

Chapter 4 - Shadowed Algorithms

By late afternoon the river district had started to pick at its own seams. The billboards stuttered in public, cameras blinked like they were thinking of blinking again, and the drones adopted the posture of civil servants who didn't trust the public to do anything unsupervised. The grid pushed back. The grid always did.

Ace and Mai seeded noise as they went—two taps for the app on a third-hand phone at a kiosk, a crooked decal slapped onto a coffee-shop window so the security camera would cough every eight seconds, a chalk square at ankle height where no sweeper would bother to bend. At the edge of the water a maintenance van idled with *Maintenance* stenciled down the door, the misspelling tidy and deliberate.

"Bright wasn't kidding," Mai said. "That's bait."

They didn't take it.

The first bleed came at the pedestrian bridge. A drone dropped a lattice of light over the span—tidy boxes, tidy lines—and the light stayed when the projector didn't. Red threads printed themselves across the rain-slick railings, not reflections at all but physical hallucinations you could have sworn you could catch with two fingers. People slowed and then matched each other's stance like the bridge had grown new etiquette.

Mai thrust the device's nose into the light. The mesh bit. The lattice stammered, lost confidence, and unraveled into a drizzle of pixels that pooled at their feet like embarrassed confetti.

"Bleed," Ace said quietly. "Digital into physical."

"Cantor protocols," Mai answered. "They're trying to isolate us by collapsing categories."

A municipal officer in a vest came toward them with the set jaw of a person who had been told there would be no trouble and learned otherwise on commission. He didn't reach for his belt. He reached for a tablet. "Identification. Devices for calibration," he said in a voice that would sound reasonable later in the report.

Ace smiled just enough to be mistaken for polite. "We're on a walk."

Mai's tone stayed factual. "Your calibration array is third-party and your firmware is unsigned. If you hand me your tablet I'll fix the security breach before someone puts you on the wrong side of a class-action."

He hesitated. The drones leaned in as if smell could be measured. Somewhere behind them a busker started to tune his guitar wrong on purpose.

The officer made a decision—small, private—and let them pass. The drones followed, annoyed that the human had failed to perform isolation.

By the time the sun rubbed itself against the horizon like a cat on an ankle, Ace's head had started to ache behind her eyes. Violet's presence pulsed against it—sweet as a bruise—asking politely to be helpful.

Open, she suggested, gentle. *We can burn the wires from the inside.*

“Not yours to ask,” Ace said aloud.

Mai heard that too. She looked past the drones, past the bridge, to a strip of city where the noise clinics had begun to sprout like weeds through concrete. “We need a wall that isn’t watching,” she said. “Kaarlo.”

They turned their backs on the water and walked toward the monastery that had loaned its bones to Kaarlo’s experiments. The old church had been halfway to museum before he had persuaded the board that a clinic for “counting sickness” would get them better press than an empty nave. He had left the pews along the walls and filled the center with chairs, thrifted rugs, instruments that made beautiful sounds if you invited them and hideous ones if you asked.

He was waiting at the side door with his clerical collar undone and ink on his fingers. “You two look like you’ve been arguing with angels,” he said by way of greeting. “Come in. Leave your polite parasites outside.”

The drones hovered at the short stone fence like dogs told to stay. Inside, the air smelled of old paper and citrus oil. A hand-lettered sign on an easel read **NOISE CLINIC—BEGINNERS WELCOME—YOU ARE ALLOWED TO BE BAD AT THIS.**

Three patients in mismatched chairs worked at being wrong. A woman in a postal uniform drummed a rhythm that never settled. A teenager hummed through a scale and deliberately skipped the even notes. An old man wrote the numbers one through twelve on a sheet of paper and crossed out every second one with a fierceness that made his hand shake.

“Screens?” Kaarlo asked, ushering Ace and Mai toward the side chapel. He called it a chapel out of habit. It had been a storage closet until he’d hung a cheap icon and set a chipped teapot on a stool for gravitas.

