

Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 5 - The Choir's Loom

Story: Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.5 **Wordcount:** ~3841 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright **Location:** Foundation lab **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

Chapter 5 — The Choir's Loom

The bread closet was a box that smelled like comfort and yeast until Mai pried its back panel up and made it a doorway again. Behind the shelves, the hatch waited with the patience of a wound under a bandage. Kaarlo levered it with a bar he found where monasteries keep tools for chores they don't admit are needed. The hinges complained; Mai marked the lintel with a squat, ugly square and drove a diagonal through it until chalk dust gritted under her nail.

"Room-size dampeners," she said, already pulling the asymmetry mesh over her shoulder like a ridiculous shawl. "We seed them as we go. Nothing perfect. Imperfection saves lives."

Ace flashed teeth at that, green shadow flickering at the edge of steel before it remembered itself and went quiet. "I'll handle anything that decides it has hands."

Kaarlo flicked his eyes down the steps: rough stone, sweating a little, the kind of narrow treads that force human bodies to behave like supplicants. "Abbot claims there's only storage," he said in a voice that had made liars confess to metaphors before.

"Abbot is undercounting," Ace said, and went first.

They descended into air that had been told to hold still. The stairs doubled back twice, then let go into a low, barrel-vaulted room that had done a century as a cellar and had been told last month it was a cathedral. The floor was packed earth over old stone. The walls had been skimmed with plaster and then scored with those shallow grooves that made patterns out of manners. Four pillars held up the idea of weight.

At the center stood a frame the size of a coffin turned upright, wooden uprights shaved too smooth, crossbars wrapped tight in red. It wasn't a loom, not honestly. But something had taught it the gestures. Threads ran from it in radiating lines to the walls and then up, vanishing into chutes cut behind the plaster. At each pillar an angled mirror had been mounted with the kind of care reserved for icons or knives. Their surfaces were filmed with a waxy wash, not for seeing. For measuring.

The air had sound without sound—the sensation of an even number repeated under breath, of a room trying to convince its contents to line up with its furniture. There were tables pushed to the edges loaded with bracelets braided of thin red, a spool of something that wasn't quite fiber optic and wasn't quite hair, stacks of clean cloths that had never seen a spill. The smell was resin and starch and the lie of antiseptic.

Two "volunteers" worked at the frame—one man in a donor T-shirt already pilled at the seams, one woman with hands that kept asking permission from the air. Red thread ran across their wrists like good behavior. They wrote nothing and made the room write them.

The third person stood to the side, gloved. She wore a simple gray dress of the sort you could pretend was humble if you never had to wash it. Her hair was pulled smooth. She kept her wrists bare. Clean hands. She watched the room with the attention of someone listening to numbers being recited correctly. When she turned and saw them, she smiled the way people do when the meeting they wanted has arrived.

“Visitors,” she said. Her voice didn’t push; it arranged. “We were told to expect auditors.”

“Subtractors,” Ace said lightly, and set her feet a little apart. Her blade stayed home for the heartbeat the moment deserved. Violet uncurled in her head like a cat deciding the windowsill was finally interesting.

There, little blade. The warp is poor. Pull and I’ll sing you a cleaner thread.

“Not your choir,” Ace said under her breath.

Mai moved without announcing it, dropping a clamp at the base of the nearest pillar so the salt-banded cord could kiss the stone. She thumbed the disruptor to a whisper and let it fill the frame like a roomful of people each deciding to hum different songs on purpose. “This space fails inspection,” she told the gray woman, almost cheerful. “It’s measuring without consent.”

“We weigh burdens,” the woman replied. “We help people hold shape. The flood left the town soft. We make straight lines where the water made curves.”

Kaarlo’s jaw did something uncharitable and then remembered it was attached to a collar. “You have no authority here,” he said, almost polite. “This is not a registered repair.”

“Repair is a sacrament,” the woman said, and looked right at Ace. “The Foundation promised me observers. They did not promise me an animal.”

Ace smiled like a blade left in a sunbeam. “Menace,” she agreed.

The volunteers lifted their hands. Threads responded, rising from the frame as if the act of attention made matter. A filigree bloomed, strands catching the waxed mirrors at angles calculated to catch not faces but posture, not features but intention. When the woman in gray raised a gloved hand and pinched the air, the threads quivered, tightening. The grooves in the plaster hummed like a choir clearing its throat.

“Observe only,” the woman said pleasantly. “Legacy protocol.”

Mai’s laugh was so small only the disruptor heard it. She threw the asymmetry mesh across the nearest mirror and pinned it with two clips and a prayer to entropy. The mesh holes gaped irregular: triangles that weren’t triangles, squares that had been drawn with a bad pen in a moving car. The measuring surface bogged, the tension point slipping sideways as if the room had stepped in a hole.

