

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 7 - Loom of Crimson

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.7 **Wordcount:** ~2946 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright **Location:** Foundation lab **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### ### Chapter 7 — Loom of Crimson

They bought seven minutes by lying to their own bodies. Eyes closed, spines against stone, breath slowed to the rhythm of a room that refused to count. The nurse watched the kettle like medicine, the teens watched the door like doorways had feelings, Kaarlo watched the corridor as if politeness might try something.

Ace drifted without sleeping and found the shallow water where Violet liked to pace.

The room in the dream had no corners. It wore red the way iron does when heat stops arguing. Violet stood where you stand when you've been waiting without getting bored: hip cocked, hands behind her back, hair loose like a dare. She had Ace's face the way a coin has both—same strike, different shine. Her smile was meant for accomplices.

There, little blade. You brought her into the pattern. She's a metric now. Let me tune you alone. I'll make the thread scream like a violin and we'll be done before the bell learns a second note.

Ace looked down at her own hands. Small. Exact. No blood. "You want me to open," she said. "You always have."

Violet stepped close, close enough for the dream to remember the smell of rain on hot concrete. "I want you to choose," she corrected, voice silk and splinters. "Open is merely a word for a door we kick. You can't be both their sword and your own lock forever. Let me turn. Let me make the green sing."

"If I give you the hinge," Ace said, "I lose the door." She searched Violet's eyes for cruelty and found, annoyingly, tenderness. "She is not a metric."

Violet's laugh was soft, nothing like the city's. "Oh, little blade," she said, amused and almost sad. "Everything you love becomes a ruler the world wants to use. That's why we keep our lovers noisy. That's why we draw ugly lines on pretty things. But the woman under the floor irons people. You can let me iron her."

"Not today," Ace said, and Violet's mouth softened into pride that looked borrowed from someone real.

The dream folded. Bells tried to ring and got the timing wrong.

Ace opened her eyes to Mai's palm on her chest, two fingers pressing the diagonal under bone. "Present," Mai murmured.

"Correct," Ace replied, and both of them breathed like they were paying rent.

The kettle clicked. The nurse poured victory into mugs. Kaarlo lifted his head. "They're moving," he said, and the words put on boots.

Outside, the town had been draped. Mirrors in shopfronts and the council hall windows glowed with a faint film like fish scales. Traffic lights flickered in a pattern that wasn't a pattern you could report. The monastery spire sent back a slick ghost of sky. Across the river, industrial sheds opened their doors wider, inviting reflections to chat.

"Field expansion," Mai said, jaw tight. "She's kicking the net out of the cellar and into the world. Mirrors linked through street cams, bank vestibules, bus stop glass. Backhaul's cleverer now." She tapped her square. "She's learned my angle faster than I like."

"Loom of the town," Kaarlo muttered, disgust curling his voice. "Vespers in red."

"Then we cut legs," Ace said. "We break the big frame by ruining little frames."

They split their load into things a body could carry while pretending to be ordinary: asymmetry mesh folded into a tote, coils in a toolbox marked PIPES, clamps in a canvas bag that used to hold hymns. Kaarlo took the bar because someone needed to look like a man who would repair a door with force and subtlety. The teens asked to be useful and Mai gave them jobs with ugly names: joiner, runner, liar. The rash-wrist woman took a clipboard and wrote nonsense on it with the confidence of a bureaucrat who has already won.

They hit the first leg at the council hall—corner window, east side, a pane cleared after the flood and blessed by a donor whose plaque mispronounced the town. Mai tossed the mesh across it and pinned it wrong. Ace chalked a square low on the sill and slashed a diagonal that made the pane flinch. The red sheen thinned like shame.

"Next," Mai said.

The second leg was the thrift store's round mirror. The owner had taped cardboard over it like a bandage; they left the bandage and added clamps where the frame wanted to sit pretty. The coil hummed. The thread smell sulked.

On the way to the third, the vans began to herd. Foundation casuals fanned out with contractor swagger and debrief smiles. One peeled off and blocked their path on the narrow street like a traffic cone designed to say please.

"Quick assessment," lab-coat man said, genial as a trap. "Separate rooms for clarity. Two questions apiece, signatures, then you can get back to your field work. Best practices."

Mai didn't break stride exactly; she bent it. "We're not best practice."

"Legacy protocol," he added, the phrase like a badge he thought would open everything.

Ace smiled with teeth. "Observe only," she repeated, and slid past close enough that if he'd had doctrine on him it would have caught on her sleeve. Mai ghosted, Kaarlo blocked without appearing to block, and the lab coat's geniality frayed.

They cut left into the market square, a place built to teach pigeons arrogance. The bus shelter's glass bore the red fish-scale film and a poster of a child with a donation bucket. Mai's disruptor purred against the shelter's frame and the film peeled like sunburn. Ace chalked a square on the poster child's cheek. A woman watching on a bench made the sign of the cross and didn't know why it felt

like a union logo.

