

Chapter 2 — Time-Stains

Mai had mapped thirty-seven clocks by noon.

Thirty-seven clocks. Thirty-seven different times. Not a single one matched.

She sat at a corner table in the cafe, The Perfect Cup the sign read, and spread her notebook across the worn wood. Pages of sketches, measurements, notations. A grid was forming in her mind. Coordinates and angles, the skeleton of a pattern she couldn't quite see yet.

The cafe's clock showed 4:23. Her watch showed 11:47.

Outside the window, Verdant Springs moved through its regular rhythm. People walking, smiling, stopping to chat. A woman with a flower cart. A man reading on a bench. The same woman, the same man, the same regular rhythm Mai had observed all morning.

She pulled out her pen and added another data point to the grid.

Clock #38: Cafe wall. Shows: 4:23. Actual (estimated): 11:47. Discrepancy: +4h 36min.

The waitress came by. Young, smiling, carrying a pot of coffee that steamed in the too-still air.

"More coffee, dear?"

"Please." Mai didn't look up from her notebook. Her pen moved across the page, connecting dots, drawing lines. "Can I ask you something?"

The waitress paused. Her smile stayed fixed. "Of course."

"The clock on your wall. What time does it show?"

The woman glanced up at it, as if she'd never noticed it before. "Four twenty-three."

"And that's correct?"

The woman's brow furrowed slightly. The first crack in the smile Mai had seen all day. "I... suppose so? It's what the clock says."

"But my watch shows a different time."

The woman looked at Mai's watch. Then back at the clock. Then back at the watch. Her smile wavered.

Flickered.

And reset.

"I'm sure it's fine, dear. More pie?"

Mai watched her walk away. The smile was back in place, smooth as the cobblestones outside. As if the question had never been asked.

She made a note: **NPC reacts to contradiction, then resets. Not amnesia. Active suppression.**

The pattern began to emerge by the fifteenth clock.

Mai had walked a systematic grid through the city, starting from the gate and working outward in concentric squares. Every building with a public clock, she noted. Every discrepancy, she recorded.

And slowly, a shape formed in the data.

The clocks closest to the gate showed the smallest discrepancies. Minutes, not hours. The farther she moved into the city, the larger the gaps became. By the time she reached the central plaza, the one with Ace's fountain, the clocks showed times hours apart from each other.

Not random. Concentric.

She stood in the middle of the plaza and turned in a slow circle. Clocks on every building, clocks on towers, clocks in shop windows. Each one frozen at a different moment.

Like ripples in a pond.

Mai pulled out her notebook and sketched quickly. The gate at the edge. The plaza at the center. Circles of clocks between them, each ring showing progressively larger discrepancies.

If she'd been asked to describe what she was seeing, she would have said: **A spreading event.**

Something had happened in this city. Something that had rippled outward from the center, affecting everything in its path. And the clocks, each one frozen at the moment the ripple reached them, were recording the spread.

She found a bench and sat down. Her hands were shaking slightly. She made herself stop, made herself breathe, made herself analyze.

Hypothesis: The event Ace felt, the violence she traced in the stone, had spread. The optimization wasn't instantaneous. It had moved through the city like a wave, and the clocks had been caught in its path.

Implication: The center of the city was the origin. The point of greatest displacement.

Question: What was at the center that could cause this?

She looked at the fountain. Smooth stone. No stains. A date from 1847 carved into its side.

Ace had gone down into that stone and found violence. Mai would go horizontal. Map the spread, find the shape, calculate the origin point.

She pulled out a fresh page and began to draw.

The cafe was called The Perfect Cup.

Mai had chosen it for its location. Exactly halfway between the gate and the plaza, on a street that curved gently through the commercial district. The kind of place where people gathered, talked, lived their regular lives.

She'd been there an hour when the man sat down across from her.

"You're mapping the clocks."

He was older, perhaps sixty, with gray hair and a weathered face. His hands, Mai noticed immediately, had calluses. Real hands. Worked hands.

"I am." Her pen stayed ready. "Who are you?"

"Someone who's been watching you since you arrived." He leaned back in his chair. His eyes weren't smiling. His eyes were sharp, tired, knowing. "You and your companions. You're not like the others."

"The others?"

