noise going forever?"

Mai didn't turn. "Long enough," she said, and the room hated the vagueness because it couldn't measure it.

They came back into the infirmary wing drunk on oxygen. Ace closed the storeroom door with her foot and leaned her head to the stone until the whine in her nerves leveled out. Mai let the kit slip to the floor and stood very still, hands at her sides like a fighter between bells.

"Zero lunch," Ace said.

"Correct," Mai said.

They laughed the laugh people use instead of crying when there's work left. The nurse handed them mugs. Kaarlo leaned in the threshold like a prayer that had earned the right to be impolite.

"Next," he said.

"Next we sleep for seven minutes with our eyes open," Mai said, already adjusting the field's dials, making the mesh uglier, teaching the coil new sins. "Then we go back and take the loom's legs, one by one."

Ace nodded, and behind her teeth Violet laughed softly, not unkind.

Little blade, she said. The web is poorly made. One tug.

"Soon," Ace told her. "But not yours."

She looked at Mai, at the ugly square chalked everywhere a mop couldn't reach, at the kids who'd drawn their diagonals on their blanket edges like flags, at Kaarlo's jaw set to duty, at the coil humming the sound of a building being taught to misbehave.

"Three," Ace said.

"Seven," Mai answered.

The rest of the number didn't matter. The noise did. —

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