

# Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark

## Ace 6: The Crimson Threads — Chapter 9 - The Severing

**Story:** Ace & Mai - The Shadow and The Spark **Chapter:** 6.9 **Wordcount:** ~1774 **Characters:** Ace, Mai, Bright **Location:** Apartment **Arc:** Arc 1 - The Shadow and The Spark

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### ### Chapter 9 — The Severing

The room met them in a new key: lower, desperate, with the false dignity of a structure that knows it's about to go to ground. The frame leaned three degrees farther than it had any right to. Two mirrors remained waxed and faithful; the others looked like they'd learned humility. The grooves in the plaster pouted like a child required to delete a drawing.

Clean Hands had rolled her sleeves to the elbow, not priestly, not secular—surgeon. Bare wrists still. She did not look at the frame. She looked at Mai, and the look was infrastructural.

"You've been very helpful," she said. "Your angle taught us a great deal. We'll be able to recognize you anywhere."

Mai's smile said litigation and glee. "Put it in a paper," she said. "You'll be wrong about the conclusions."

Ace felt the tug then—the sly, new vector. Not at body. At bond. The red threads that remained flicked toward both of them, not to loop wrists or gag mouths. To string a neat, measured line between them. The oldest trick: make two become parallel, and then measure.

The pressure was exquisite, surgical, like the weighted blanket of an institution. Ace's vision narrowed, not to darkness, but to a clean corridor where distance was elegant and sterile. Violet laughed in her ear, not kindly. Look how tidy love can be when you stretch it until it snaps.

Ace heard herself make a sound she didn't like. Mai did too. They moved at once, each toward the center of that wrong line, closing the engineered gap until the thread had to make a choice between them and doctrine. Ace put her hand over Mai's mouth—pressure, diagonal, anchor. Mai bit—alive, insistence, oath. The thread twanged and kinked like a guitar string someone fretted with dirty fingers.

"Not separate," Ace said, and the thread whined.

"Never neat," Mai finished, and drove her disruptor's muzzle into the floor by the frame's left foot. The pulse crawled up through stone and into wood like spite.

Clean Hands' pleasantness broke outright. "Cantor," she called toward the stair, not to the team but to the protocol, as if the word itself were a lever. "Separate and calibrate."

Boots. Jackets that wanted to be lab coats. The clipboard man with his folder of verbs. Kaarlo filling the door with yes/no as needed. Bright at the top of the stairs, very intently not present.

"Observe only," the clipboard man said, and two techs flanked the doorway with devices shaped like

polite crosses. "For safety, we'll need to split the subjects for a moment to ensure—"

"No," Kaarlo said, backed by stone and a bar and a God tired of being blamed. "Municipal ordinance. One at a time."

"Sir—"

"Confessional is that way," Kaarlo told him, pointing in an unhelpful direction.

Mai moved first because the room wanted Ace to move first and Mai refused choreography. She stepped under the leaning crossbar, right into the geometry the frame wanted to draw through her. Her patch sang with ache. "Thirty seconds," she said.

Ace answered with the key. She pressed her crimsoned diagonal to the air at the brace and turned the last, ugly degree. Violet exhaled like thunder held under cloth.

The frame's left leg let go with the flat crack of a denial finally believed. The structure dropped. Threads wailed. The waxed mirror on pillar three shattered—not out, but in, collapsing into itself, a mistake repenting in private. A wash of red dust billowed and then settled on Ace's knuckles like expensive sin.

Clean Hands struck then—no thread, no mirror. Her hand, bare, fast, precise, a strike for the side of Mai's neck where sparks live. Mai twisted late—late enough that the edge of her vision went white. The room saw the sway and surged for her.

Ace's blade was there, not to cut skin. Flat, under the woman's wrist, levering. Clean Hands pivoted, used the leverage, rolled, efficient. She was trained. She had loved someone while learning this and learned to forget it in drills.

Mai stumbled to one knee. A thread found that knee like a snare and tightened. The pressure climbed her thigh like a familiar staircase. Her hand fluttered once toward the patch, a bad instinct. She stopped it with will and a hiss like a cat who'd been preached at.

Ace didn't think. She laid the flat of her blade over the thread just above Mai's knee, and the green along the edge bit—not cut, not sever, heat. The filament shrank from contact and snapped, curling like burnt hair. The smell was new plastic and principle.

Clean Hands smiled, bloodless. "You burn your own house to keep out the cold," she observed.

"We keep it warm," Ace said, and bared her teeth.

Clipboard man tried again. "For everyone's safety—"

"Silence," Kaarlo suggested, and the rosary in his pocket nodded.

