

Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 1 - Noisy Peace

The city had a talent for being loud in gentle ways. Traffic murmured like an unpracticed choir, dogs barked at nothing and everything, and somewhere a neighbor's radio coughed out a ballad that lost the melody every other line. It was imperfect, uncoordinated, gloriously wrong. Ace liked it that way.

She stood on a small stool in their kitchenette, reaching for a tin of tea leaves on the top shelf. She was still damp from the shower, dark hair hanging in a straight, glossy curtain down her back, a loose black T-shirt swallowing her frame. The house lights were off; morning came in through the tall window like a clean knife. Her left hand—scarred across the knuckles—parted the curtain of steam rising from the kettle. The right tapped the counter with a fingertip, a quiet beat that wasn't quite rhythm.

"Even numbers," Mai said from the table without looking up. She was building the day's ritual out of mundane things: two mugs, a chipped plate, a hunk of bread that refused to slice cleanly. Silver hair tied into a rough ponytail, red jacket draped over the chair like it was keeping watch. The sleeve had a burn mark shaped a little like a lightning fork.

Ace smiled, the tiny, crooked one meant for her alone. "Three, five, seven," she murmured.

Mai clicked her tongue. "Menace."

"Correct." Ace hopped down, carried the tea with the focus of a bomb disposal expert, and set it beside Mai's pile of crumbs. She leaned down and kissed the corner of Mai's mouth. Flour dusted Ace's lip. She licked it off and made a show of approving the flavor. "Perfect. Tastes like victory and a dull knife."

"Buy a new one," Mai said. But there was warmth under the mock-annoyance, and it seeped into the room like heat from an old radiator.

They ate at the little table by the window. Outside, a bus sighed. A woman on the sidewalk laughed into her phone. Somewhere below, a bottle met pavement and did not survive. Mai watched the steam off her mug as if it might try to lie to her. Ace watched Mai. It was a habit as old as everything that mattered now.

On the wall behind the table, the paint was ruined in one stubborn patch: an ugly square of matte black, a diagonal gash of darker gray slashed through it. The mark had been neater once; now it was layered and overpainted, a palimpsest of defiance. They had started doing that after the Cathedral, when the world had tried to sing them into nice, obedient shapes. The square and the diagonal were their answer, their private curse word written in geometry. They drew it on doors sometimes, on alley walls that hummed the wrong way, on municipal signs that tried to look like staffs. Here, in their kitchen, it stared back at them like a guard dog.

"Sleep?" Mai asked, careful. She always let Ace be the one to decide how deep a question went.

Ace considered lying and decided she didn't need to, not here. "Dreamed of water that wouldn't hold still. And a staircase that counted me, which is rude."

"Noted. We'll file a complaint with management." Mai set her mug down and held out a hand, palm up, like an invitation to climb.

Ace placed her own on top. She was smaller, cool-skinned, all tendon and steadiness. "Three," she

said.

“Two,” Mai said.

“One,” Ace finished, and the bad pattern slid off, the way it always did when they counted wrong together. It was never magic—not the grand kind. It was a habit with sharp edges.

They didn't speak Violet's name aloud in the mornings. It was a rule they'd never made, but kept anyway. Morning was for the living.

Still, something of her coiled in the quiet just then, a felt presence rather than a heard one. The whisper came like a thread tugged along the inside of Ace's skull, slow and amused: There, little blade.

Ace's jaw tightened under her skin. Her eyes flicked to the ugly mark on the wall and then away. She squeezed Mai's hand once, a signal and a thanks and a warning.

Mai's thumb drew a line across Ace's palm, the same diagonal she'd painted on the wall. “Stay with me,” she said, soft as lint. “Breakfast is a terrible battlefield to die on.”

“Agreed,” Ace said, and drew breath until she felt herself inflate back into all the places her body knew. She buttered the bread into a ruin. She ate it like she was the wolf from the story and the story owed her money.

