

Chapter 10 – Resonant Ashes

Morning found the city with a wrinkle in its hum and decided not to iron it out. The billboards kept failing in public with new confidence; cameras blinked as if they'd learned to be shy; drones hovered like ushers who had just discovered the audience didn't want the same show. In a dozen apartments and three borrowed basements, Kaarlo's "noise clinics" opened their doors and taught deliberate mistakes: clapping off-beat until wrists remembered disobedience, humming scales with the even notes crossed out, drawing crooked squares on paper and burning them to teach the air to misbehave.

Ace and Mai moved through the aftermath without pretending it was peace. The Nexus hummed on the river as if it hadn't been taught to doubt itself. The wellness complex upstream had plastered over its seam and called it resilience. The Foundation's Cantor memos learned new fonts for the same threat: **ISOLATE OR BE ISOLATED**. But everywhere the dissonance mesh had been seeded, reflections stammered before they praised, and something inside people loosened.

Bright arrived at the apartment with a messenger bag and the posture of a man returning something he'd stolen from himself. He set the bag on their table like a confession and let the paper speak first: requisitions with the Overseer's neat initial, vendor invoices that called altars **fixtures**, an internal slide deck with a photo of the Nexus floor and the caption **CHOIR INTEGRATION: CIVIC HARMONIZATION PILOT**. Near the back, a scan of an old ledger page fitted itself into the printouts like a bone in a new body—inked names under the header **CATHEDRAL DONOR TRUST**, half the surnames recognizable as Foundation board members.

"Every time they say pilot, somebody drowns," Bright said, voice scuffed but steady. "I can't fix their mouths. I can burn their bridges."

Mai paged silently until she reached the ledger. "This is old money," she said. "And they haven't laundered the theology out of it."

"They won't," Bright said. "It gives them meaning on days the budget reports don't." He looked up for the first time. "I'm in. Fully. I've made my calls."

"They'll isolate you," Ace said. It wasn't a threat. It was a weather report.

Bright smiled without confidence and with conviction. "They already did. It didn't take."

They built a different kind of bridge while the city practiced. Bright set up drop sites for the mesh and mapped out Foundation handoffs they could sour. Kaarlo sent volunteers who could keep clinics open without supervision. The teens from the river town appeared with an entire duffel of chalk and a coil of stickers printed at a shop that only asked "cash?" and never asked "why?" The stickers were keys—crooked diagonals with a small, mean tooth—designed to sit in corner-of-eye places: bottom corners of bus adverts, the side of a drone's charging cradle, a mirror in a lobby that taught people to admire themselves.

Mai broke the mesh into kits simple enough to ship in brown envelopes. The **Dissonant** app finally admitted its name and behaved like a tool too stubborn to spy. Bright wrote copy in the kind of language bureaucrats use to say *no* politely. Mai translated it into instructions you could follow half-asleep. Kaarlo wrote a blessing that wasn't one and added three guitar chords. Ace sharpened chalk and blades indifferently, then drew the new key—diagonal plus tooth—above their kitchen sink where only they would see it.

Clean Hands did not vanish. Her drones watched the clinics from respectable distances. Her voice

arrived once through the window glass—warmer than it had any right to be.

“You won’t be allowed to keep this,” she said, gentle to the point of treachery. “Noise doesn’t cache well. It decays.”

Mai held up a lit match to the glass and burned the end of a key-paper into an ember. The white field wrinkled; the voice retreated to recalibrate its pity.

In the afternoon, a crate arrived with no return address. Inside was a tattoo kit that had been cleaned like an apology and a roll of transfer paper with the crooked key prepped at three sizes. The note taped to the lid read **PAYED CASH** in a hand that couldn’t spell and didn’t need to. The teens claimed credit later—sheepish and proud. The artist was an aunt who owed Kaarlo a favor and liked the way ugly shapes made expensive clients flinch.

“A permanent key?” Mai said, light and serious.

