

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 8 - Keys of Blood

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.8 **Wordcount:** ~1556 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright **Location:** City (unnamed) **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### ### Chapter 8 — Keys of Blood

Stone remembered them when they stood up. The nurse pressed dried bread into their palms like an oath; the teens laced the mesh with tape that had learned new swear words; Kaarlo checked the pry bar for faith and found enough.

Mai pulled Ace a half-step aside, into the wedge of shadow the storeroom made at 4 p.m. "Show me your sternum," she said in the professional tone that made saints and circuits obey.

Ace lifted her shirt just enough. The five faint, pale bars that someone else had carved into a child's chest lived there like a bad diagram. Above them, Mai's ugly square tattooed in matte ink and, across it, Ace's own diagonal—black on old white, refusal laid over obedience.

Mai traced the diagonal with two fingers, not touching the bars. "Look," she murmured, and sketched in air: the bars as the warding teeth of a crude key, the square as the bow, the diagonal as the bit. Rotated, misaligned, ugly—functional. "They made a lock out of you," she said. "We made a key. Use it."

Ace watched the shape cohere. Violet leaned in as if to smell it. Little blade. Turn.

"On my terms," Ace said, and bit her lip until a bead of red welled bright and ordinary. She touched it to the diagonal's end, then thumbed that touch along the inside of her wrist where the dampener patch sat. The patch drank the color and decided it knew her better now. "Crimson enough?"

Mai's mouth hit that thin, delighted line she wore when the math got messy in her favor. "Correct," she said, and pressed a second ugly patch over the first. "Two locks. One noise."

They moved. Corridor, closet, hatch. The stairwell sprinklers had dried to sulk; the Foundation men had retreated to meetings phrased as weather. Below, the loom room waited with its slow breath and its promise to make better citizens out of raw inconvenient people.

Clean Hands stood by the frame, wrists bare, not sweating. Two new mirrors angled like knives, wax renewed. Four fresh red threads stretched from the crossbar to the pillars as if the room had been practicing posture.

"Vespers," she said. "Kneel."

Kaarlo stepped into the doorway and did not. Mai slung the mesh high over mirror one. Ace set her palm an inch from the crossbar and let her body remember a counting she had not been given—three, seven, four—a rhythm that made rooms stutter.

"I'm not your liturgy," Ace said softly. "I'm a locksmith."

She pressed her crimsoned wrist to the air above the crossbar, just shy of touching. The patch hummed. The diagonal under her sternum seemed to warm, not burning—aligning. For a split second something in the room recognized a shape it had been built to accept. Clean Hands saw the microflinch and hid it.

Mai hit the coil with a pulse tuned down to a growl. The frame's wood spoke in a register that complained about trees. The grooves in the plaster lost confidence, regained it, lost it again.

Ace rotated her wrist by a quarter turn. Not elegant. Ugly. Wrong. The air around the crossbar thickened the way air does above stoves and graves. Threads pulled tight, then slack, then tight again. The mirrors' wax filmed, thinned, filmed. The even-number murmur broke once on a prime and tried to pretend no one had heard.

"Turn," Violet breathed, coaxing, almost kind.

"On mine," Ace said, and rotated the last degree a locksmith would if the lock were an insult.

Something inside the anchor let go with a pop a maintenance man would call minor. The right-hand pillar shuddered; the thread linked to it snapped like something realizing it hadn't been paid. Wax sloughed off mirror one in a sheet, folded itself wrong, and fell, splatting on stone like a flayed lie.

Clean Hands' face did a brief, human thing. "Blasphemy," she said.

"Carpentry," Ace countered.

Mai was already moving. Mesh two across mirror three, clamp, coil, pulse. "Third leg," she said, clinical, hungry. The crossbar sagged a centimeter. In the refectory above, glass decided it didn't owe the bread table anything and cracked toward the abbot's chair.

Threads went feral for a heartbeat. One whipped for Mai's eyes, a dirty tactical upgrade. Ace's blade was there and not cutting; flat laid to air again, pinning. The green at the edge woke, a quiet line of voltage. The thread smoked and went out like a small ambition.