Threads reached like helpful strangers. One arced for Ace’s mouth as if the room had been taught to gag. She cut it wrong—three, seven, four—and it parted with a sound like a strand of floss losing an argument. Another dipped for Mai’s wrist, the dampener patch a bright target in a map that loved symmetry. Mai took it on the back of her hand instead, the thread rasping where it didn’t want to be, and pulsed the disruptor low; the filament shivered and sagged, ashamed.

The woman in gray did not flinch. “There are children upstairs,” she said conversationally, as if Ace had failed to wipe her feet. “They will do better if they stop wanting to be complicated.”

"We met them," Ace said. "They're spectacularly complicated."

Kaarlo circled to the far pillar, bad badge invisible, good spine present. He dropped a clamp. The cord drew a straight line and then kinked itself out of spite. "This installation violates three codes and an instinct," he said.

"Instincts are unreliable," the woman said. "They're the first thing to go in a flood."

Mai slid under the frame, belly almost to ground, and set a coil under the crossbar where threads gathered before they got ideas. Up close the red wasn't dye—it was the color of pressure in capillaries, of cheeks a person pinches when they want attention. The coil clicked as it found a current. The frame's wood creaked a little as if it had been told to hold that thought.

"There's a backhaul," Mai said softly. "Not just local weave. There's a line out. It's riding building ground, then piggybacking the old phone trunk." She angled her square and made a face. "Cheap. But it works."

"Where is it going?" Ace asked.

"Servers that don't want to be called servers," Mai said. "Probably a 'resource center' two towns over, paid for with donor funds and very clean conscience. We cut the anchor here and it loses the training signal. It'll still try to sing along, but it won't know the verse."

The gray woman raised her bare wrists, showing nothing, the way some people boast. "The world is tired of noise," she said. "We offer mercy. A town that learned to be obedient to water can learn to be obedient to itself."

Ace took a step that would have been a feint if she were the kind of fighter who announced her plans. "Mercy that requires measuring is a tariff," she said. "You know what happens to tariffs."

"We call them tithes," the woman said, and lifted a hand. Threads jumped.

Three shot for Kaarlo at throat level, a neat bow. He ducked under two and caught the third with a forearm. It bit through cloth and decided it had planted a flag. Mai fired a short pulse through the mesh; the bite unclenched, thread quivering like a nerve forced to admit it was wrong. Kaarlo stepped back and looked at his sleeve with a confusion that wanted to become anger. He kept it being a plan instead.

Ace stepped to the frame. The threads rising off it were taut, tuned by the even-number murmur in the room to a pitch that wanted to be law. She put her left palm an inch from the crossbar and the muscles in her arm remembered the bowl, the oil, the five bars someone else had carved on a chest that had been hers even then. Violet's voice folded around that memory like a ribbon you don't want but keep.

Key, little blade, she whispered, almost reverent. It's all keys. Turn and hear them break.

Ace's breath came in, went out, measured but not obedient. "Not yet," she said, to the room, to Violet, to the part of her that wanted to be the instrument if it meant winning. "Mai."

Mai heard the thickness in the air. She had a hand against the frame's lower brace as if steadying a patient that lies about the pain scale. "On three?"

"Two," Ace said.

"Four," Mai countered, wrong on purpose, and slammed her disruptor's muzzle into the crossbar like a gavel coming down. The pulse thumped through wood, through thread, into groove. The mirrors hiccuped. The women at the frame flinched as if someone had smacked their teeth together. The gray woman's breath caught in a way she didn't want noticed.

The weave loosened, not much, like a belt notch. Enough.

"Again," Mai said.

Karlo dropped his last clamp. The cord snapped taut and then developed opinions. He ground his shoe on the cord to hold it ugly. "Do it."

"Three," Ace said, and this time when Mai pulsed, Ace's blade came up not to cut but to lay flat across two strands and pin them to air. The metal hummed once, a low green like a thought remembering a cost and paying it anyway. The threads went slack, then tried to retune. The mesh on the mirror wrinkled in a way no one intended. Somewhere up in the refectory a crack decided it had walked far enough toward the bread table and sat down.

The woman in gray stopped being pleasant. She moved her hands in tiny, precise angles, and the grooves in the plaster answered, raising a lattice you could pretend was decorative if your job required you to lie about motifs. Threads splayed, trying to get clever—one for Mai's throat now, not the wrist; one for Ace's eyes, the old trick of taking people out of the picture; one low for the back of Karlo's knee.

Ace went high, fast, the cut not a cut but an erasure, the way you write over a word so thick the paper remembers. Mai dropped the mesh like a net over nothing; the threads stumbled in pattern space and tangled in embarrassment. Karlo took the low one with the bar and twisted; it parted like cheap string and smelled like an argument new plastic had won.

"Observe only," the gray woman hissed. There was doctrine in it, and fear.