"The ones who come and stay." He gestured at the cafe around them. "Look at them. Smiling. Content. No questions. No curiosity. You've been writing in that notebook for an hour, and you haven't smiled once."

Mai studied him. His face had lines. The kind that came from worry, not laughter. His posture was guarded, shoulders slightly forward, hands ready.

"You're different," she said.

"I'm resistant." He said it quietly. "Not immune. Not anymore. But I remember... fragments. Enough to know that something's wrong here."

"You remember what happened."

He shook his head slowly. "No. I remember that something did happen. I remember that things weren't always like this. I remember..." He trailed off. His hand went to his temple. "It slips. Every time I try to hold it, it slips away."

Mai leaned forward. "Can I ask you questions?"

"You can ask." He smiled briefly, without warmth. "I can't promise I'll be able to answer."

She opened her notebook to a fresh page.

"When did you first notice something was wrong?"

He told her what he could.

His name was Henrik. He'd lived in Verdant Springs his whole life, or what he thought was his whole life. He remembered a childhood here. Remembered a wife, grown children, a career as a carpenter.

But there were gaps.

"I remember building things." His hands moved unconsciously, miming the motion of a hammer. "Furniture. Houses. But when I try to remember specific projects, there's nothing. Just the feeling of having built."

"And the city?" Mai asked. "Do you remember it changing?"

He was quiet for a long moment. His eyes went distant, focusing on something she couldn't see.

"Sometimes," he said slowly, "I dream about fire. A great fire. And screaming. And then... nothing. Silence. And I wake up, and everything is perfect, and I can't remember why that should feel wrong."

Mai wrote: **Dreams persist. Subconscious retains what conscious mind cannot access.**

"The clocks," she said. "When did you first notice they were wrong?"

He blinked. Looked at her. "The clocks?"

"The clocks throughout the city. They all show different times. None of them match."

He turned to look at the cafe's clock. Then at Mai's watch. His brow furrowed.

"I... never noticed."

"Never?"

"Never." His voice was strange. Distant. "How could I never notice that?"

Mai watched his face. The confusion. The growing alarm. He was seeing it now. Really seeing it. The cracks in the perfect surface.

"Something is preventing people from noticing." She said. "You've been here your whole life, and you never saw it until I pointed it out. Why can you see it now?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't... I don't know. Maybe because you asked? Maybe because someone finally asked the question?"

Mai made another note: **Resistance triggered by external questioning. Optimization prevents observation, not memory.**

"Can you show me where you live?"

Henrik's house was on a street three blocks from the plaza.

Small. Neat. Perfect. Windows gleaming, shutters painted a fresh green, garden blooming in precise arrangements. The kind of house that looked like it had never needed repair.

"My wife made those curtains." He gestured at the windows. "She's been gone for... for..."

He stopped. His hand went to his temple again.

"For how long?" Mai prompted gently.

"I don't remember." His voice cracked. "I know she's gone. I know she's not here anymore. But I can't remember when she left, or where she went, or..."

He looked at Mai. His eyes were wet.

"Why can't I remember?"

Mai didn't have an answer. But she had a hypothesis forming.

The optimization didn't just erase events. It erased the capacity to perceive them. It erased the ability to notice the gaps, to question the wrongness, to feel the absence.

Henrik had lost his wife. He knew she was gone. But he couldn't access the memory of how, or when, or why. The optimization had taken the event and left only the shadow.

"I'm sorry," Mai said.

Henrik looked at his house. His perfect, impossible house.

"My workshop." He said it suddenly. "I had a workshop. In the back. I built things there."

He walked quickly around the side of the house. Mai followed.

The workshop was small, wooden, weathered. The only building Mai had seen in Verdant Springs that showed its age. The wood was gray, the windows dusty, the door slightly warped.

Henrik pushed it open.

Inside, the smell of sawdust and wood and time. Benches covered in tools. Real tools, worn handles, sharpened blades. Projects half-finished, abandoned.

"This is mine." A whisper. "This is really mine."

Mai ran her hand along a workbench. The wood was smooth, but not too smooth. It had been touched. Used. Loved.

"This wasn't optimized."

Henrik picked up a hammer. His hand closed around the handle, and something in his face shifted.

