

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

Chapter 10: The Wrong Room

The elevator ride down took forty-five seconds. Mai counted them. When you were about to enter the containment zone of a cosmic entity that had been asleep for three centuries, you counted whatever you could.

The elevator was old. Pre-Consolidation. The buttons were mechanical, the cables were original, and the maintenance certificate on the wall was dated forty years ago, which meant either the certificate was decorative or the elevator had been running without inspection for four decades. Given that the elevator led to a containment chamber built by non-human architects to hold a dreaming god, Mai suspected the maintenance certificate wasn't the most concerning compliance issue in this building.

Shammy stood at the back of the elevator, the only place she could stand without her storm-gradient hair brushing the ceiling. The air quality shifted as they descended. The regulation from below was getting stronger. Not oppressive. Present. The way a heartbeat is present: you don't notice it until you pay attention, and then you can't stop noticing.

Ace stood at the front. Her shadow-pressure pressed against the elevator doors, reading what was on the other side. Her violet eyes were focused and her hand rested on the hilt of her katana, which was her default posture when entering an unknown space—and also her default posture in known spaces, because Ace's default was readiness.

The doors opened.

The room was wrong.

Mai's analytical framework engaged before her emotional response could intervene, which was the only thing that kept her standing upright. The wrongness wasn't visual, not entirely. It was architectural. The walls were almost right. The angles were almost correct. The proportions were almost standard. But “almost” was doing a lot of work, and the work it was doing was making Mai's eyes hurt.

The walls leaned inward at angles that were two degrees off from vertical. The corners of the room met at intersections that should have been right angles but weren't. The floor was flat—she could feel it under her feet—but her eyes told her it was curved. The ceiling was high enough for Shammy to stand, which was a relief, but the height wasn't uniform: it was taller in some places than others, and the pattern of the variation didn't follow any structural logic Mai could identify.

“This is the inner sanctum,” Verath said. She'd been waiting for them at the elevator. Her calm had a new quality to it today: something closer to vigilance. “The Dreamer is directly below this chamber. The seal's primary anchor point is in the floor. The closer we get to the anchor, the stronger the Dreamer's presence.”

Shammy's atmospheric sense had gone blank. The regulation in this room was absolute. Not the gentle, ambient regulation of the warehouse above. This was the source. The Dreamer's breath, amplified by proximity, held the air in a stability so complete that Shammy had nothing to read.

"I can't feel anything," Shammy said. Her voice was her focused register—short sentences, less warmth. "The regulation is total. It's like trying to read the surface of a frozen lake from underneath the ice."

"You'll adjust," Verath said. "Your atmospheric sense will find gaps in the regulation over time. The Dreamer's control is absolute, but it's also passive. It doesn't respond to individual readers. You'll find the spaces between the breaths."

Mai had moved to the floor. The seal's primary anchor point was visible here, the central node of the entire containment structure. She pulled out her field scanner and started mapping.

The rune-burn started within minutes.

Mai's nose began bleeding at the four-minute mark. She wiped it away and kept scanning. At six minutes, her hands started trembling. At eight minutes, the nosebleed was steady and her vision was blurring.

"Mai." Ace's voice. Flat. The compression that meant concern.

"I'm fine. The rune-burn is within acceptable parameters." Mai kept scanning. The data was flowing. The seal's architecture was revealing itself layer by layer. The human-readable geometry on the surface. The shadow architecture beneath. And below that, something else. Something deeper. The non-human mathematics that Kessler had described.

"Your nose is bleeding onto the floor," Shammy said. "The floor is the seal. You're bleeding on the seal, Mai."

Mai looked down. Blood on the stone. On the seal. On the containment structure that was holding a cosmic entity.

She stepped back. Wiped her face. The bleeding slowed but didn't stop.

"The seal responds to resonance," Verath said, watching the blood with an expression Mai couldn't read. "Human blood carries human resonance. The seal will read it. The Dreamer will read it. You're announcing yourself to the containment structure and the entity it contains."