"We did," Ace said. "It's ugly."

Mai slid a second coil under the frame and dialed the disruptor down until it buzzed like a fly trapped between two panes of thought. The pillars' mirrors fogged; the waxy layer sweat. "Anchor's weakening," she said. "We can break local control. But if Foundation steps in mid-cut, they'll 'secure' and then we get to watch them install a better version with a manual."

As if obedient to slander, a radio cracked the stairwell's air: voices from above, clipped, carefully casual. "—Team B to nave. Structural team with the assessment. Copy." The word "assessment" had teeth in its coat.

Karlo swore in a dead language and somehow still made it land. "They'll come in through the refectory door," he said. "On the paper it will say they're checking for flood damage. In the footnotes it will say they're installing moral geometry."

Ace's tongue found the edge of a cracked tooth and smiled about it. "Then we break local and leave a mess they don't know how to sweep."

The gray woman drew breath to say a holy word and instead said a number. Even. Even. Even. The volunteers answered, hands rising, wrists pulling an old team sport into a new liturgy. Threads lifted like veins drawn in chalk. The room decided it had jurisdiction.

Ace stepped into that decision with the kind of wrong that makes rules pick new careers. "Mai."

"Ready," Mai said, and kicked the coil with her heel like a bully. The disruptor's pulse went long and low, a bowel-deep note that never decided to be sound. The frame bucked. The threads luffed like sails with no wind. The grooves went from attention to sulk so fast the plaster sweated dust.

Ace laid her blade's flat to the crossbar and pressed. For a split second something in her wanted to press further, to let the green in the metal find the seam and open it until the room cried. Violet purred at the back of her teeth: Turn. Break. Be what they failed to make you.

Ace lifted instead. "No."

The anchors let go of one of their polite lies. The lattice across the nearest wall collapsed into ordinary hairline cracks and a smear of wax that admitted it had always been just wax. The mirror at pillar two coughed a line of frost and forgot its job. One bracelet on the table unwound by a centimeter and then sat there, embarrassed at being seen.

The woman in gray steadied herself on nothing, lips very white. For the first time something lived in her eyes besides doctrine. Not panic. Anger that the room had disobeyed. "You are harming order," she said.

"We are hurting your loom," Ace corrected, and let herself show a little fang. "Order is fine. It thrives when it isn't suffocating."

Footsteps hit the stair above in a rhythm the Foundation trained into knees. "—Team, hold on the threshold. Observe. Do not engage," a male voice said, professional, bored, lying.

Mai shook her hand once, quick; her dampener patch had escalated from itch to burn. She blew out through her nose and kept her voice level. "We have to go. We cut enough. The backhaul's choked. They'll spend a day deciding whether to be mad at us or to pretend they cut it."

Karlo nodded and took two steps backward, bar in hands, eyes on the stair mouth. "I can stall legalists," he said. "I cannot stall men with measuring sticks forever."

The volunteers sagged, red thread sliding loose on their wrists, the way belief slides when you discover it hates you. The woman in gray watched Ace and saved the smile for later, where she could file it properly.

"We'll finish the weave," she said. "You can't be everywhere. You can't be loud in enough rooms."

Ace almost said watch us. Instead she wiped her blade on the air and sheathed it; the green went away like a kindness. "You'll find our signature," she said, and chalked a square and a diagonal at ankle height on the frame's upright where a caretaker's mop would never find it. "It's how you'll know the problem got here first."

They backed toward the stairs together, wrong-stepping on purpose—three, seven, four—so the grooves couldn't predict where their heels would land. The first of the Foundation team appeared at the top: two in contractor vests with clean clipboards, one in a jacket that wanted to be a lab coat when it grew up. Behind them, a fourth person Ace recognized only by posture: a man killing his own cigarette out of respect for a sign he didn't write. Bright hadn't shaved. He didn't come down. He watched.

"Structural assessment," the lab-coat man called, a pleasant echo of the woman in gray. "We're here

to help.”

“Observe from there,” Kaarlo said flatly. “Basement access is restricted under municipal code.”

“Who enforces that in a monastery?” the man asked with a smile.

“I do,” Kaarlo said, and made the sign of the cross in a way that meant none of the usual things.

The mesh on the mirror slumped; Mai grabbed it and slung it back over her shoulder. Her knees looked steady, which is different from being steady. Ace’s eyes flicked to the dampener patch and then to Mai’s mouth. The corners were too tight. She filed it. Later. Not here.

They climbed. Bright didn’t meet their eyes until the last step, then lifted two fingers in the shape of a question mark and dropped them again, apology and warning in one brief semaphore. The lab-coat man held out a clipboard like a weapon you could sign.

“Names?” he asked.

“No,” Ace said. “We’re exempt.”

Mai deadpanned, “Religious.”

Kaarlo coughed, which could have been a laugh if you gave it a pew.

