

Chapter 5 – Public Error

The city did not calm down after the clinic.

It got louder in the wrong places.

Ace and Mai left Kaarlo's old monastery with the kind of momentum that only comes when the next bad decision has already been made and all that remains is to arrive there with style. Behind them, the side door clicked shut. Inside, the first evening group at the noise clinic had started a rhythm exercise that sounded like a fight between cutlery and conscience.

Ahead, the streets had begun to twitch.

It wasn't dramatic at first. A tram schedule display near the square blinked one digit out of order and left it there. A cosmetics ad in a pharmacy window lagged half a frame behind itself and gave the model an expression no marketing department would ever approve. Traffic lights held green a fraction too long, then corrected so aggressively the correction became more suspicious than the error.

The city was learning to stutter in public.

"Your ugly note spread," Ace said, hands in her coat pockets, katanas humming faintly against her spine with that low irritability they reserved for nights like this.

Mai checked her tablet without slowing. "Not spread. Propagated. There's a difference."

"Of course there is."

"Spread is accidental. Propagated means somebody wants it."

Ace glanced sideways. "You think Bright pushed it?"

"I think Bright leaked enough to make a few systems panic and a few others overcompensate." Mai flicked through three different diagnostic overlays, all of them disagreeing in interesting ways. "And now the grid is trying to smooth the city harder than before."

A billboard over the avenue changed ad three times in ten seconds.

Luxury watch. Insurance campaign. Public wellness announcement.

Then the fourth image stayed: a blank white field, so clean it felt hostile.

At the center, for no more than a breath, a pair of gloved hands folded themselves neatly together.

Ace stopped walking.

The people around them did not.

They adjusted.

It happened so subtly most of them would never have noticed. A woman with two shopping bags shifted half a step left to avoid colliding with a cyclist she had not yet seen. A delivery driver straightened his shoulders before a car behind him honked. Three strangers approaching the crossing unconsciously spread themselves into evenly pleasing intervals, their bodies arranging themselves

like notes somebody else had chosen.

Then the gloved hands vanished.

The ad became toothpaste.

The city resumed pretending it had not just been measured.

“Clean Hands,” Ace said.

Mai did not answer immediately. She was watching the pedestrians, not the screen. “Micro-corrections,” she said at last. “She’s not trying to control actions directly. She’s smoothing hesitation. Removing friction.”

“And friction is how people stay human.”

Mai’s mouth tightened. “Exactly.”

Violet stirred in the back of Ace’s mind, amused and hungry in equal measure.

Pretty little order. They always think the cruelest thing they can do is remove choice gently.

Ace ignored her and started walking again.

They cut through a side street lined with secondhand shops and closed cafés. Here the screens were smaller, older, badly maintained—the kind that carried more grease than software updates. That should have made them safer.

Instead, it made the infection easier to see.

A lottery kiosk screen showed the same four numbers in a gentle pulse: 2 4 6 8.

A bus stop display rendered every route with even spacing, even when the schedule should have been chaotic.

A laundromat television showed a cooking show where the host’s knife hand moved in perfectly repeatable arcs, every slice the same thickness, every smile too symmetrical to trust.

Mai stopped at the bus stop and unscrewed the bottom panel with the speed of someone who had already decided this city’s infrastructure no longer deserved legal respect.

Ace took position half a meter to her left, where her shadow would break the line of sight from the nearest camera.

“Thirty seconds,” Mai said.

“You always say thirty.”

“It keeps me optimistic.”

The panel came loose. Inside, the cheap municipal hardware looked almost embarrassed to be carrying Foundation-level corrections. A piggyback board had been clipped into the route controller with surgical neatness. No city contractor would have bothered with that kind of elegance.

Mai hissed softly through her teeth. "Cantor splice."

Ace looked down. "That official?"

"It is now."

Mai pulled a slim lead from her sleeve, plugged it into the board, and shoved a sliver of the dissonance mesh into the signal path. The little screen above them spasmed, recalculated, and then displayed three bus routes as if they had been organized by a drunk poet.

One line dropped down half a line. Another smeared. The third developed a tiny, persistent pixel scar at the far right edge.

A teenager waiting under the shelter looked up from his phone, stared at the broken symmetry, and grinned.

"Hey," he said to nobody in particular. "That's new."

"Public error," Mai muttered, disconnecting the lead.

Ace's mouth twitched. "Good phrase."