They could have had a day. They could have taken the train to the river and watched plastic bags inflate and deflate under the current, listened to street performers trick the air into behaving. They could have bought a better knife. They could have made another mark somewhere the city had a seam that needed cutting open.

The phone on the counter buzzed once. A sound like a metallic insect tapping on glass. It was a line that didn't buzz often, and never without a reason. Mai and Ace looked at each other for a fraction of a second, the kind that held three conversations.

Mai stood and wiped her palms on her jeans. She crossed to the counter, picked up the phone, and held it so that its camera wasn't looking at anything that mattered. The screen showed no name, only a set of coordinates flickering in a notification shade and an attachment icon with a red slash through it—as if the message were allergic to being opened.

“Encrypted packet,” Mai said. “Low-level Foundation channel. Not one of the official ones. And definitely not one they'd like us to admit exists.”

“So it's from a friend,” Ace said.

“Or from Bright,” Mai said, which was the same thing said carefully.

Ace walked over, towel-dried her hands, and looked over Mai's shoulder. Her hair smelled like cheap shampoo that claimed to be herbal and lied about it. The phone waited, patient and dangerous.

Mai tapped the packet open. It wasn't text. It was a series of images, one after another, like the flipbook version of a bad idea: security camera stills of a narrow street lined with secondhand shops and religious tat; a mirror in a thrift store window spontaneously webbing into fractal cracks; a child running with his hands over his ears while no one else in the frame reacted; a culvert in concrete where something like thread hung from the lip and swung left, then right, then wasn't there at all.

The last image was a memo header clipped off mid-sentence, as if the sender didn't trust paper to finish thoughts. PROTOCOL C— then a line of hash, then: Observe only. Do not engage with anomalous reflective surfaces without authorized field dampeners. Interim designation: RED THREADS. Status: pending classification under—

The rest of the sentence ate itself in static.

Mai scrolled. There was a map with a red dot upriver. A town they'd passed through once on a job neither of them liked to recall. The name looked wrong even to the phone: letters slightly misaligned as if the font had flinched.

"Attached signal," Mai said, head tilted. "Short burst, carrier masked in FM noise." She tapped a control on her own device, a small square of black glass the size of her palm. The room filled with a nonsense of radio for a second, then thinned to a burr of sound that wasn't quite a tone. Not a hymn, not the Cathedral's tyrant note. More like someone plucking a thread under water.

Ace felt the muscles in her shoulders shift without permission. She rolled them back and the crack of cartilage made the air feel honest again. "It heard us," she said.

"It heard the wrong thing," Mai said. "Which is better."

Ace wanted to say no, to say they deserved the day they'd almost had. Instead she reached past Mai and pulled open the skinny closet by the door. Their gear lived there like very clean animals: two sheaths crossed on a hook, black lacquer, dull runes along the curve; a half-case of batteries that liked to pretend they were charms; a tool roll that smelled faintly of ozone and cordite and rain. The square of the chalk sat in an old tin where cookies had once been hopeful.

She took the chalk out first. She drew on the inside of the closet door a small square, deliberately off-center, and cut a diagonal through it with a thick stroke. Then she closed the door on it, as if it could keep ripple and echo from touching their shoes.

Mai watched her do it and nodded, approving a decision she had already helped make. "If we go," she said, "we don't go alone."

Ace arched a brow. "You inviting Bright to brunch?"

"I'm inviting his inconvenient conscience to send us data without getting us arrested," Mai said. "And I'm checking the dampeners before you put hands on those blades."

Ace glanced at the crossed sheaths. The katanas hummed, but only in her bones. When she closed her eyes for half a breath, the low green at the edge of her vision came and went like a lightning bug with a mean streak.

There, little blade, said the voice that wasn't morning's friend. Pull the seam.

"Later," Ace said aloud without meaning to. She lifted one sword from its rest. The weight settled against the calluses of her palm like an animal recognizing its name.