The woman in gray stood below, framed by the hatch, hands clean, thread drifting around her ankles like obedient snakes. “We’ll complete the loom by vespers,” she called up, sweet as donation. “There’s a refectory mirror that wants discipline.”

Ace pivoted toward the refectory door, pretended to consider it, then slammed her palm on the papered pane of the old cabinet in the corridor with an aggression reserved for off switches. The tape crackled; the paper sagged; the hidden glass stayed covered and therefore uncooperative. “We’ll bring noise to vespers,” she said.

The lab-coat man’s smile went thready. “Observe only,” he said again, like a parrot who had been paid.

“We did,” Mai said. “We observed a warranty void.”

They walked past him without touching. Bright, under his breath, not looking at them: “North alley in ten. Don’t let them make you two lines on a form.”

“Noted,” Mai murmured.

In the refectory, the mirror’s crack had sloped a little toward the bread and then veered off as if the bread had defended its honor with a fork. The chalk square at the bottom corner held like a kickstand against bad ideas. Ace exhaled once, slow. The basil in her lungs that always tasted like a lie loosened by a degree.

Outside, the monastery had accumulated vehicles like a confession accumulates qualifiers. Two white vans with the Foundation’s donor smile, one municipal pickup with a ladder even it didn’t trust. A pair of men in vests pretended to check masonry with a device that would say anything for a per diem. The sky had gone the gray of a shirt that wants to be ironed and will not be.

Mai leaned against a low wall and looked casual. Up close, the dampener patch’s edge had reddened

the skin around it. She flexed her hand once, as if reminding it of ownership.

“Pain?” Ace asked.

“Pressure,” Mai said evenly. “It’s learning my angle faster than I like. That’s not just local,” she added, chin toward the vans. “That’s Cantor’s rear end pointing antennas at my head.”

“North alley,” Ace said. “Then we make them work harder for data.”

Kaarlo peeled away with the confidence of a man who knew which doors he was allowed to close and which he would close anyway. He intercepted a contractor with a bland smile and the kind of question that takes twenty minutes to lose. The gray woman had not come up; which meant she was below making the room practice obedience as a calisthenic.

They cut left through a knot of tourists looking for piety. The alley behind the guesthouse smelled like radish tops and rain. Bright waited at the corner, hands empty, jacket pockets admitting guilt. He didn’t say hello. He said, “Cantor’s brief has your names attached to a recommended separation protocol. They think you make each other louder.”

“We do,” Ace said.

“We do,” Mai confirmed, and smiled with teeth.

“Good,” Bright said, as if that had been a test. He handed Mai a foil packet and didn’t look at Ace. “Additional dampeners. Ugly. I stole them off a prototype that was too perfect to work.”

Mai tore one open with her teeth and laughed at how badly soldered it was. “The only good news in a while,” she said, and slapped it over her patch. The relief was almost audible. Her shoulders dropped half a centimeter. “Thank you.”

Bright’s eyes went to the ground, then to the monastery roof, then nowhere anyone could read. “You’ve got maybe an hour before they publish the ‘structural’ report and try to escort you to a room with nice chairs,” he said. “I hear there’s a lunch.”

“We’ve got a loom to insult before lunch,” Ace said.

“And a Choir-Mother who thinks discipline is love,” Mai added, tone flat enough to cut.

Bright’s mouth moved around a sentence that would get him fired and picked a shorter one. “Don’t let her count you. And don’t let my people turn you into data. If they separate you, you’ll be easier to tune.”

“Then we don’t separate,” Ace said.

“Correct,” Mai echoed.

Bright jammed his hands into his pockets as if he didn’t trust them to mind themselves. “I didn’t send you,” he said, which meant he had. “I didn’t tell you her name,” which meant he knew it. “And I didn’t say that the anchor sits on original foundation stones they decided not to move because they loved the lie about history.”

“We’ll move it with noise,” Ace said.

He nodded once, an apology you could live with. “I’ll misfile something for twenty minutes,” he said.

“Use them.”

He bled back into the street the way a stain decides to spread and calls it art. Mai watched his back a second too long. Then she pulled the ugly extra patch flat and flexed her fingers.

“Shadow’s getting longer,” she said lightly.

Ace heard the thinness under it. “We’ll cut it,” she said. “After we make them regret mirrors.”

They headed toward the side entrance that would take them fastest back to the bread closet. The donor vans gleamed like teeth in a grin that didn’t reach the eyes. A contractor lifted his device and pointed it in lazy arcs that tried not to look like aiming.

Mai touched Ace’s wrist. Her fingers drew a diagonal without ink. “Three,” she said.

“Seven,” Ace answered, and because they had promised each other to keep the world noisy, she added, “Four.”

They went back inside to finish teaching the loom what happens to patterns that try to measure people who won’t fit. —

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