"I'm mapping the architecture. The rune-burn is the cost of reading at this depth." Mai's voice was steady despite the blood. The analytical framework was holding. Barely. "The seal's primary anchor point is degraded by approximately 18%. The secondary anchors are degraded between 12 and 15%. The redundancy is compensating, but the load redistribution is causing secondary stress fractures. At the current rate, the primary anchor reaches critical in six to ten months. The secondary anchors follow within weeks."

"Worse than your previous estimate," Verath said.

"The degradation has accelerated. Our presence is part of it. The Dreamer's REM activity increases every time we enter the warehouse, and the REM activity degrades the seal." Mai pulled up another scan. "But I can also see something I couldn't see from outside. The seal's non-human mathematics include a self-repair function. The entity is maintaining its own containment from below. The Dreamer isn't just breathing. The breath is a maintenance protocol. Each exhalation reinforces the seal's structure from within."

"The Dreamer is helping to maintain the seal that contains it?"

"The Dreamer is maintaining the seal that it helped design. It's not fighting containment. It's supporting it. The seal works because the entity and the structure are cooperating." Mai's silver-blue eyes held something that was almost wonder. "The containment isn't adversarial. It's symbiotic. The Dreamer holds the seal together, and the seal holds the Dreamer still. They need each other."

Ace had been standing at the room's center, her shadow-pressure pressing against the walls and the floor and the seal below. Violet was resonating strongly here, more strongly than in the chamber above. The fragment could feel the proximity of its source. Not the Dreamer itself, but the architecture that connected the fragment to the whole. The seal was a network, and Violet was a node in that network, and being this close to the network's center was making the fragment vibrate with recognition.

Ace catalogued the things she couldn't cut. The seal. The walls. The floor. The entity below. Verath's people. The air itself. The only things in the room she could cut were the reinforcing bars on the seal's surface and a loose cable near the elevator.

She focused on the cable. It was irrelevant.

The focusing was regulation.

Shammy moved through the room slowly, her atmospheric sense reaching for gaps in the regulation the way Verath had predicted. The gaps were small. Microscopic fluctuations in the Dreamer's regulation that appeared between breaths, in the half-second pause between exhalation and inhalation, where the atmospheric control momentarily relaxed.

She found one. A gap. A space where the air was slightly less stable than the surrounding atmosphere. She focused on it. Expanded it. Read it.

"The Dreamer's atmospheric signature is different than I expected," Shammy said. "It's not just maintaining pressure. It's listening. The regulation responds to changes in the environment. When we entered, the regulation tightened. When Mai started scanning, the regulation shifted frequency. When Ace moved to the center, the regulation focused on her position. The Dreamer isn't maintaining a static environment."

She paused.

"It's maintaining us."

"Maintaining us?" Mai asked.

"Keeping us comfortable. The air temperature in this room is 22.3 degrees Celsius, which is thermally neutral for humans. The humidity is 45%, which is optimal for respiratory comfort. The air composition is cleaner than anything in Night City above ground. The Dreamer is regulating this environment for our benefit." Shammy's bright blue eyes were wide. "It's not just containing itself. It's hosting us. It wants us to be comfortable here."

"That's..." Mai paused. Her analytical framework had no category for a cosmic entity that practiced hospitality. "That's concerning."

"It's kind," Shammy said. "It's kind, and it's lonely, and it's been alone for three centuries, and we walked into its home and it made sure the temperature was comfortable."

The room's wrongness felt different now. The walls still leaned at angles that were two degrees off.

The corners still met at intersections that shouldn't exist. The floor still looked curved when it was flat. But the wrongness was being contextualized by Shammy's observation, and the context was that the room had been designed by something that was trying very hard to make humans comfortable in a space that wasn't built for human perception.

