

Chapter 5 — Mapping

Mai spread her map across the hotel room bed.

It wasn't a single map anymore. It was layers. Tracing paper stacked on tracing paper, each one showing a different dimension of Verdant Springs. The clock discrepancies. Shammy's pressure points. Ace's traced violence. The streets, the buildings, the spiral shape of the city itself.

And at the center of all of it, a single point: the fountain.

"It's not random." Mai's pen traced the concentric circles she'd drawn. "The clocks, the pressure, the traces, all of it originates here. Something happened at that fountain, and it rippled outward like..."

She stopped. Her mind was racing but she couldn't quite catch the comparison.

"Like a stone dropped in still water." Shammy said from the window.

Mai looked up. "Yes. Exactly."

Ace sat on the edge of the bed, her hand pressed flat against her thigh. The pressure in her chest had been growing since yesterday. Mai could see it in the tension of her shoulders, the tightness of her jaw. She didn't say anything about it. Not yet.

"Miriam said three figures came from the sky." Ace said. "Three figures who stopped the fire. If that's true, then the optimization wasn't just erasure. It was containment."

"Containment of what?" Mai asked.

"The fire. The destruction. Whatever burned this city."

Mai turned back to her map. Her pen moved across the surface, connecting points, drawing lines. The shape that emerged was the same spiral Shammy had described from the clocktower. A vortex winding outward from the center.

"If the optimization was containment." Mai said slowly. "Then the clocks being frozen isn't a side effect. It's a record. Each clock stopped at the exact moment the containment wave reached it."

"A timeline." Shammy said.

"Yes." Mai's voice quickened. "If we can calculate the spread rate, the speed at which the containment moved, we can determine exactly when the original event occurred. Not just the year on the fountain. The day. The hour."

She pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and began calculations. The numbers came easily. Distances between clocks, discrepancies in time, the shape of the spiral.

Ace watched her work. Shammy stood silent by the window.

After ten minutes, Mai stopped.

"What?" Ace asked.

"The spread rate." Mai's voice was strange. "It's not consistent. The containment moved faster in some directions than others. As if..."

"As if something was pushing back." Shammy finished.

Mai nodded. "There's a pattern in the spread. Like a wave hitting resistance. Whatever was contained, whatever the optimization was holding back, it didn't go quietly."

Ace stood. The pressure in her chest was a weight now, pressing down with everything they'd learned.

"Show me where."

They went to the plaza at noon.

The sun was directly overhead. Mai knew because her watch showed 12:00 exactly. The clocks around the plaza showed 3:47, 6:23, 11:05, 2:58. All different. All frozen.

Mai carried her notebook. Ace walked beside her, her hand occasionally brushing Mai's arm. Contact. Grounding. Shammy followed, her head tilted back, reading the atmosphere.

At the fountain, Mai stopped.

"The center." She said. "The origin point. Whatever happened here, it spread outward in waves. But the waves weren't even."

She pointed to the northern edge of the plaza.

"That's where Shammy felt the burning. The pressure spike. And that's where my calculations show the spread rate slowing down."

"Slowing?" Ace asked.

"As if something was pushing back. As if the fire wasn't just contained."

She paused. Looked at Ace.

"It was fought."

Shammy raised her hand. Her fingers spread wide, reading the air.

"The atmosphere confirms it. There are two patterns here. One spreading outward, the containment. And one pushing inward, resistance. They met at the northern edge."

Mai flipped to a fresh page in her notebook. "Then that's where we need to look. Not just the center. The edge. The place where the containment met resistance."

"The place where someone fought back." Ace said.

The northern edge of the plaza was a row of shops.

A bakery. A tailor. A bookbinder. All perfect, all clean, all showing the same frozen clocks in their windows.

But Mai's calculations pointed to a specific spot. An alley between the bakery and the tailor.

They entered. The alley was narrow, shadowed, empty.

Ace pressed her hand against the wall. The pressure in her chest intensified.

"Here." She said. "Something happened here."

Shammy raised both hands. "The air pressure's different. Thicker. Like something..."

She stopped. Her eyes went wide.

"There's something beneath us. A space. A gap in the air."

Mai pulled out her notebook. "Can you map it?"

Shammy closed her eyes. Her hands moved through the air, tracing shapes Mai couldn't see.

