

[Index](#) | [Chapter 2](#) →

Chapter 1 — The Gate

The gate was white.

Too white.

Ace's hand found Mai's arm without looking. Pressure in her chest. Familiar. A shadow-weight she'd learned to trust. The stones beneath their feet showed no cracks, no weathering.

No time.

“Something's wrong here.”

Mai had her notebook out already. Eyes tracking left, right. “The gate clock. It's wrong.”

Shammy tilted her head back. Hair lifting in a breeze that wasn't there. “The air's not moving.”

They stood at the entrance to Verdant Springs. The city beyond stretched in neat rows, buildings of pale stone and darker wood, streets that curved gently, trees in perfect blossom.

A city that looked like a painting.

Like something that had never been touched.

Ace counted her heartbeats. Twelve. Thirteen. The pressure didn't change.

They'd come following rumors. Whispers about a place where things were different, where the usual rules didn't apply. The Triad had heard a hundred such rumors. Most led to dead ends, ordinary weirdness, small magic not worth their time.

This felt different before they'd even entered.

“Should we go in?” Mai asked.

The question hung. Ace felt Shammy's attention shift to her.

“Yes.” The pressure tightened. “But something's wrong.”

The gate guard smiled at them.

Good smile. Warm. Genuine. The kind of smile that made you feel welcome.

That was the problem.

“We don't get many visitors.” His name tag read MARCUS. His uniform was pressed and clean. His hands, Ace noticed, were smooth. No calluses. No scars. “Welcome to Verdant Springs. What brings

you to our city?"

"We're travelers." Mai's voice was easy, pleasant. The voice she used when she was analyzing every word and didn't want you to know. "Heard good things. Thought we'd see for ourselves."

Marcus beamed. "You'll love it here. Everyone does."

His eyes didn't change when he said it. That was the strange part. They stayed warm, friendly, fixed in that smile. As if the words were automatic. As if he'd said them a thousand times.

Ace felt the shadow press down. She stepped through the gate.

Without waiting for the others.

The street beyond was empty.

Not abandoned-empty. Waiting-empty. Clean cobblestones, storefronts with open doors, flower boxes in perfect bloom. A bakery on the corner exhaled the smell of fresh bread. A tailor's shop displayed jackets in precise arrangements.

No people.

Ace counted thirty steps before she saw the first one. A woman pushing a cart of vegetables. She looked up, smiled, and kept walking.

The smile stayed after she passed.

"There." Mai nodded toward a clock mounted on a corner building. "That clock. What time does it show?"

Ace looked. The clock face read 3:47.

She checked the sky. Maybe two hours past noon. Around 2 PM.

"The clock's wrong."

"No." Mai's voice had that edge. The one that meant her mind was racing. "The clock says 3:47. My watch says 2:03. Shammy?"

Shammy closed her eyes. Her hand came up, fingers spread, reading something Ace couldn't see. "The air's wrong here. Held. Like breath caught in a throat."

They walked. The street curved and they followed it past more perfect storefronts, more empty-waiting spaces, more smiles from the few people they passed. A man tipping his hat. A child running by with a ball. A couple walking arm in arm.

No one argued. No one hurried.

No one looked lost.

Ace counted the heartbeats between each person. Eight. Twelve. Six.

Too regular.

The inn was called The Restful Heart.

The name should have been warning enough.

Inside, walls painted soft blue. Tables polished. The bar gleamed. A woman behind the counter smiled. There was that word again.

"Travelers! Welcome, welcome. Rooms for the night?"

"Three," Mai said.

"Three rooms, or one room with three beds?" Her smile didn't waver. "We have both. Very reasonable rates. Very comfortable."

"Three separate rooms."

The woman nodded. Her hands moved across the counter, producing keys, a register, a small dish of candies. "Please sign in. Dinner is served at six. Breakfast at seven. We hope you'll enjoy your stay in Verdant Springs."

Ace watched her hands. Smooth. No calluses.

The same as the gate guard's.

They signed. Mai used a name that wasn't hers. Ace signed below with a mark she'd made a hundred times, three lines pressed hard. Shammy added her signature in the looping script Ace had learned to read upside down.

The woman took the register back.

She didn't look at what they'd written.

Their rooms were on the second floor.

They gathered in Ace's room. The bed was too soft. The window looked out on the street below, empty-waiting, clean, perfect.

Mai spread her notebook on the bed. Pages of maps, notes, sketches. "The clock discrepancy. That's the key. One clock wrong could be broken. All clocks wrong, differently wrong, that's a pattern."