The triad worked together to map the seal. Ace read the shadow-containment vectors, her fragment allowing her to perceive containment geometry that Mai's instruments couldn't detect. Mai read the mathematical structure, building on Kessler's schematic and her own analysis. Shammy read the atmospheric pressure points, the places where the Dreamer's regulation was strongest and weakest, the nodes of the environmental control that underpinned the seal's function.

Together, they produced a complete map of the seal's current state. It was worse than Mai had calculated from outside. The primary anchor point was at 82% integrity. The secondary anchors were between 85 and 88%. The redundancy was holding, but the load redistribution was creating cascading stress.

The timeline wasn't eight to fourteen months. It was six to ten.

"The Dreamer moved during your visit," Verath said. She was standing at the edge of the room, near the elevator, watching them work with an expression that combined vigilance with something that was almost hope. "Not much. A slight shift in position. We've never detected movement before. The containment structure registered a displacement of less than a millimeter. But the sensors recorded it."

"What does that mean?" Ace asked.

"It means the Dreamer is aware of you. Not just your presence. Your identities. It recognized the fragment. It felt the atmospheric signature. It noticed the mathematical analysis." Verath's voice was measured but the measurement was showing strain. "In three centuries, the Dreamer has never moved. You've been here three days, and it's already adjusting its position."

"Adjusting toward us?" Mai asked.

"Adjusting toward the fragment. Toward Violet. The Dreamer knows its own kind." Verath looked at Ace. "I don't know what that means for you. But I know what it means for the seal. The movement puts additional stress on the primary anchor. The stress accelerates the degradation. The degradation shortens the timeline."

"How much?" Mai asked.

"My best estimate? Four to six months. Not eight. Not ten. Four to six. Maybe less if the Dreamer continues to respond to your presence."

The numbers landed like stones. Four to six months. Not a year. Not two seasons. A single season. The time it took for the weather to change.

Mai wiped the last of the blood from her face. The rune-burn was fading. Her hands had stopped trembling. The analytical framework had the data it needed, and the data was bad, and the framework was running on adrenaline and stubbornness, but it was running.

"I need to work faster," Mai said. "The redesign can't wait. I need to understand the seal's original design parameters. I need to know what the permanent structure was supposed to look like. I need to

know who built this and why they didn't come back.”

“The permanent structure was never designed,” Verath said. “The original architects built the temporary seal and left. The protocols we follow are their protocols. The maintenance procedures are their procedures. But there's no record of a permanent design. The seal was always meant to be replaced. It was never meant to be the solution.”

“Then we design the permanent structure ourselves,” Mai said. “With human mathematics. With human materials. With the triad's resonance as the stabilizing element.”

“You're proposing to redesign a containment structure built by non-human architects, using mathematics they developed, to hold an entity that helped them build it. And you want to do this with human resources in four to six months.”

“Yes.”

Verath stared at her. The stare lasted a long time.

“The cult will cooperate,” Verath said finally. “We'll give you access to the seal chamber, the sanctum, our maintenance data. We'll give you everything we have. But you need to understand: the Dreamer is not a puzzle to solve. It's a presence to survive. You can't outthink something that thinks in dimensions you can't perceive. You can only hold the line until something changes.”

“Something is changing,” Ace said from the room's center. Her shadow-pressure had stabilized, and Violet's resonance had settled into a background hum. “The Dreamer is changing. It's dreaming more actively. It's moving. It's reaching toward Violet. And it's making the room comfortable for us because it's lonely and we're the first people who've come close enough to feel in three centuries.”

Ace looked at Verath. “What happens when it decides to stop being patient?”

Nobody answered.

The Dreamer breathed. Seven-point-four seconds. The seal held. The room was wrong in ways that were becoming familiar, and the triad stood in the wrongness and mapped it, and the map showed a structure that was running out of time.

They left the sanctum the way they'd come. The elevator took forty-five seconds. Mai counted them. In forty-five seconds, the Dreamer would breathe approximately six times. Six breaths. Six exhalations that reinforced the seal. Six moments of patience from something that had been patient for three centuries and was starting to wonder why it was still waiting.

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

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