"Spiral." Shammy said. "Like the city. But inverted. Going down instead of out."

"Below the plaza?"

"Below everything."

Ace had gone still. Her hand was flat against the wall, her eyes closed. When she spoke, her voice came out compressed.

"I can feel it. A void. A place where the stone was... edited. Removed." She opened her eyes. "Something's down there."

Mai looked at her partners. Analytical Mai, calculating the shape. Storm-touched Shammy, reading the atmosphere. Depth-sensing Ace, feeling the void in the stone.

Three perceptions. Three dimensions. Three keys to the same lock.

"We need to get down there." Mai said.

"How?" Ace asked. "We don't know where the entrance is."

Shammy opened her eyes. "I can feel it. The gap. The place where the air doesn't hold. If I..."

She raised her hand. The static charge in her fingers built. Rising. Rising.

A crack echoed through the alley.

Not a sound. A sensation. The air splitting, the pressure releasing, the storm breaking through.

And in front of them, the cobblestones shifted.

A seam appeared in the ground. A line that hadn't been there before. Slowly, grudgingly, a section of stone rose. A trapdoor hidden so well that even the optimization had forgotten it was there.

Stairs descended into darkness.

Mai stared. Her calculations hadn't predicted this.

Ace's hand found her arm. "Ready?"

The question hung in the air. Below them, darkness waited. The gap in the air. The void in the stone. The secret that Verdant Springs had buried beneath its perfect surface.

Mai pulled out her flashlight. "Ready."

Shammy raised her hand. Electricity crackled between her fingers, casting blue light down the stairs.

"Let's find out what they were hiding."

They descended.

The stairs were old. Older than the fountain, older than the clocks, older than the city itself. Mai counted thirty steps. Forty. Fifty. The air grew colder, the pressure heavier.

At the bottom, a corridor stretched into darkness.

The walls were stone, but not the smooth stone of the plaza above. These walls were scarred. Burned. Marked by violence that the optimization hadn't been able to erase.

Ace ran her hand along the wall. "Battle." She said. "This is where they fought."

"Who?" Mai asked.

"I don't know. But they left traces."

They walked. The corridor curved, following the spiral shape Shammy had described. Rooms branched off. Chambers filled with debris, doors hanging off hinges, the remains of something that had been destroyed.

And then, at the end of the corridor, a door.

It was sealed. Not locked. Sealed. As if the stone itself had been fused together to keep something inside.

Shammy raised her hand. "The air stops here. There's nothing beyond this door. No pressure. No atmosphere. Just... absence."

Mai photographed the seal. Her mind was cataloging. Symbols carved into the stone, patterns she'd seen before in the city above.

"This is it." She said. "The center of the spiral. The origin point."

Ace pressed her palm flat against the door. Her eyes closed.

"I can feel something on the other side. A presence. Not alive. Not dead. Just... waiting."

Mai studied her partner's face. The tension around Ace's eyes, the compression in her voice. She didn't like this. She didn't like any of it. But they were here now, and there was no going back without answers.

"Can you open it?" Mai asked.

Ace's eyes opened. "Not alone. But the three of us..."

She looked at Mai. At Shammy. At the sealed door that had been waiting for a hundred and seventy-nine years.

"Together." She said.

They stood before the door.

Mai on the left, notebook in hand, calculating the patterns. Shammy in the center, electricity building in her palms. Ace on the right, her hand pressed flat against the stone.

"Whatever's behind this door." Mai said. "We need to be ready. The optimization sealed it for a reason."

Shammy's charge peaked. The air crackled around her.

Ace's pressure focused. The weight in her chest pressed down, down, down, reaching for whatever waited beyond.

"Now." Ace said.

Shammy released. A bolt of lightning struck the door, blue-white, concentrated, precise.

Mai shouted coordinates. Angles and vectors, directing the force.

Ace pushed. Her hand sank into the stone as if it were water.

The door cracked.

Light poured through. Golden, warm, impossible. Not firelight. Not sunlight. Something else. Something that had been waiting in the dark for a very long time.

And from beyond the threshold, a voice.

"Finally. You've come."

The door gave way.

end of chapter five

[← Chapter 4](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 6 →](#)—

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:19**