Shammy stood by the window. Afternoon light caught her height, made her seem even taller. "The air doesn't move here. I've been trying to read it since we entered. There's pressure, but it's not atmospheric. It's like something's holding everything down."

Ace sat on the edge of the bed. The pressure had settled there now, a weight she couldn't name. She counted her breaths. In. Out.

"The gate guard's hands," she said.

Mai looked up. "What?"

"His hands. Smooth. No one who works a gate has hands like that." A beat. "Not real gate guards."

Shammy turned from the window. "You think he wasn't real?"

"I think he was too real." Ace pressed her palm flat against her thigh. "Like the buildings. Like the street."

Too perfect. No scars.

They went out before dinner.

The city had filled slightly. More people, still moving with that regular rhythm. A woman selling flowers. A man reading a newspaper on a bench. Two children playing with a hoop in the square.

The square.

Ace stopped.

In the center stood a fountain. Water sparkled up and fell in neat arcs. Around it, benches in perfect rows. Trees in perfect symmetry.

The fountain's base had no stains.

Ace walked toward it. Mai followed. Shammy's shadow fell across the cobblestones behind them.

Water fountains accumulated. Algae, mineral deposits, the residue of years. This fountain looked newly built. But the inscription on the side read: IN HONOR OF THOSE WHO BUILT VERDANT SPRINGS, 1847.

A hundred and seventy-nine years.

And the fountain looked new.

"Someone's been cleaning it." Mai's voice was doubtful.

Ace touched the stone rim. Cool. Smooth. No roughness where generations of hands should have worn it down.

She felt something else.

A trace. Faint, like a shadow in sunlight. A residue of something that had happened here.

She closed her eyes. The pressure focused, pressed down, reached toward that trace.

Violence.

Her eyes snapped open.

"Ace?" Mai was beside her. "What is it?"

"Something happened here." Compressed. Tight. "I felt it. Violence. Battle."

Something bad.

Shammy looked up. Her eyes tracked across the square, reading something in the air. "You feel that too? The pressure, it's not even. There's a shape underneath."

Mai had her notebook out, pen moving fast. "Where? Show me."

Ace pointed. Not at the fountain. At the space around it. The cobblestones. The benches. The trees. "Everywhere. The whole square."

"But there's no damage." Mai's voice was sharp now. Analytical. "No cracks. No repairs. No evidence of—"

"That's the evidence." Ace stepped back from the fountain. Her hand found Mai's arm. The contact helped. "No scars. Buildings that should have damage don't. A fountain that should be worn isn't. People whose hands should show work don't."

Shammy turned slowly, arms spread slightly. "Someone optimized this place. Made it perfect. Made the scars disappear."

The word hung.

Optimized.

They ate dinner in the inn's common room.

The food was good. Too good. Bread that tasted like bread should taste, meat that fell apart at the touch of a fork, vegetables that crunched with freshness.

The other diners smiled at them. Nodded. Welcomed them.

"My wife and I visited last year." A man at the next table. His smile was the same as the gate guard's. "We stayed. Best decision we ever made."

"Everyone stays." His wife. "Once you're here, you don't want to leave."

Ace counted the words. Twelve. The same count as the gate guard's greeting.

After dinner, they went back to Ace's room. The sun was setting. Golden light through the window, shadows lengthening across the perfect street.

Mai closed the door. Her notebook was open before she sat down. "We need to map this. The clock discrepancies, those are data points. Every clock, every location, every time it shows. We find the pattern, we find the mechanism."

Shammy stood by the window, silhouette against the fading light. "The air pressure's worse now. Building. Like something wants to break through but can't."

Ace sat on the bed. The pressure hadn't left. If anything, it had grown, a weight pressing down, compressing her lungs, her thoughts.

Fourteen. Fifteen.

"I need to go deeper."

Mai looked up. "What?"

"The trace. At the fountain. I only touched the surface." Ace pressed both hands flat against her thighs. "If I go deeper, I might be able to feel what happened. Not just that it happened. What."

"That could be dangerous." Mai's voice had shifted. The analytical edge softening into something else. "You don't know what you're reaching for."

"I know." Ace met her eyes. Mai's gaze was steady, intelligent, mapping Ace's face like she mapped everything else. "But we need to know. And that's what I do."

Mai's jaw tightened. That was the only sign.

Shammy turned from the window. "I can feel it too. Not the same way. But the air, it's like a held breath. Something's waiting. Something's been waiting for a long time."

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. Sketching. Mapping. Ace could see the shapes forming, circles, lines, the beginning of a pattern.

