

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 10 - Dissonant Flame

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.10 **Wordcount:** ~2229 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright **Location:** Apartment **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 10 — Dissonant Flame

The city that took them back had not learned to be quiet while they were gone. Good. Buses sighed like old gods with joint pain, radios fumbled choruses on purpose, dogs held conferences about pigeons and philosophy. The train spat them onto a platform that smelled of hot metal and coffee grounds. The air wasn't clean; it was honest.

They walked home the way they always did: a half step apart, close enough to borrow balance, separate enough to have both hands free for work or for each other. Ace kept one palm tucked into her jacket, thumb resting where the bite mark lived—an anchor you could travel with. Mai shifted the field kit on her shoulder; the ugly mesh peered out like a flag rescued from a bureaucrat.

At their door, Ace put her ear to the wood and listened like the apartment deserved the courtesy. The hallway held curry and someone's failed date. No counting. No thread. She unlocked. Inside, the light through the tall window put a knife edge on the dust and then let it go.

They didn't turn lamps on. They stood a moment and let the room remember their shapes. On the wall behind the table, the ugly square and slashed diagonal stared back like a guard dog that had learned law.

Mai's hand found Ace's jaw, two fingers along the hinge, pressure exact. Ace stepped into it and let her breath climb into the places it should be. "Present?" Mai asked, already knowing.

"Correct," Ace said, and kissed the corner of Mai's mouth until the taste of resin and rain turned to bread.

They ate the last of the scorned loaf with butter that had made peace with its temperature. They counted badly under their breath, a syncopation for two. The kettle thought about boiling and decided to later. The city outside tuned itself to a wrongness they'd taught it to like.

Ace pulled chalk from the tin and held it out. "We owe the wall a story," she said.

Mai took the chalk and set it to paint where the old square needed friends. She drew the ugly box again, off-center, and cut the diagonal with a mean, sure stroke. Then—slowly, deliberately—she added a small tooth along the bottom line and a crooked oval at the top: the suggestion of a key bow and bit, shaped out of their existing no. Not neat. Enough.

Ace watched the symbol resolve the way a face in fog does when it decides it wants to be recognized. "A key that refuses symmetry," she said. "Rude locksmithing."

"Crimson if the light's honest," Mai replied, and pressed her thumb—still showing the bite's crescent—into the diagonal's end, smearing a thin, ordinary red where the ink would remember. She

stepped back. The mark held.

Their phones buzzed like insects who'd learned manners.

Kaarlo sent a photo: the monastery refectory after mops and confessions; the abbot's chair had learned humility; the mirror wore a sheet; at ankle height the chalk diagonal glared like a veto. **bread saved. vespers loud.** he'd added, then: **confessional closed for maintenance.** Ace laughed out loud, something sharp and bright.

A second line, from a number that never carried a name: **risk memo drafted; task force proposed; separation protocol recommended; i strongly advised against cleverness; please don't make me right by being clever in public.** —B A beat later: **threads seen in three other towns' traffic cams. not panic. posture. make friends who hate mirrors.**

Mai thumbs-typed without looking down: **sending ugly patch schematics + field notes; use only on bad days.** —M She attached a photo of the mesh draped across a mirror, clamps taped at wrong angles, the label **warranty void** scrawled over it in pen.

The rash-wrist woman—no name given, none needed—texted a picture of a storeroom cot with three mugs and two chalk marks on the bedframe. **we're noisy on purpose. she'll hate it.** Joonas followed with a shot of his wrist bare and the square sticker peeling at the edge. **itching less. wanted to say thanks without group.** Mai sent a thumbs-up that looked like a blueprint.

Ace's phone tried, briefly, to be a mirror. She turned it face-down and palmed it like a coin you refuse to spend. When she closed her eyes, Violet paced the edge of her thoughts like weather. Not pressing. Present.

There, little blade. You turned. You can build with it.

"On my schedule," Ace said aloud, to the apartment, to the air, to the part of her that could be bribed with victory. Mai's head tilted: she'd heard the sand in the gears.

"Violet?" Mai asked, casual the way bomb techs are casual when they cut the right wire and want to be sure.

"Drowsing. Preening," Ace said. She considered the words, considered honesty, amended: "Proud."

"Good," Mai said. "Tell her she gets a treat if she stays in her corner."

"We're not keeping a cat," Ace said automatically, then: "Menace."

"Correct," Mai answered, same automatic, and the room let itself be ordinary for one clean minute.

The kettle chose that moment to remember its purpose. Mai poured, then poured more. They drank terrible tea like the saints drink rain. Outside, a siren pretended urgency and thought better. A neighbor dropped something ceramic and swore like a poet.

"We should set lines," Mai said, working because stillness made her mean. "We go public with the patch schematic, quietly. Bright can leak a 'best practice' that ruins Cantor's measurements in any room with wax. Kaarlo gets us a list of places where mirrors teach posture. We seed chalk. We train people to count wrong and mean it."

"Survivors first," Ace said. "We build a net of dissonance. Someone tries to iron them, they wrinkle

the whole town.”

Mai nodded, eyes already moving through the map. “We’ll have to travel. Upriver. Downriver. Abroad if the money finds a passport. They’ll try to make it cloud-native, of course. Phones as little chapels for posture. We’ll ruin the firmware with ugliness.”

Ace grinned. “Holy malware.”

“Unholy patch notes,” Mai corrected, already opening her black square to jot a list: **asymmetry mesh v2; null-field sleeves (kid size); patch adhesives for damp environments; instructions written like recipes; Kaarlo translations; Bright plausible deniability.**

A yawn ambushed Ace like a kind burglar. She pretended to fight it and lost. Mai watched her lose and set her mug down with the ceremony of a verdict.

“Bed,” Mai said.