“Screens, cameras, lights,” Mai said. “They’re using reflection loops to nudge behavior. When we break the loop, bleed happens. The drones projected a grid and the grid stayed.”

“Sacraments of order,” Kaarlo murmured. “Transubstantiated into protocol. Typical.”

Mai set her device on the stool and pulled a stack of thick, ragged-edged paper from her bag. The top sheet bore the crooked square and diagonal. The next one added a small, mean tooth at the base. She took a candle stub from a drawer. “I want to try something,” she said. “If the symbol’s power is partly that it forbids symmetry, maybe we can fix it in flame long enough to choke a local network.”

“You want to light doctrine on fire,” Kaarlo said, delighted. “By all means.” He held the matchbook like a priest handling a reliquary and then thought better of the metaphor.

Ace watched the side door. The drones loitered beyond the glass, pretending not to tilt their heads.

Mai touched match to wick. The candle wobbled its small light into the room. She pressed the key-symbol paper to the flame until the chalk lines blackened and the corner curled. “Count with me,” she said softly. “Wrong.”

Kaarlo grinned. “Three.”

“Seven,” Ace said, the ache in her skull tightening as the smoke crawled up her throat.

“Four,” Mai finished. She held the paper over the device. Ash fell in a jagged line across the casing,

making a mark with no patience for cleanup.

Somewhere in the building a breaker thunked and un-thunked. The drones outside hiccuped—lattices half-raised, then embarrassed into stillness. The clinic's fluorescent hum faltered and came back, out of phase with itself. The teenagers in the chairs laughed at nothing and then kept laughing because nothing was better than being told when they had to stop.

Mai blew the candle out. The last light folded onto itself and died.

Kaarlo put a hand to his chest. "You felt that too," he said. "The air forgot which way it wanted to vibrate."

"Local choke," Mai said, checking readouts. "Short-lived, but sharp. If we do this at the river... we might get a window before the grid tries to iron us."

"Do not burn my church down," Kaarlo said, then added as an afterthought, "unless it helps."

Ace smiled without showing teeth. "We'll try not to help that much."

Kaarlo's grin softened. "You two need anything else besides sacrilege?"

"Bright," Mai said. "And a door nobody can see."

Bright arrived as if he'd been listening from the next room. He had a messenger bag, a week-old shave, and a cautious joy like he had found an excuse to betray someone who deserved it. He took the paper—"just paper"—and the ash, and sniffed them like a sommelier. "Dissonant flame," he said. "Knew you'd get there."

"Your resignation letter still riding drafts?" Ace asked.

"Which one?" Bright said. He dug in the bag and handed Mai a sheaf of printouts with the Foundation's stingily beautiful letterhead. "Cantor protocols went from advisory to enforcement. Field memo says 'isolate or be isolated' in six different ways, two of them polite. There's a sub-bullet about *A-LOCK* and *M-RED* that sounds like someone has been scraping your selfies. The river node is their pet project. Half Foundation, half Order money, and Clean Hands has a biometric badge that opens both doors."

Kaarlo went still—head tipped like he'd heard the word *Order* in the plumbing. "She what?"

"Clean Hands is not a freelancer," Bright said. "She's anointed. You can hear it in how she counts." His smile hadn't moved. His eyes had. "And in how she *doesn't*."

Mai spread the printouts on the stool, on the ash, on the cheap icon. Pipelines. Contractor lists. A diagram of the substation's servers that had no right to be pretty and had been made pretty anyway. She tapped the badge ID photo—gloved hands only, obedient to brand. "So the Chorus Nexus is half a cathedral and half a datacenter."

"Same thing," Kaarlo said.

Ace's headache pressed a bright point under her crown. Violet saw the plans and made a happy sound. *Let me help,* she said. *We can green the altar and make it sing wrong until it learns to like it.*

"Later," Ace told her. She felt a small wounded silence.