A radio voice from a van said: “—Cantor separation protocol approved; copy; isolate subjects AceMai for calibration.” Bright’s text hit Ace’s palm before the air finished swallowing the word: they will try to make you parallel lines. refuse geometry. west lane, bakery side entrance. I can buy thirty seconds. “Bakery,” Ace said. “Bread is doctrine,” Kaarlo replied, deadpan, and led them down the alley that smelled of proofing dough and clean knives. They were almost through when a pair of Foundation techs stepped out from either side like a closing book. One had a scanner that wanted to be a wand in the worst way. The other had separateness printed on his posture. “Just a moment,” wand said, friendly. “We need to check your dampeners for compliance.” Mai’s smile looked saintly if you squinted wrong. “We’re noncompliant,” she said, and dropped her tote. The first tech’s device took offense at asymmetry. The second reached for Ace’s elbow with the kind of grip that had been trained never to bruise. Ace’s blade didn’t come out. She pressed the side of her wrist into his palm, turned, three-seven-four, and his grip closed on air. Kaarlo took half a step and planted a thumb under the wand’s emitter; the tech thought about doctrine and found biology instead. The wand lowered. Bright ghosted through the bakery’s side door like guilt. He didn’t look at them. He looked at the smoke sensor on the ceiling and flicked a lighter against it with practiced sadness. The alarm went off with the offended dignity of an aunt. Sprinklers coughed—not enough water to flood, enough to speckle every glass surface with imperfection. Red film mottled, reflections died unheroically. The Foundation techs swore in professional dialect. “Thirty seconds,” Bright hissed without moving his lips. Mai was already moving. “North wall,” she said, and Ace knew she meant the anchor line riding the old phone trunk through the bakery office. They ducked past racks of half-baked loaves and into a room with a safe, a fax, a framed photo of donors who loved their own hands. Mai laid the coil against the trunk and pulsed. The building sighed in two tones; the lower one admitted it was tired. The sheeted red across town shuddered like a fish deciding to play dead. “Next leg,” Ace said. They stitched wrongness through the town like saboteurs of a very tidy parade: a bank vestibule where mirrors pretended to be protective; a hair salon where the long wall glass had learned to flirt with posture; the municipal stairwell where glass bricks turned people into ghosts and then asked questions. Each time: mesh, clamp, coil, chalk. Each time: the pressure in Mai’s head pressed back and she pressed harder. “Five minutes,” Bright texted. “They’re triangulating your patches. Separation team inbound with friendly maps.” “They like my angle too much,” Mai said, scowling. “We need to blur me.” Ace reached up and smudged a thumb across Mai’s cheekbone, a dirty stroke meant to make the camera hate its work. “Ugly suits you.” “Correct,” Mai said, and with her free hand drew a diagonal on Ace’s collar with two fingers, staking a claim the room couldn’t paper over. By the time they swung back toward the monastery, vespers had learned to ring after all. Bells counted the wrong seconds, then corrected themselves, then got it wrong again as if someone tugged the rope every time habit tried to stand up straight. The donor vans had multiplied. The lab-coat man had a folder now. He looked relieved to see them, which meant someone had told him relief was the right expression to wear. “Just a quick debrief,” he said, as if he had snacks and a PowerPoint. “Separate rooms. Ten minutes. We’ll get out of your way.” Mai breathed once and made her smile kind. “And if we decline?” He looked truly perplexed, the way men with clipboards do when doors vote. “Then...then we’d have to put a note in the report.” “Do that,” Ace said. “Spell our names wrong.” Kaarlo stepped into the doorway like a hinge and let the wrong people bounce. “Vespers is closed,” he told the lab-coat man. “Go audit a drain.” They didn’t quite run, because running reads as guilt to systems that live on surveillance. They slid. Kitchen corridor. Bread closet. Hatch. Stairs. The world below had learned a new noise. The frame swayed micro-millimeters. The waxed mirrors’ film runneled like rain desperate to be a river. Clean Hands stood in the center like a saint with good posture, bare wrists, eyes brighter. “You’re disciplined,” she greeted them, sincere. “I admire it. It will make your surrender clean.” “Messy is our brand,” Mai said, and threw the field kit’s heart at the frame. The coil sang down the anchor like a rude hymn. The mesh unfurled and caught two mirrors with one petulant flap. The clamps bit pillar base and didn’t let go. Ace’s blade came out of its sheath with a sound the room