“Rude,” Ace said, but she was already on her feet.

In the bedroom that tried not to be sacred, they undressed with the speed of soldiers and the care of people who intend to wake up. Ace paused at the mirror on the shoe cabinet and turned it face-down again because habits with good results deserved loyalty. Mai’s dampener patch came off with a hiss; the skin beneath was red and sullen but no longer shouting. Ace pressed a cool cloth to it, then her mouth, brief as a stamp. She pressed her own bitten thumb against the inside of Mai’s wrist, a diagonal that didn’t need chalk.

In the dark, they didn’t say Violet’s name. Morning rule borrowed and bent. They lay wrong on the mattress on purpose, ankles not aligned, breath out of phase until it decided to sync out of spite.

“Three,” Ace whispered eventually.

“Seven,” Mai said into her hair, and bit the base of Ace’s thumb, anchor renewed, ritual paid.

Ace slept.

The dream had corners this time. Not a room. A grid of screens in a place that wanted to be an operations center and was only a curated anxiety. In each pane: a town’s glass performing obedience, some already sulking under chalk; a bus shelter peeling; a bank vestibule blinking; a woman with clean wrists overseeing men who measured for a living. Clean Hands looked up at one camera as if it were a sky. Her mouth moved. No sound.

Violet reached forward from the periphery and turned one monitor off by touching the bottom corner where the cheap plastic flexed. Then another. Then another. She looked at Ace over her shoulder and grinned. *If you won’t let me iron,* she said, *then at least let me cut power.* It sounded like a joke. It sounded like compromise. It sounded like a third option they needed.

Ace woke to gray light and radio cough and the smell of a city only sometimes clean. Mai was already up, hair an untidy halo, jacket over a T-shirt that apologized to no one. She was building v2 of the mesh on the table with hanger wire and hope.

“Dream?” Mai asked without looking up.

“Options,” Ace said. “We can starve the room or break the lights. Maybe both.”

“Both,” Mai said, and wrote **both** on her list as if it had always been there.

Ace stole a slice of new bread from a bag that claimed to be artisanal and was in fact simply decent. She buttered it into a ruin and ate like the story owed her interest. She went to the wall and added a second diagonal to the key mark, a slash that made the bow look like it had teeth. Ugly. Perfect.

Their phones conspired again. A video from the teens: market square at dusk, bus shelter glass flashing once like it wanted to announce an idea and then giving up because someone had chalked the pole. A voice-over: **we taught the pigeons to count wrong. they understood.** The nurse sent a photo of a storeroom now full of cots and people pretending to read; the caption: **noise clinic open evenings.** Kaarlo texted a link to a council memo proposing “Mirror Discipline Guidelines,” followed by his own draft: **Mirror *Disobedience* Guidelines** with items like “1) If you must install, install crooked. 2) Any glass near bread must accept criticism. 3) Chalk provided.”

Mai’s cheek dimpled where laughter lived. “We started a religion,” she said.

“We started a union,” Ace corrected.

She slipped on her jacket and checked the line of her blade where it slept. The green at the edge hummed like consent. Violet stretched in the back of her head and said nothing, which was, in its way, approval.

At the window, the city did a trick with light that made the mark on their wall glow briefly like a liar caught by a camera flash. Ace traced it with two fingers. “We’ll have to move,” she said. “Not apartment. Work. New towns. New mirrors.”

Mai didn’t look up from the mesh. “We’ll take the train,” she said simply. “We’ll teach people to be wrong on purpose. We’ll make it fashion.”

“Menace,” Ace said, and turned to kiss the corner of her mouth, flour ghosting her lip because some flour always did.

“Correct,” Mai said into the kiss.

They packed ugly. Coils and clips and patches in a tote that used to sell books. The black square that listened for bad habits. The chalk tin. The blade that liked its name. They left the apartment with the mirror face-down and the mark glaring and the plants watered with no expectation of gratitude.

In the stairwell, a child had drawn a square and a diagonal at ankle height with something that wasn’t chalk because chalk had not been provided. The diagonal sloped charmingly. Ace crouched and added a tiny tooth to the square. Mai added a dot of red off-center with a marker that claimed to be permanent and probably was. The child’s work looked back, improved not by neatness but by indecency.

Outside, the sky tried on blue and gray like shirts and refused to choose. The river insisted on carrying gossip downstream. The bus wheezed. A woman laughed into her phone and then frowned into a shop window and then laughed again because the window wore a squared-off mouth with a diagonal tongue.

On the corner nearest the station, a city sign had been bolted straight by someone who loved levels. Ace glanced at Mai. Mai nodded. They chalked the key—square, diagonal, ugly tooth—right across the staff lines printed there to tell people where to stand. It wasn’t art. It was a lie detector that worked.

Ace's phone buzzed once, last mercy: **cantor file closed "pending review." i'm resigning "pending review." buy noise. —B** No signature. Didn't need one.

Ace put the phone away. "We'll send him schematics," she said.

"And bread," Mai added. "And a doorstep."

They reached the platform. The train sulked in the way machines do when they know they're necessary. Ace's thumb found the healed bite. Mai's fingers found Ace's jaw, pressure a diagonal that never learned to be formal.

"Three," Ace said.

"Seven," Mai replied.

The loudspeaker cracked. Dogs argued. Pigeons decided philosophy was above their pay grade. The next town would have mirrors. The one after that would have cameras. The work would make them small sometimes. They would refuse. They would keep it noisy.

Behind them, on a kitchen wall where the light learned pride for a second and then forgot, the key mark glowed like a coal that knew how to wait. In Ace's head, Violet smiled into her sleeve, amused and patient.

The train opened its mouth. They stepped in. The doors practiced closing. The city, imperfect, beautiful, tuned itself to dissonant flame and held the note wrong on purpose. —

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