Clean Hands chose that moment to test the walls. The front windows filmed with a white sheen as if the weather had remembered what obedience was supposed to be. Lines appeared—subtle, respectable—down the glass, not quite visible if you didn't want to see. The clinic's sign blurred. The world outside pinched itself into sharper posture.

From the nave the murmured lesson of the "noise" group faltered. The old man glanced up, pen hesitating over the line where ten wanted to become twelve.

"She found us," Mai said.

"She always does," Ace answered. Her hand went to her wrist—chalk-thin diagonal, half-faded, a private sigil that felt warmer under her skin when Clean Hands tried to smooth her edges.

"Let me address the congregation," Clean Hands said through the glass—not cracking it but becoming it. Her voice came thin and magnified at once. A white rectangle ghosted into being at the center window. Faint gloved fingers arranged themselves into prayer and then into precision. "Noise is a symptom. We can make you comfortable."

Karlo made a sign that meant nothing to any church Ace had ever trusted. "Not today," he told the window.

Mai lifted a sheet with the key-symbol and held it up to the glass. The diagonal's tooth looked childish there, handmade, almost funny. The white field buckled a millimeter along the diagonal and then pretended it hadn't.

Clean Hands' tone sweetened. "Mai," she said. "I could make your device stop hurting you. Let me calibrate your hands. You'll never have to say no to a protocol again."

Mai didn't bother answering. She struck a match and touched it to the paper. Flame ran the diagonal like a fuse. Heat breathed across the glass. On the street, a drone pivoted hard away from its own reflection and clipped a lamppost with quiet bureaucratic embarrassment.

Clean Hands sighed—genuine or rehearsed. "We'll isolate you," she said again, faint as a promise. "We always do."

The white film peeled back as if it had learned a new virtue and wanted to show it off elsewhere. The clinic's sign swam back into clarity. The three patients in the nave picked up their wrong rhythms where they had left off, as though they'd been allowed to breathe again.

"Flame works," Mai said. "Not for long. Long enough."

Bright put his hands up like a man at the end of a long, expensive argument. "You want my advice you didn't ask for?" he said. "Don't take the main doors at the river. They want to iron your love flat on camera and turn it into a training module. Use the maintenance tunnel the city forgot. It runs under the choir pit and smells like dead electricity. You'll hate it. It will love you."

"Map?" Ace asked.

"Already on your device," Bright said. "I put it there last week when I was lying to myself about whether I'd see you again."

Karlo stepped in close to Ace with pastoral fussiness that hid a soldier's eye. He took a pen from his pocket and, with one gentle, unapologetic motion, redrew the diagonal on her wrist, lengthening the

tooth into a small, uncompromising hook. He did the same to Mai's palm—a quick scratch that would fade in an hour but last until it needed to. "Bind yourselves," he said. "Not to the wound, to the wrongness. Go do violence to a choir."

Ace's headache eased a fraction. Violet stretched like a cat and settled, content to wait for songs.

They left under a sky that had mislaid the idea of dusk and gone straight to bruise. The drones tested the fence and found their manners again. On the sidewalk a teenager in a resold hoodie chalked a square on the clinic's step without being asked. Kaarlo, in the doorway, clapped off-beat until the kid grinned and made the tooth too long.

On Mai's device the river node pulsed like a throat. Between them and it lay half a kilometer of alleys, one unlit maintenance tunnel, and the part of the city where the Foundation liked to practice telling people no. Bright peeled off into a shadow, hands in pockets, a man on the edge of treason and enjoying the view. Kaarlo went back to his mismatched choir.

Ace and Mai walked shoulder to shoulder, the new hooks in their chalk-marks stinging like promises. The Chorus Nexus waited with lights steadied and cameras just a hair too eager.

"Count?" Mai said.

"Three," Ace answered.

"Seven," said Mai.

"Four," Ace finished, and the city did not argue. —

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