

Chapter 11 - Keeper's Ledger

By noon, the Foundation changed uniforms. The new vests were the same polite black, but the word **CANTOR** had been replaced with an emblem that meant nothing and meant obedience. The drones learned a new posture like a dog taught a different command. Clean Hands took a meeting with someone who signed checks and let herself be photographed sideways.

Ace and Mai spent the morning turning a mess into an organization without telling anyone that's what it was. The clinic volunteers needed routes. The app needed mirrors. The teens needed bail once. The chalk needed replacing. Bright needed somewhere to sleep without teaching an algorithm his breath. Kaarlo needed a noise curriculum that didn't sound like religion while working exactly like one. The ledger Bright had brought—the one with the Cathedral donors—refused to stop insinuating itself into the day.

"Look," Mai said, tapping a column half in Latin, half in accounting. "They didn't just fund ceremonies. They funded *anchors.*"

"Filed as fixtures," Bright said drily. "Depreciated over thirty years. The theology survived as maintenance budgets."

Kaarlo flipped the page with fingers that smelled faintly of citrus and newsprint. "Coordinates," he murmured. "Half are dead places—buildings knocked down, churches turned into yoga. Half are still what they were. Some are water."

"Anchors don't care if you forget their names," Mai said. "We pulled one off the wall under the river. That ledger says there are at least four in this city, maybe more." She skimmed to the bottom note and read aloud. "'Wherever mirrors gather and men sing the even notes.'" Her mouth thinned. "That's not poetry. That's spec."

Ace looked at the map and at the window and at the part of the wall where the key had glowed and gone to sleep. "If we burn anchors at clinics, we get local choke. If we unseat them, we get time."

"Time for what?" Kaarlo asked.

"For getting better at being wrong," Ace said.

The Foundation offered them a reason to accelerate. A block away, a van marked **Mainenance** stopped at the curb and three polite people in civilian jackets asked the hardware store to surrender its security DVR for **calibration**. The owner's eyebrows argued; his hands didn't. The polite people left with the drive and the footage of everyone who had bought chalk there in the past two weeks.

Mai texted three lines. Ten minutes later a teen with a key sticker on their phone walked in and bought a dozen sidewalk chalks in colors the grid hated. The owner rang it up cash and didn't look at their face on principle.

"Keepers," Bright said, as if the word had arrived when nobody was looking. "People who hold noise."

"You named a thing," Kaarlo said, pleased. "Now it will grow teeth."

Keepers needed training and not from a handbook the Foundation could confiscate. That afternoon they borrowed space behind the bar with the darts and the broken karaoke machine. Ace taught knife-less knife: how to stand so a drone's grid draws itself wrong around your shoulders; how to move so a camera makes a liar of itself; where to put a mirror so it disobeys. Mai taught device

ugliness: how to cough a phone out of counting for you. How to sticker a lens where the angle, not the adhesive, did the work. How to burn a paper key without setting the smoke detector off. Kaarlo taught the embarrassment out of being bad at rhythm. Bright taught how to read allowed, line by line, until corporate writing finally confesses something human.

Clean Hands watched none of it directly. She didn't need to. The room filled with the awareness of her oversight the way water fills a basin, quietly, until it's too late to notice you're wet. A memo pinged on three devices at once, stripped to its skeleton: **KEEPERS IDENTIFIED. OBSERVE ONLY. DO NOT CONFRONT WITHOUT CALIBRATION UNIT.** It used words with the same care she used her gloves.

"Good," Mai said, tossing the phone back onto the table. "They're afraid of the mess."

By evening, the ledger had mapped itself across their wall with pins and string Mai would deny was sentimental. Four anchor sites in the city. Two likely in the suburbs. One at the coast, not their jurisdiction and absolutely their business. The coordinates at the bottom for **CWC**—the corporate wellness center—were circled, then crossed out, then circled again.

"They'll move the plate there," Bright said. "When you cut one mirror, they build two somewhere you're not."

"Then we cut where we can and teach everywhere else to cut itself," Ace said.

A message arrived on the quiet channel only four people knew, one of whom would rather have died than use it: a picture of a notebook page, lines ruled with patience, a single crooked square pressed so hard the page had nearly torn. No words. The metadata said nothing and everything: sent from a device that believed in anonymization like a religion and a cafe that had a chalk key on its bathroom mirror and a barista who pretended not to notice.

"Lux," Mai said.

"Alive," Ace said again, and it was not hope; it was a fact she would check every hour without apology.

They took a detour then, because consequences had to be local. The clinic in the laundromat had picked up a tail—two drones clinging to the ceiling and a real person leaning in the door like a customer who had lost the habit of patience. He introduced himself as **Cantor Field Support** without moving his mouth. His eyes couldn't hold still near chalk.

"This is a private business," the owner said from behind the counter, hands flat on receipts like shields. "You need a warrant or a hobby."

The support officer glanced at the drones, then at Ace and Mai, and decided his next commission depended on pretending he hadn't seen them. "Public safety review," he recited. "Cooperative inquiry. Voluntary. You all want to be safe."

"Safety is where people sleep loud," Kaarlo said from the back without raising his voice.

Mai slid between the officer and the door jamb and stuck a sticker low, where the lens would have to crouch to read it. The drone coughed. The officer's tablet miscounted the number of people in the room and gave up, not wanting to be caught lying.

"We all want to be safe," Ace said pleasantly. "You can start by leaving."

He did. The drones followed with the offended dignity of small gods who have misplaced a tithe.

Night reached in on schedule. The clinics closed their doors and left chalk signatures low enough to be missed by brooms. The ledger on the wall glowed with the reflected light of the city outside. Ace and Mai sat on the floor under it, backs against the couch, map above, knives close enough to hear their opinions.

“We’ll run out of wrists,” Mai said, glancing at the tattoo kit case and the transfer paper. “There are too many doors and not enough keys.”

“Then other people draw the keys,” Ace said. The words were easy. The faith inside them took work.

Violet stirred like a cat hearing the can opener. *Little blade, the storm’s plate will be pretty. You’ll hate breaking it. You’ll do it anyway.*

Mai looked at the ledger’s coastal coordinates and did not lie to herself. “After we keep this city,” she said. “Then we go hear the weather sing.”

Bright stretched his legs, a man who had burned a bridge and found the view improved. “You two,” he said, more prayer than accusation. “Try to sleep.”

They did not. They let their bodies hum against each other until the ache became bearable and called that good. The city learned how to hold a wrinkle in its song without panicking.

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