

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

Chapter 5: Dumpling Diplomacy

“The dumpling place on 7th Street folds them correctly.” Shammy's declaration carried the weight of someone who'd given the matter considerable thought and arrived at a conclusion that was, in her view, objective fact.

They were walking through the Chrome District at noon, which was the Chrome District's version of midnight, because the Chrome District operated on industrial time and industrial time didn't acknowledge the sun. The streets were full of chrome and concrete and people who'd had too much coffee and not enough sleep. The neon here ran at 60Hz, which Ace had catalogued and filed, and the air tasted of machine oil and ambition.

“The fold is irrelevant if the filling ratio is wrong,” Mai said without looking up from her field tablet. She was pulling up Kessler's last known address and calculating approach vectors. “The 7th Street place uses a pork-to-vegetable ratio that's 40/60. The correct ratio is 55/45. The fold is aesthetics. The ratio is engineering.”

“The fold affects structural integrity during cooking. A poorly folded dumpling leaks steam. A dumpling that leaks steam is a dumpling that's betraying its own potential.”

“A dumpling that leaks steam is a dumpling with inadequate sealing, which is a manufacturing defect, not a folding problem.”

“Sealing is folding.”

“Sealing is pressure application. Folding is geometry.”

Ace, walking between them, took a bite of a dumpling she'd purchased from the 7th Street stall three blocks back. She didn't comment. She didn't need to. The dumpling was good. The fact that she was eating it while they argued about it was her statement on the matter.

The Chrome District's dive bar culture had a specific aesthetic: chrome fixtures salvaged from pre-Consolidation industrial facilities, lighting that was either too bright or too dark depending on which corner you stood in, and a clientele that treated paranoia as a professional qualification. Kessler's bar of choice was called the Rust Bucket, which was either an ironic commentary on the Chrome District's aesthetic or a literal description of the building's structural integrity.

Mai stopped outside. “Let me do the talking.”

“You always do the talking,” Shammy observed.

“Because I'm the one Kessler hates. If I send either of you in first, she'll think I'm trying to manipulate her through proxies, which I would be, but she needs to hear it from me directly.”

“Direct manipulation,” Ace said.

“Efficient negotiation. Kessler responds to expertise, not charm. I show her the seal data, she tells me

I'm wrong, I prove I'm right, she gets angry, I buy her a drink, she talks." Mai tucked her field tablet into her coat. "It's a script. We've done it before."

"How many drinks?" Shammy asked.

"Two. Maybe three if I mention the Jakarta paper."

The Rust Bucket's interior was exactly as bad as the exterior promised. Corroded chrome fixtures. Lighting the color of old tea. A bartender with cybernetic arms who looked like he'd been designed to discourage questions and enforce silence. He nodded toward a booth in the back corner where a woman sat alone with a drink and a data screen and the expression of someone who'd been disappointed by life and was taking it personally.

Kessler was older than Mai had described. Mid-fifties, maybe older, with gray hair cropped short and the particular stillness of someone who'd learned to sit in dive bars without being approached by people who wanted things. Her eyes tracked the triad as they entered. Noted Ace's shadow-pressure. Noted Shammy's height. Noted Mai and did something with her face that was the opposite of smiling.

"Tanaka." Kessler's voice was sandpaper over gravel. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

"Kessler." Mai sat in the booth across from her. Not adjacent. Across. "You look well."

"I look like someone who's been sitting in this bar for six years watching the city get worse. Don't waste time. What do you want?"

"Information about a containment seal in the Harbor district."

Kessler's hand paused over her data screen. Small pause. Mai noticed.

"Which seal?" Kessler asked.

"88 Harbor Row. Warehouse. Pre-Consolidation architecture. Organic material purchases consistent with ritual maintenance protocols. Atmospheric stability anomaly across a twelve-block radius."

Kessler stared at Mai for five seconds. In dive-bar negotiation, five seconds of eye contact was the equivalent of a formal declaration of intent.

"Who told you about the atmospheric anomaly?" Kessler asked.

"Whisper. Data-broker in the Warrens."

"Whisper should learn to keep her mouth shut." Kessler drained her drink. "The seal at 88 Harbor Row isn't in any Foundation archive. I know because I checked every archive the Foundation has, and several they don't admit to having, when I first heard about it eight years ago."

"Eight years," Mai said. "You've known about this for eight years?"

"I've known about the atmospheric anomaly for eight years. The seal, I've seen from the outside. Never been inside. Nobody goes inside. The people who maintain it don't let anyone in, and the people who've tried to get in without permission have either failed or disappeared."

