

[← Chapter 9](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 11 →](#)

Chapter 10 — Wordless Trust

Mai's hand found Shammy's in the dark.

Not a gesture. A necessity. Shammy was shaking. Mai could feel it. The storm inside her partner hadn't settled. The electricity still sparked, just beneath the surface.

"Ground," Mai said. "I'm here."

Shammy's hand tightened. Not pain. Contact. Realness.

"I almost lost it." Shammy's voice came out rough. "In the lobby. The storm wanted out. All of it."

"But it didn't."

"Because Ace was there." Shammy's breathing steadied. Slightly. "She found me. Grounded me. But I could feel it. The moment where I could have destroyed everything."

Mai moved closer. Her other hand found Shammy's arm. Anchoring.

"That moment passed. You're here. We're here."

"Are we?" Shammy's voice cracked. "The Architect sent those things to stop us. We're not safe here. We're not..."

"Then we'll leave. After we make the choice."

Shammy was quiet. Her hand trembled in Mai's grip.

"What if we choose wrong?"

Mai didn't answer immediately. She let the silence hold. Let the question breathe.

"Then we live with it," she said finally. "We make the best decision we can with the information we have. And we carry the consequences together."

Shammy's hand relaxed. Slightly.

"Wordless trust?"

"Always."

The room was dark.

They'd retreated to Ace's room. The least damaged, the most defensible. Ace sat on the bed, counting heartbeats. Mai had pulled a chair to the window. Shammy stood in the corner, her hand still raised,

still reading the atmosphere.

"We can't renew the seal," Ace said.

Mai turned. "Why not?"

"The original Triad sacrificed themselves. They became the containment. If we renew it, we become the seal. Forever."

"We don't know that for certain."

"I felt it." Ace's voice was flat. "When I went down into the fountain. The presence showed me. The three figures who came from the sky, they didn't just sing containment into existence. They became it. Their resonance. Their essence. Everything they were."

"Then they're still there," Shammy said. "At the center. Waiting."

"Yes." Ace's hand pressed against her chest. "And if we renew the seal, we join them. We become part of the containment. We stop being ourselves."

Mai processed this. Her mind worked through the implications. Calculations. Probabilities. Outcomes.

"Then we don't renew the seal."

"Then we break it," Shammy said. "And the fire returns."

"Yes."

"And everyone who forgot, remembers."

"Yes."

Shammy's hand dropped. The atmosphere in the room shifted.

"Henrik," she said. "Miriam. All the people who lost their families, their memories, their lives. They'll remember what happened to them."

"Every death. Every loss. Every horror." Mai's voice was steady. "The cost that was deferred for a hundred and seventy-nine years."

"Is that fair?" Ace asked. "To make them remember something that terrible?"

"Is it fair to keep them in the dark?" Shammy countered. "To let them live a lie?"

No one had an answer.

The silence stretched.

Outside, Verdant Springs was still. No people. No movement. The optimization had withdrawn, leaving the city empty.

Mai stood and moved to the window.

"The Architect offered us a choice," she said. "But it's not really a choice. Renew the seal and lose ourselves. Or break it and unleash the fire."

"Those are the only options?"

"According to her."

Ace rose from the bed. Her hand pressed flat against her thigh.

"There might be a third."

"What?"

"The presence at the center. It said it was the echo of the original Triad. The memory of what they did." Ace's voice was tight. "But it also said the seal is weakening. That everything weakens over time."

"So?"

"So maybe we don't renew the seal. And maybe we don't break it either." Ace's eyes found Mai's. "Maybe we transform it."

Mai's mind raced. Calculations. Patterns. The spiral city, the frozen clocks, the vertical axis.

"How?"

"The optimization contains fire by erasing memory. But what if there's another way to contain it? What if we change the nature of the seal?"

"Change it how?"

Ace looked at Shammy. "The storm inside you. It's not just electricity. It's release. It's the breaking of pressure. What if we use that?"

Shammy's hand came up. Electricity flickered.

"You want me to break the seal?"

"No. I want you to transform it. Channel the storm. Change the containment from erasure to release."

"Release?" Mai asked. "Release what?"

"The fire. But contained release. Controlled burning. Let the memories come back, but slowly. Let people remember, but safely. Transform the optimization from a prison into a..." Ace trailed off. "A valve."

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. Sketching. Calculating.

"It's possible. Theoretically. But it would require all three of us. Depth to find the source. Horizontal to map the spread. Vertical to channel the release."

"Then we do it."

Shammy stepped forward. "It might not work."

"It might not. But it's better than the alternatives."

Ace moved to the door.

"We go tonight. Before the Architect sends more constructs. Before the seal breaks on its own."

Mai grabbed her notebook. Shammy raised her hand. The electricity built.

"Tonight," Shammy said. "We find out what we're made of."

The plaza was waiting.

The fountain glowed now. Not with water, but with light. The seal was visible. A barrier of energy, holding back something immense.

The Triad approached. Three vectors. Three perceptions. Three keys.

At the edge of the fountain, Ace stopped.

"Depth," she said. "I go down. Find the source. Open the path."

Mai nodded. "Horizontal. I map the spread. Direct the flow."

Shammy raised her hand. Electricity crackled.

"Vertical. I channel the storm. Transform the release."

They stood at the center of the spiral. At the origin of the optimization. At the place where fire had been contained for a hundred and seventy-nine years.

"Together," Ace said.

Mai's hand found Shammy's. Shammy's hand found Ace's.

"Together."

And they went down.

end of chapter ten

[← Chapter 9](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 11 →](#)—

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