Mai was back on her feet. Pain made her angle messy; messy saved her. She slammed her disruptor into the brace from the other side and held the pulse longer than she liked. The coil screamed. The frame's last leg began to split, fibers showing like tendons in a story about how trees survive knives.

Violet's voice pressed close, thrilled and terrified: Little blade, turn with me. We can finish. Open and I will—

"No," Ace said, too loud for a whisper, and felt the amused approval that meant she had bought herself love and trouble. She rotated the key inside the shape of her own scar, felt the bars line up

with a lock that had never wanted to open for kindness. She turned.

The frame went. Not explosion—collapse. Threads snapped like cheap violin strings. The wax film on the last mirror did not shatter; it liquefied, slid, pooled, and then ran in a line no floor deserved. The grooves in the plaster, robbed of purpose, looked suddenly like scratches a bad painter had tried to hide.

The anchor died. The weave in the walls lost its spine. For a heartbeat the room was just a room with bad lighting and the smell of resin's aftermath.

Clean Hands did not scream or plead. She stepped backward once, not much, just enough to clear debris, and smiled with the serenity of people who have budget lines in other departments. "You cut wood," she said. "We moved to light."

Mai's square buzzed in her pocket. She checked without showing it. A graph with too few labels. "Backhaul jumped," she reported, dry. "City cams. Bank vestibules. Transit displays. Not the big net—yet. A pilot fish with teeth. She's right. The loom goes cloud."

Clipboard man cleared his throat like a form complaining about a pen. "Then we can help," he said, relieved to find a verb he liked. "Institute protocols for reflective media. Deploy—"

"Deploy fewer mirrors," Ace suggested. "And stop measuring people with them."

The man blinked. Doctrine had not prepared him for that economics.

Bright finally moved, broke his posture's vow of invisibility by three degrees. His voice carried down like contraband: "Get out," he said, low. "Before they turn 'assist' into 'contain.' I can give you a street and a minute. Then I'm out of favors."

Clean Hands adjusted the cuff of her rolled sleeve as if to present neatness to God. "We'll see you anywhere there's polish," she promised. "You can't be everywhere with chalk."

Ace took Mai's hand in a grip that had ended wars inside her. "No," she said. "But we can make ugly travel."

They backed out. Kaarlo gave the room a last blessing in a language it did not speak. Clipboard man chose not to step into the doorway while it was busy being a hinge. The volunteers who still wore red bands took them off without ceremony and put them on the table like dead snakes. Joonas touched the tiny square on his wrist and kept his eyes on Ace as if courage could be contagious.

Up in the refectory, the abbot stood in a puddle and clutched a mop like a relic that might work. The mirror's crack had wandered into a doodle and given up. The bells rang once—not neatly—and then refused to ring again for a decent interval.

Outside, the town had shed the red fish-scale sheen except where new glass loved itself too much. Bus shelters reflected pigeons. Shop windows reflected people, messy. The council hall windows reflected doctrine and found it boring.

Bright met them at the north alley with a paper cup that had once held coffee and now held nothing. He didn't hand them anything. He didn't look at Ace's blade or Mai's patch. He looked at the space between them and nodded once, as if geometry could be a prayer.

"They'll say you compromised an assessment," he said. "They'll propose a task force with your names

on it. They'll say 'separate for clarity.' Don't."

"We don't," Mai said.

"Correct," Ace said.

Bright's mouth twitched. "I never told you her name," he said, faint. "She never told me hers. That's how you can tell which side of the ledger you live on. Go before they put you into a box for counting."

Karlo shook Bright's hand like absolution. "You'll have confession hours," he said. "They'll go unattended. On purpose."

Bright snorted in gratitude he couldn't afford and bled back into a building where men wrote nouns like policies. The teens ghosted them a look that meant they'll break cameras with chalk. The rash-wrist woman folded her empty clipboard into a shape that could have been a bird.

They did not run. They walked the way they always did: a half step apart, borrowing balance, hands free for tools, for blades, for each other. The river received its own face without compliments. The sky pretended to be blue and sometimes failed.

On the station platform, with a town that had remembered itself at their backs, Ace's phone buzzed one last time:

threads in transit. you bought time. not peace. do not be small. —B

Mai leaned her shoulder to Ace's, light, precise. "We weren't going to be," she said.

Ace touched the diagonal under her shirt, then looked at her wrist where the ugly patch sat over a smear of ordinary red. The key still hummed against her bone, faint as a song stuck in someone else's head. Violet laughed, not unkind, from the place dreams keep for bad ideas you've domesticated.

"Three," Ace said.

"Seven," Mai answered.

The train sighed into the station like a door that liked them. They stepped on, and the town let them go without trying to iron them first. —

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