"Castellan."

Kessler's eyes flickered. "You know about Castellan."

"Whisper told us. Independent data-miner. Went to the Harbor district eleven weeks ago. Hasn't been heard from since."

"Castellan came to me before he went to Whisper. Asked me about the seal. I told him what I'm telling you: stay away from it. Don't approach it. Don't try to read it from the outside. Don't try to understand it with human mathematics." Kessler leaned forward. "He didn't listen. The smart ones never do."

Ace had positioned herself at the bar, close enough to hear the conversation, far enough to not be part of it. Her shadow-pressure filled the space between the entrance and the booth. The bartender with the cybernetic arms gave her a look that was professional recognition—he saw how she moved and understood what it meant.

Shammy had taken a seat at a high table near the window. The table was too small for her, which most tables were. She sat with her back to the glass and her bright blue eyes tracking the room's atmospheric flow. The Rust Bucket's air was terrible, even by Night City standards. Shammy was choosing not to fix it through an act of will visible in the set of her shoulders.

"The seal is archaic," Kessler said. "At least three hundred years old. Probably older. The architecture uses a modular containment design with four primary anchor points, which is standard for pre-Consolidation ritual work. What isn't standard is the mathematics. The geometric proofs in that seal predate human mathematics by at least two centuries."

"Predating human mathematics," Mai said. "How is that possible?"

"Because whoever designed it wasn't human." Kessler said this the way you'd say the sky was gray—a fact that was unpleasant but not negotiable. "The seal was built by something that thinks in dimensions we can't perceive and calculates in proofs we haven't discovered. The containment structure is elegant. More than elegant. It's inevitable. Like water finding its level. The math doesn't just work. It works better than it should. It's too beautiful to be human, and too functional to be alien. It's something in between."

"Something like what?"

"Something like whatever's inside it." Kessler poured herself another drink from a bottle that hadn't been on the table a moment ago. Mai didn't ask where it came from. "The entity contained by that seal built the seal that contains it. Or helped design it. Or was consulted during the design phase. However you want to frame it, the containment architecture and the contained entity share a mathematical vocabulary. They're speaking the same language, even though the seal is trying to silence the entity and the entity is trying to speak."

"That's not how containment works," Mai said. "The seal and the entity should be in opposition. Complementary structures would imply—"

"Would imply that the entity consented to being contained," Kessler finished. "Yes. That's exactly what it implies. The seal at 88 Harbor Row wasn't built to imprison something that was fighting to get out. It was built to hold something that agreed to be held. And then the people who built it left and didn't come back, and the entity has been waiting for them to return for three hundred years, and the people who stayed behind have been maintaining the seal because they don't know what else to do."

The bar noise seemed to pull back for a moment. Not actually quiet—the Chrome District was never

quiet—but the conversation had reached a point where the noise felt like it was happening in a different room.

“The cult,” Mai said slowly. “They’re maintaining, not worshipping.”

“They’re maintaining because that’s all they know how to do. The original architects, whoever or whatever they were, left protocols. Maintenance schedules. Repair procedures. The cult follows the protocols without understanding the principles behind them. They’re technicians, not engineers. They can replace a blown fuse, but they can’t redesign the circuit.”

“And the seal is degrading.”

“The seal is degrading because it was designed as a temporary solution. A placeholder. Something to hold the entity until the permanent structure could be built. The permanent structure was never built. The placeholder has been doing the job of a permanent solution for three centuries, and it’s finally running out of redundancy.” Kessler met Mai’s eyes. “You don’t break a seal that old. You reinforce it, or you leave it alone. Those are your options. There is no third option that ends well.”

“What about redesign?”

Kessler’s laugh was a sound that had given up on being funny a long time ago. “Redesign. Sure. Redesign a containment structure built by something that thinks in dimensions you can’t perceive, using mathematics you haven’t discovered, to hold an entity that consented to containment and has been waiting patiently for three hundred years for someone to finish the job. What are you going to use? Graph paper and good intentions?”

“I have the schematic from the Foundation archive. The modular design allows for—”

“You have a schematic that shows you how to read the seal without breaking it. That’s not the same as a schematic for redesigning it. Reading and building are different skills, Tanaka, and you’re an analyst, not an architect.” Kessler finished her drink. “I’ll give you the schematic. Not because I think you’ll use it wisely, but because you’re going to go after this seal whether I help you or not, and I’d rather you have some protection than none. The schematic will let you map the seal’s current state. It won’t let you change it. Don’t try to change it.”