"I remember this." He said. "I remember building a chair. A rocking chair. My wife wanted..." His voice broke. "She wanted it for our daughter. For when she had her first baby."

"Your daughter?" Mai stepped closer. "You have a daughter?"

Henrik's eyes went distant again. The hammer slipped in his grip.

"I... I don't..."

"Stay with me." Mai touched his arm. "You were building a chair. For your daughter. For her baby."

"I..." He blinked. Looked at the hammer. Looked at Mai. "I had a daughter."

"Where is she now?"

His face crumpled. His whole body sagged.

"I don't know. I don't remember. She was here, and then she wasn't, and I can't—"

He dropped the hammer. It hit the floor with a clang.

"Something took her." He said. "Something took my wife, and my daughter, and everyone who mattered, and made me forget they were ever gone."

Mai didn't correct him. Didn't say it was probably worse than that.

She wrote in her notebook: **The optimization doesn't just erase events. It erases people.**

She left Henrik in his workshop, surrounded by the things he could remember.

He would stay there, he said. In the one place the optimization hadn't touched. The one place where his real life still existed.

"If you find out what did this." He said. "Come back and tell me. I want to know. Even if I can't hold onto it, I want to know."

Mai promised.

She walked back toward the plaza, her notebook heavy in her bag. The sun was directly overhead now. Noon, according to her watch. The clocks around her showed 3:15, 6:42, 11:03, 2:37.

Like a shattered mirror, each fragment reflecting a different moment.

She found a spot on a bench near the fountain and pulled out her map.

The time-stains, the discrepancies she'd recorded, formed concentric circles around the plaza. The center was the origin. The point of greatest displacement.

Ace had gone down and found violence.

Mai would go horizontal. Map the spread. Calculate the when as well as the where.

Because if each clock was frozen at the moment the optimization reached it, then the discrepancies weren't just spatial.

They were temporal.

The event hadn't just spread through space.

It had spread through time.

And somewhere in the center of those concentric circles, Mai would find the moment it all began.

She was still sketching when Ace found her.

Her partner's step was quiet, but Mai knew the rhythm. The weight. She didn't look up until Ace's shadow fell across the page.

"The fountain." Ace's voice was compressed. "I went down."

Mai didn't ask if she'd been careful. That wasn't a conversation they needed to have right now.

"And?"

"There was violence. Battle. Death." Ace sat beside her. Her hand found Mai's arm without looking. "And something else. The stone had no heartbeat. Whatever happened here was erased so completely that even the memory is gone."

Mai turned her notebook so Ace could see. The map of circles. The spreading pattern.

"It wasn't instant." Mai said. "The optimization spread. Like ripples. Each clock frozen at the moment it reached them."

Ace studied the map. Her eyes moved across the circles, following the logic Mai had laid out.

"Then the center." Ace said. "That's where it started."

"That's where I'm going." Mai pointed at the center of the innermost circle. "The plaza. The fountain. Whatever happened here, it started there."

Ace's hand tightened on her arm.

"Shammy found something too. The air pressure. She says there's a center point. A place where everything originates."

"Then we're all finding the same thing."

Ace nodded. Her eyes moved across the plaza. The smiling people, the perfect buildings, the clocks that showed all the wrong times.

"Something happened here." Ace said. "And someone made it disappear."

Mai closed her notebook. Her hands were steady now. The fear was still there, but it sat beside something else.

Purpose.

"Then we find out what." Mai said. "And why."

She returned to The Perfect Cup before dinner.

The waitress smiled at her. The same smile, the same greeting, the same coffee pot. Mai ordered pie and sat in the corner, notebook open.

She had thirty-nine clocks now. Thirty-nine data points. Thirty-nine fragments of a shattered timeline.

And in the center of all of it, a fountain that bore a date from 1847 but looked brand new.

Mai drew the final circle. The origin point.

Then she wrote at the bottom of the page: **The optimization spreads. But it has a source. Find the source. Find the truth.**

The cafe's clock showed 4:23.

It had shown 4:23 all day.

Mai looked at it for a long moment. Then she added one more note:

Clock #39: Frozen. Not wrong. Frozen.

The optimization hadn't just displaced time in this city.

It had stopped it.

end of chapter two

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