Mai's gaze flicked to her face. "Hey." She didn't ask. She stepped closer and set two fingers against Ace's jaw, a light pressure that said here, be here. "We decide our own seams."

Ace's smirk came back, thinner, truer. "Three."

Mai's mouth twitched. "Seven."

"Four," Ace said, deliberately wrong, and Mai snorted. The world righted a degree.

"Packet includes a local contact," Mai said, studying the screen again. "Monastery police liaison. That's either a real title or a very creative euphemism. He logged three missing kids in forty-eight hours. Mirrors shattering in shops, bathrooms, the municipal building. They banned selfies."

"Merciful," Ace said. She slid the blade back home. The sound it made was soft and private. "We pack light. We go quiet. We don't check in on the official grid until we decide whether the grid deserves us."

Mai made a note on her black glass—a list that meant something both mundane and not: spare magazine, null-field sleeves, three clips of banded salt, two of the good tape, extra clamps, the dark towel that didn't show blood or chalk. She added bread to the bottom as if the universe needed reminding that food had a vote.

"You okay?" she asked finally, not about the mission anymore.

Ace considered the honest answer and gave it. "I hate stairs that count me," she said. "But I like this table. And your ridiculous jacket. And the way the world sounds when it isn't trying to be a hymn."

Mai let the admission sit where it landed. "Then we keep it noisy."

"Deal." Ace leaned in and stole another crumb from Mai's plate and the kiss that was attached to it. She turned away before either could go soft enough to be a liability.

They moved through the apartment with a choreography that had been learned and then unlearned and then learned again until it looked easy. The apartment looked like a place someone had just moved into and also like somewhere people would be happy to return to; they kept it that way on purpose. No shrines. No frames full of faces. The ugly square on the wall guarded the rest.

At the door, Ace paused. The hallway outside held the faint scent of last night's curry and the shape of an argument someone had decided not to have. She reached up and retied her hair into a knot that sat low, a practical choice. She glanced at the mirror on the shoe cabinet and then, very deliberately, she turned it face-down.

Mai watched. "Dampeners," she said, and pressed a slim adhesive patch to the inside of Ace's wrist, then one to her own. The patches were ugly little things—uneven edges, a coil of wire showing at the seam. They worked better because of it. Perfect circles invited the wrong attention.

"Three," Ace said, making it a toast.

"Two," Mai answered, and locked the door behind them.

In the stairwell, the light flickered with ordinary bad wiring. On the third landing a boy laughed and a dog answered and somewhere a television argued with a game console about which one of them deserved sound. All the wrong notes layered into something that felt like armor.

Halfway down, Ace's phone buzzed again. A single line, no header, no sign-off:

observe nothing alone

Mai read it over her shoulder and exhaled through her nose. "Bright," she said.

“Or someone who likes his jokes,” Ace said. She slid the phone into her pocket and patted it like it might behave better for the attention. “We’ll observe everything, together, and complain about it later.”

They stepped out into the street. The sky was a washed-out blue that pretended it had never met a storm. A bus sighed again, and this time Ace thought it sounded a little like relief. She and Mai cut left, toward the subway and the upriver train, toward a red dot on a map that had misprinted its own name out of embarrassment.

Behind them, the apartment door held a chalk line that would not be there by nightfall. In Ace’s head, the green at the edge of everything breathed in and out, keeping time with the city’s noise. The voice did not press. She did not invite it.

They walked the way they always did: a half step apart, close enough to borrow balance, separate enough to keep their hands free for blades or tools or each other.

“Buy a new knife on the way back,” Mai said.

“Or steal one,” Ace said.

“Menace.”

“Correct.”

The corner store bell rang as they passed, and a woman shouted for a child to slow down, and a pigeon decided the middle of the sidewalk was the best possible place to be a philosopher. The world thrummed with unsorted life. Ace and Mai let it fill them until there was no room for hymns. Then they went to meet the thread.

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