"Do it tomorrow." Mai said. "In daylight. When we can move if something goes wrong."

Ace nodded. Tomorrow.

Night fell over Verdant Springs.

Ace lay in the too-soft bed, counting her breaths. The window let in moonlight, too bright, too clear. The street below was empty-waiting again.

Somewhere in this city, something had happened. Violence. Battle. An event that should have left scars.

But the scars were gone. Optimized away.

And the people smiled. And the clocks showed different times. And the air held its breath.

Ace closed her eyes. The shadow-weight pressed down.

Tomorrow, she would find out what lay beneath the perfect surface.

Tonight, she counted heartbeats and tried not to dream of violence she couldn't remember.

Morning came too bright.

The sun rose over Verdant Springs like it had been rehearsed. Golden light, soft shadows, birds singing in the perfect trees. Ace watched from her window as the city woke. Doors opening, people emerging, smiles beginning.

They met in the common room. Breakfast was laid out. Eggs, bread, fruit, all of it arranged with that same impossible perfection.

"We're going to map the clocks." Mai had been up before dawn. Ace could see it in the new pages of her notebook. "Every clock we can find. Every time it shows. Then we look for the pattern."

"I'm going to read the atmosphere." Shammy said. "Work outward from the square. See if the pressure changes."

Ace nodded. "I'll go back to the fountain. Go deeper."

Mai's hand found hers under the table. Brief. Grounding.

"Be careful."

Ace squeezed once. That was answer enough.

They separated.

Mai went left, notebook in hand, eyes already tracking for clocks. Shammy went right, her height drawing looks from the smiling people, looks that didn't quite register surprise. Just acknowledgment.

Ace went straight.

Back to the square. Back to the fountain that looked new but bore a date from 1847. Back to the trace of violence she'd felt yesterday.

The square was filling. People walking, talking, living their regular lives. The woman selling flowers had set up her cart. The man with the newspaper sat on his bench.

No one looked at Ace as she approached the fountain.

She stood at the edge. The water sparkled up and fell down in its neat arcs. The stone base was smooth, unmarked.

Ace pressed both hands flat against the rim.

And went down.

The pressure in her chest became a plummet. Down through the smooth stone, down through the perfect cobblestones, down through the held-breath earth beneath.

She felt the trace immediately. Not a shadow now. A scar. A wound carved into the bedrock, filled in with something that wasn't stone.

Violence. Battle. Blood. Fire.

The impressions came in fragments. Flashes of light that wasn't sunlight. Sounds that weren't birdsong or footsteps. A scream that had been silenced before it finished.

Ace pressed deeper. Her hands on the fountain rim, her breath stopped, her heart—

her heart—

Her heart wasn't beating.

She felt for it. Not with her hands. With the pressure. With the shadow-weight that was hers.

Nothing.

No heartbeat in the stone. No pulse beneath the surface. This place had been optimized so thoroughly that even the memory of its wound had been excised.

Ace pulled herself up. Gasped. Her heart slammed in her chest, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen beats in rapid succession.

She stepped back from the fountain.

Her hands were shaking.

"Ace?"

Mai's voice. Ace turned. Her partner stood at the edge of the square, notebook in hand, eyes sharp. How long had she been watching?

"I found it." Compressed. Tight. "The trace. There was violence here. Something terrible. And someone, something, erased it."

Mai crossed to her. Her hand found Ace's arm. "What kind of violence?"

"Battle." Ace forced the words out. "Fire. Death. A lot of death. And then... nothing. Someone made it nothing."

Shammy appeared from the other direction. Her face was pale. "The air pressure, I followed it. There's a center. Somewhere in this city, there's a point where all of it originates."

"The clocks." Mai flipped pages in her notebook. "I mapped twelve so far. Every single one shows a different time. And the times—"

She stopped. Her pen hovered over a sketch.

"What?"

"The times aren't random." Mai's voice had that edge again. "They form a pattern. Concentric circles. Like something spread outward from a center."

"The center." Shammy said. "That's where the pressure originates."

Ace looked at the fountain. The smooth stone. The impossible newness.

"Then that's where we go. The center of the circles. The origin of the optimization."

"To find what?" Mai asked.

Ace pressed her hand against her chest. The shadow-weight had settled there again. A pressure that

wouldn't leave.

“To find what they erased.” A beat. “And why.”

The day was too bright.

The smiles were too warm.

The city was too perfect.

And beneath all of it, waiting in the held-breath air and the wrong-time clocks and the smooth stones, something had been buried.

Something the Triad was about to dig up.

end of chapter one

[Index](#) | [Chapter 2](#) →—

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