Clean Hands breathed a number. Her volunteers answered with their wrists. The grooves in the wall tried to stand and found their legs too short.

"Ace," Mai said, and did not have to finish the request.

"Fourth," Ace answered, and pressed her wrist-key to the air over the opposite brace, rotated in a fractionally different wrong. She felt the shape in her chest click, the way bad memories do when you finally say them out loud under the right ceiling. She turned. The frame moaned. A mortise joint sulked and then cracked. The pillar listed two degrees.

The even-number murmur fell into a hole and came out thin as thread through teeth. Clean Hands stopped pretending she had only one weapon. She lifted her right hand and curled her fingers. Every waxed mirror left in the room flared a skin-deep red in a single shared shiver. It pushed at Mai—not at her patch nor her throat nor her knee. At the catalog of her. At all the angles she had ever offered a reflective surface to prove she was presentable. It tried to average her.

Mai's smile got mean. "I'm un-average," she said, and bit Ace's palm where it hovered, ritual completing; anchor locked. She threw a long, low pulse into the coil, and the room jumped like a horse who'd discovered a snake under its saddle. The mirrors flickered. The red film broke into fish scales and then into flakes. The grooves in the plaster forgot their lines.

"Three legs," Mai said, breath harsh. "One more and it falls without grace."

Footsteps above. Foundation voices. Words like secure and custody and isolate scaled the staircase with the patience of bureaucracy. Bright's text thudded into Ace's palm:

cantor wants you split; i want my job; do neither; thirty seconds of confusion coming from west door; finish your math

Ace rotated the wrist that was her key one last wrong. The diagonal under her sternum felt like it had a pulse of its own; Violet moaned like relief in the back of her throat and Ace took that sound and didn't let it land. "Turn," she said to the room, and the room, insulted, obeyed wrong.

The fourth leg popped with a clean carpenter's crack. The frame lurched and leaned into its own end. Threads snapped and sniveled. Waxed mirrors lost their skins. The even-number murmur died mid-syllable.

Clean Hands did not flinch backward. She stepped forward, into the fall, palms open, as if welcoming collapse like a baptism. "We will rebuild in decimal," she said, oddly serene. "You cannot keep it noisy forever."

Ace sheathed her blade. "Long enough," she said, and when the first Foundation boots hit the threshold, the sprinklers in the stairwell coughed themselves awake again in a coincidence named Bright.

Water fell on good doctrine and made it mildew. Kaarlo filled the doorway with bar and collar and a face the city would believe. Mai gathered mesh and coil and the ugly patches that made geometry cry.

They left the frame leaning, unphotogenic, unholy. The chalk diagonal at ankle height on the upright stared up at Clean Hands like a promise signed in a bad hand.

In the corridor, the abbot stood with a mop and the expression of a man who has had the idea of his building revised without his consent. "This is a monastery," he said to no one, to everyone, to the water.

"This is a town," Kaarlo replied briskly. "We'll keep it that way."

Outside, the red sheen on civic glass had thinned to sulk. Bus shelters reflected pigeons and weather and not doctrine. The donor vans sulked like uninvited relatives. The bells miscounted, beautifully.

Mai's patch burned less. Ace's wrist-key thrummed once more and then settled, as if a door inside had decided to close itself without slamming.

Bright didn't come over. He stood across the square and looked at his shoes until no one could accuse him of saying anything at all. Ace's phone buzzed once more:

you bought noise; they'll buy microphones. if you can, end the loom now. if you can't, run ugly.

Ace showed it to Mai. "We end it," she said.

"Correct," Mai said, and smiled like a blueprint you draw on a napkin because the bar is closing and you're not done yet.

They turned back toward the hatch. Behind them, the teens flicked the market square's public

camera off with a wink and a chalk mark. The rash-wrist woman held a clipboard like a shield and misdirected a man with a vest into a conversation about drains and the soul.

Water dripped everywhere in the monastery like punctuation that didn't belong to the sentence. The city outside gossiped with itself in traffic and dogs and radios that forgot the melody on purpose.

They went down to finish it. —

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