Ace rolled her sleeve and offered her wrist like a vow. They didn’t go to a shop. They did it stupidly careful at the kitchen table, an antiseptic bottle between them like a relic. Mai’s hands were steady. The diagonal bit. The small hook sat low, the tooth slightly off. The sting made Ace hiss without shame.

“My turn,” Ace said. Mai laughed because trusting a hunter with a needle had to be the funniest way to prove a thesis. She didn’t flinch when the tooth went in, her breath wrong on purpose, jaw loose without permission. When it was over the keys were not pretty, and that was the point. The city outside their window tried to count and kept forgetting the even numbers.

They went back out because waiting had never been their craft. At the clinic Kaarlo had pushed chairs into a circle and was teaching a postal worker how to clap like she meant to ruin a metronome. A kid of ten tugged at Ace’s sleeve and held up a phone with the **Dissonant** icon and a camera that now refused to flatter anyone. “It makes my Mom’s mirror honest,” he said gravely. “Is that legal?”

“It’s not illegal yet,” Ace said. “Keep it noisy.”

Bright walked them to a corner and pointed up at a drone hovering at the very top of its allowable altitude, pretending to be a star. “They’re waiting for one mistake big enough to justify replacing patience with force,” he said. “Don’t give it to them here.”

“Then where?” Mai asked.

“Where they expect you anyway,” Bright said. “You already set the stage at the river. They’ll write a finale. Show up and refuse the script.”

Evening curled around the city with the guilty softness of a habit trying to come back. The Nexus breathed; the plate had been swapped; the choir had been told their earlier falter was a drill. The Foundation’s memos found new synonyms for **monitor**. Clean Hands pressed her gloves at a podium in a conference room where donors smiled and nodded and heard words they liked: *calm, integration, civic harmony.*

Ace and Mai let the city carry itself for a few hours. They sat on their couch and drank bad coffee and listened to the hum through the wall. Violet lay quiet along Ace’s ribs, the contented weight of a predator between hunts. When Ace’s knuckles ached with leftover green, Mai wrapped her fingers around them and let the ache spread until it thinned.

News screens in shop windows found neutral anchors who promised balance. One clip showed a grainy overhead of two small figures on a catwalk above the Nexus and asked if disinformation was making people unsafe. Another clip lingered on a clinic door and a chalk key and asked if rebellion had a user manual now. The sound was off. It always is when the street has better noise to offer.

Kaarlo sent a picture: three new clinics—one in a laundromat, one in a bar between the dart boards, one in a church hall where someone had once wept over carrots and now practiced wrong steps. Bright sent an address where a municipal server would be tired and open at two in the morning. The teens sent a clip of a drone with a sticker key on its charging cradle; the caption read **sriry 4 bug** and a trail of skull emojis for punctuation.

The city was learning.

Late, when the coffee had decided to live inside their bones and the body learned how to hold it without shaking, a quick, soft ping grazed Mai's side-channel. The signature was a key she'd allocated for Lux and had revoked and kept anyway because some habits weren't ethical so much as accurate.

DON'T COME. THE VOICE CAN'T SEE ME IF YOU DON'T LOOK AT ME. YOU CUT THE RETURN. GOOD. THERE'S ANOTHER PLATE WHERE THE STORM LEARNED TO COUNT. NOT HERE. COAST. YOU'LL HEAR IT WHEN IT SINGS THE WEATHER.

Mai closed her eyes. "Lux is alive," she said.

Ace's face didn't change. "For now."

The message ended in numbers out of order—like a breath caught in a door. **3, 7, 4, 5, 1.** Then nothing. The line stayed cold.

They didn't argue about what that meant. There would be time—and not enough time—later.

The key on the kitchen wall glowed once—just once—as if the apartment had decided to approve of their vices. Ace leaned her shoulder into Mai's and let the weight say **mine**. The city's undertone held strong.

They slept, if sleeping is the word for closing your eyes and refusing to open doors in your head when someone polite knocks.

At dawn the drones resumed pretending to be stars. The plate on the river remembered pride. The clinics opened early. Someone chalked a key on a bank's steps and nobody hosed it off until noon.

Noise decayed. They made more.

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