Mai accepted the data chip Kessler pushed across the table. Her fingers closed around it carefully—not because it was fragile, but because it was the kind of tool that could save lives or end them depending on how it was used.

“One more thing,” Mai said. “The atmospheric anomaly. The entity is regulating the district’s atmosphere from below the warehouse. Shammy, my associate, has detected it. She says the regulation is alive. Breathing. Eight-second intervals.”

Kessler’s face went very still. “Eight seconds. You’re sure?”

“Shammy’s readings are precise.”

“Eight seconds is the entity’s resting respiratory cycle. If it’s breathing at eight seconds, it’s in deep dormancy. If the cycle shortens, it’s moving toward wakefulness. At four seconds, it’s dreaming. At two seconds, it’s awake.” Kessler stood. “If the cycle drops below one second, you won’t need to worry about the seal, because there won’t be enough of you left to worry about anything. Get out of the Harbor district. Map the seal from outside. Don’t go inside.” She paused at the edge of the booth.

"And Tanaka?"

"Yes?"

"If the seal is 300 years old and still holding, whatever's in there is patient. It's been patient longer than Night City has existed. What makes you think you can do anything about it?"

Mai didn't answer. Kessler didn't wait for one. She picked up her data screen and left through a back door that Mai hadn't catalogued in the bar's layout, which meant Kessler had added it after Mai's last visit, or it had always been there and Mai had missed it. Either possibility was concerning.

The triad regrouped outside the Rust Bucket. The Chrome District's noon sun was a suggestion behind the smog layer. The neon flickered at 60Hz.

"I liked her," Shammy said.

"She threatened to let us die in a containment breach," Mai observed.

"I liked her honesty. And her bar has terrible sightlines. She's been there six years and the sightlines are still terrible. That's someone who's given up on optimizing their environment. I find that sad and also relatable."

Mai checked the data chip. The schematic was clean. Comprehensive. Kessler had given them exactly what she'd promised: a tool for reading the seal without breaking it.

"The dumpling place," Ace said.

They stopped at the 7th Street stall on the way back. The dumplings were, as Shammy had claimed, folded correctly. The filling ratio was, as Mai had observed, slightly off. Ace ate three without commenting on either variable. The case file sat between them on the counter, and the data chip sat inside the case file, and the schematic for reading a 300-year-old seal sat on the data chip.

Three people eating dumplings while the most dangerous piece of information in Night City cooled next to the soy sauce.

Mai bit into a dumpling and for a moment, her analytical framework went quiet. The taste was good. Simple. Pork and vegetable and dough and steam. The last time she'd eaten street food had been in Tokyo, before the breach, before the frequency that still lived in her sleep, before she'd rebuilt herself as a system instead of a person.

She put the dumpling down. Picked it up again. Ate it. The memory didn't go away. The dumpling was still good. Some things could be both.

"Two more blocks at 50Hz," Ace reported. "The boundary's expanding."

Mai checked her scanner. Ace was right. The stable-frequency zone had grown by two blocks since their reconnaissance visit. The entity's breath was reaching further.

"We have the schematic," Mai said. "We have the atmospheric data. We have Kessler's assessment. The next step is inside the warehouse."

"Kessler said don't go inside," Shammy noted.

"Kessler said don't try to change the seal. I'm not going to change it. I'm going to read it. There's a

difference.”

“A difference Kessler doesn't believe in.”

“I know.” Mai tucked the data chip into her coat. “But Kessler's been watching this seal for eight years and hasn't done anything about it. I've been aware of it for three days, and I already know more than she did when she started. The seal is degrading. The entity is breathing. The cult is maintaining. The timeline is shrinking. If we wait until we have permission from everyone who's ever been scared of this thing, we'll wait until the seal fails.”

“And then it won't matter,” Ace said.

“And then it won't matter.” Mai looked at the Harbor district's distant skyline. The buildings were old and dark and steady, the same way they'd been for three hundred years. “We go in tomorrow. We read the seal. We understand what we're dealing with. Then we decide.”

The triad walked home through the Chrome District, past the 60Hz neon and the machine-oil air and the people who'd had too much coffee. The dumpling argument resumed. Shammy defended the fold. Mai defended the ratio. Ace ate another dumpling and said nothing.

It was normal. The cosmic horror existed. The dumplings also existed. They chose the dumplings.

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

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