heard and disliked. The room tried the trick again. Mai's voice in Ace's skull, counting even numbers. It was smarter now; it borrowed Mai's inflection on her worst days, the tired, precise cadence she used when writing reports in an empty room. Two. Four. Six. Ace swallowed a laugh that was not funny. She put her hand over her own mouth and bit down into skin already sore, marking herself with her own animal. She pressed two fingers into the hinge of her jaw. She tapped her sternum once—diagonal—like a password. The lesson took. Mai's body stuttered, the way a record skips on the wrong day. She held her breath until it turned honest again. "Anchor's loosening," she said through teeth. "Give me thirty seconds of no heroics." "You have them," Ace lied. Clean Hands moved her fingers in patterns you couldn't arrest. The grooves in the plaster tried to salute. Threads writhed like veins drawn wrong. Even numbers crowded the air, smug. The frame's crossbar thrummed as if it remembered it had been a tree and thought about that life with nostalgia. The volunteers watched with faces that wanted to believe the room loved them. "Now," Mai said, and slammed the disruptor muzzle into the crossbar so hard the wood decided to be offended. The pulse ran through anchor and out along the old phone trunk like a rumor. Somewhere across town a bus shelter forgot its job and went quiet. In the refectory above, glass cracked in an unfashionable direction. Ace stepped in and didn't cut. She laid the flat of her blade across three threads and pinned them to air like specimens. She thought of the Cathedral's drowned note, of stairs that had counted her. She thought of Mai's teeth on her thumb and of the chalk diagonal on a wall no one could ruin. The green at the weapon's edge woke, not singing, but humming like a voltage a room shouldn't have. The threads smoked where metal held them and then slumped. The stairs above banged. Foundation boots. "—Field team, below. Cantor-3 ready." Bright's text arrived like a confession shoved under a door: fire alarm round two. sprinklers in stairwell. when wet, optics hate their jobs. thirty seconds. go rude. "Kaarlo," Ace said. He was already in the mouth of the stairs, bar lifted, rosary in a pocket, water starting to spit from a head that had been waiting all its life to be relevant. The first two techs came down into spray with equipment that wanted to be brave and found viscosity instead. "Observe only—" one tried, and swallowed a mouthful of civil engineering. Mai kicked the coil again. The pulse went lower and the frame sagged with an undignified creak. The wax rippled like a disgusted pond. Red film in the mirrors thinned to nothing around the mesh, ashamed. Clean Hands' mouth tightened in a way she hadn't practiced in front of anyone. "You're not fixing anything," she told them, calm finally splitting. "You're breaking tools." "Correct," Ace said. The numbers man—who had said "three" earlier as if it burned—looked at his wrist, then at the frame, then at Ace as if permission were an organ. "If I take it off," he whispered, "does she stop seeing me?" "No," Mai said, honest. "But she stops measuring you against yourself." He pulled the red band and it came away like a scab that refused to bleed. He cried once without sound. Joonas, trembling, tore his off too and put it on the table as if it might become something harmless if left alone. The frame's right leg—an upright shaved too smooth—popped where a mortise joint had been over-believed. The structure listed a degree, then two. Threads snapped with apologetic little plinks. The room's even count tripped, said "five," tried to pretend it hadn't. "Leg," Mai said, voice fierce with a joy that wasn't pretty. "Next." They didn't get it. Not then. The stairwell filled with men who had been trained to be reasonable in unreasonable places. Bright coughed and set off a third alarm and someone upstairs cursed Kant in a way that suggested education wasted on procurement. But the room's math was broken. Clean Hands saw it. Her eyes promised a more intimate cruelty next time, the kind you deliver without witnesses. They fell back in a shape they had practiced: Ace last, blade arrogant and down; Mai a step ahead, field kit hugged like a baby no one could photograph; Kaarlo in the mouth, polite as a locked door. Water made everything equal. Chalk bled in lovely ways. They sealed the hatch as a courtesy to narrative. Lab Coat tried again with his clipboard and looked like a man who'd been told his meeting had moved to a place without chairs. "We'll have to—" he began. "File it," Mai said, and wiped a wet strand of hair off her forehead with the back of her hand like contempt. "Make sure you spell 'looms' as in 'bad craft.'" Ace looked from the vans to the spire to the river broadening to carry more lies. She felt Violet coil like patience in hot weather. Little blade, the web is poorly made. One tug. "Soon," Ace told her, and Violet smiled with too much love to be wholly safe. They slipped back through the guesthouse to the

infirmery storeroom that knew their names. The kids woke enough to understand that something had shifted; the girl in the hoodie had drawn twenty diagonals on her shoe. The nurse handed towels like sacraments. The teens reported the red film had gone patchy in the square. The rash-wrist woman held up the clipboard, face alight with the holy joy of a lie well told. "They think the abbot authorized a sprinkler test," she said. "For insurance." "Saint Underwriter," Kaarlo said solemnly. "Patron of inconvenient water." Mai sank onto a crate and let her breath be seen. The patches on her wrist looked sullen but no longer punitive. She closed her eyes for a second like a machine powering down between cycles. When she opened them, she was grinning like a cut that healed wrong on purpose. "Two legs," she said. "We take two more, the frame won't stand even if she prays in decimal." "Clean Hands will call in favors," Ace said. "And Foundation will change verbs. 'Assist' becomes 'secure.' 'Observe' becomes 'isolate.'" "We won't let them make us parallel lines," Mai replied, and touched Ace's throat with two fingers, the soft threat of love. "We keep it noisy. We cut until the town remembers itself." Ace nodded. The city outside had the color of a bruise that had decided to be chromatic. Bells miscounted again, on purpose. In her mouth, the taste of iron faded to something like bread. "Three," she said. "Seven," Mai said. The rest would have to be made up as they went. That was the plan. — © 2025-2026. "World of Ace, Mai and Shammy" and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.   
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