The teenager's phone buzzed. He looked down, frowned, then held it farther from his face as if distance might improve honesty. "Weird," he said. "My camera keeps making my eyes uneven."

"Tragic," Ace said, deadpan, and kept moving.

By the time they reached the river district, the city had begun to answer itself.

A chalk square appeared on a tram stop advertisement, diagonal slightly too long.

Then another on a utility box.

Then a third on the pavement outside a florist whose owner was absolutely pretending not to notice.

The symbols were small, damp, ugly, and alive.

Mai saw them too. "It's spreading faster than I expected."

"People don't need much invitation to misbehave once they know the rules are fake."

The river itself looked like black glass dragged over old steel. Corporate buildings rose along the embankment, reflective and smug. Somewhere among them sat the node Bright had warned about—the one he had called cloud, lungs, breath. The terminology had shifted three times already. That was never a good sign. It meant the system wanted to be understood as more than one thing.

A maintenance drone passed overhead.

Then another.

These were different from the earlier municipal watchers. Sleeker. Cleaner. Less apologetic in their design. No bright decals, no public-service casing. They moved in pairs, one slightly above the other, depth sensors painting invisible geometry across the street.

“Foundation finally took the gloves off,” Ace said.

Mai’s gaze tracked the higher unit. “Not fully. They’re still hiding behind municipal shells. But yes. This is escalation.”

The upper drone paused.

A cone of measurement passed slowly across the sidewalk.

People moved out of it without knowing why.

Ace did not.

The drone’s angle adjusted by three precise degrees.

Its companion lowered.

A message flickered across a public transport display beside them, replacing departure times with a single line:

ISOLATE OR BE ISOLATED.

The commuters at the stop barely reacted. Their faces smoothed. Their shoulders found equal distance from one another again. The city was already being taught how to accept threats if the typography was clean enough.

Mai swore softly and dragged Ace sideways into the narrow shadow between two concrete planters. The drone cone followed, then lost them when the reflection off a wet café window caught its own geometry and fed it back wrong.

“Still wants us together,” Ace said.

“Or apart. Depending on which gives it better control.”

“Cute system.”

Mai checked the side-channel Bright had buried under three layers of junk architecture. A message waited there, new by less than a minute.

RIVER NODE NOT PRIMARY. THEY’RE STAGING UPSTREAM. GREEN ROOF. GLASS ATRIUM. CORPORATE WELLNESS COMPLEX. IF YOU CAN SEE THE RIVER, YOU’RE ALREADY TOO VISIBLE.

Beneath the text sat a simple arrow and a service route rendered in deliberately ugly lines.

Mai angled the screen so Ace could see.

Ace read it once and nodded. “He wants us off the river.”

“He wants us alive long enough to be inconvenient.”

The drone pair swept the street again.

This time the lower unit projected a lattice across the pavement—not visible to the eye exactly, but visible in consequence. A man stepping out of a taxi corrected his footfall mid-motion and nearly

twisted his ankle. A woman carrying takeaway coffee slowed by instinct and repositioned herself half a meter farther from the curb.

"It's not just reflection anymore," Mai said.

"No."

"They're painting behavior directly."

Ace felt Violet's interest sharpen.

This is where they always fail, the voice murmured. When they stop seducing and start arranging.

Ace watched the lattice shimmer faintly in rain-slick air. "Then let's help them fail."

Mai pulled the dissonance device from her bag and keyed a burst into the nearest street camera.

The effect wasn't loud.

It was worse.

The lattice lost confidence.

Its perfect boxes sagged at the corners. One line bent diagonally when it should have stayed square. Another doubled back and briefly intersected itself. The lower drone drifted a little too far right, corrected, and clipped a hanging banner advertising civic mindfulness.

People blinked.

A cyclist laughed out loud for no reason he could have explained and cut across the lane in open defiance of all software.

A bus driver leaned on the horn one beat too long.

The city, for a moment, remembered how to be rude.

"Move," Mai said.

They did.

Upstream, away from the river's open sightlines. Through backstreets where the cameras were older and the concrete knew how to hide a person. Behind them the drones regrouped, and the public displays tried to reload their commands.

The city did not obey quite as neatly this time.

By the time Ace and Mai reached the hill roads leading toward the corporate district, someone had already chalked a tiny, tooth-hooked key onto a parking meter.

The shape was wrong.

Which meant it was working.—

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