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## Chapter 12 — Horizontal Truth

Mai's map had grown beyond the borders of Verdant Springs.

She sat in the warehouse, notebook open, pages covered in calculations. The spiral city was just the center. She could see that now. The optimization had spread beyond the gates, reaching toward other towns, other valleys, other lives.

"How far?" Ace asked.

Mai traced the pattern with her pen. "Three towns to the north. Two to the south. Another beyond the eastern mountains. All showing the same signs."

"Clocks frozen?"

"Worse. People smiling. Memories fading. The same peace spreading outward."

Shammy moved to the window. The atmosphere outside had changed. The held breath releasing. The pressure shifting.

"It's a contagion," Shammy said. "The containment isn't stable. It has to grow to survive."

"Yes." Mai's pen moved faster. "The original fire was contained here. But the optimization, the erasure, the forgetting, it can't stop. It spreads to new places, containing new fires before they start."

"Preventing apocalypses?"

"Or creating them." Mai looked up. "Every new city the optimization reaches, something is erased there too. Something that might have been. Something that might have mattered."

Ace pressed her hand against her chest. "The presence at the center. It said the fire would have spread. That without the containment, everything would have burned."

"Or that's what it wants us to believe."

"You think it's lying?"

"I think we don't have enough data." Mai flipped to a fresh page. "The original Triad made a choice. They contained the fire and erased the memories. But we don't know what they were containing it from."

"Or who."

Mai nodded. "The Architect maintains the optimization. But who created it? Who decided that erasure was the answer?"

"The Triad."

"Then what happened to them? Why did they become the seal instead of just maintaining it?"

Ace was quiet. The pressure in her chest offered no answers.

"We need to find out," Mai said. "Before we make the same choice."

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They went to the library.

Not the public one, the optimized one with its perfect shelves and smiling staff. The real library. The one Kade had hidden in the warehouse's basement.

It was small. A few dozen books, salvaged from the erasure. Pages yellowed, bindings cracked, words that hurt to read.

Mai pulled out a volume. The title was faded: HISTORY OF VERDANT SPRINGS.

She opened it.

The first pages were normal. Settlement. Growth. Industry. The kind of history any town might have.

Then she reached 1847.

The words stopped.

Not erased. Stopped. As if the book itself couldn't continue. As if the history had been cut off mid-sentence.

But there were traces. Impressions where words had been. Shadows of paragraphs.

Mai pulled out her pen. Began to sketch over the page, following the impressions.

A shape emerged.

A drawing. Rough, desperate, made by someone who'd witnessed something they couldn't write.

Fire. A city burning. Three figures descending from above.

And beneath the figures, words pressed so hard they'd left marks:

THEY CAME TO SAVE US. THEY MADE US FORGET.

Mai traced the words. Her hand trembled.

"Ace."

Ace appeared beside her. Looked at the page.

"They came to save us," Ace read. "They made us forget."

"The original Triad. They made a choice." Mai's voice was tight. "But the choice wasn't just containment. It was erasure. They didn't just stop the fire. They stopped the memory of fire."

"Because memory feeds fire."

"Or because they wanted peace. Real peace. The kind that can only exist when you don't remember what you've lost."

Ace's hand pressed against her chest. The pressure confirmed. This was true. This was the secret the seal had been keeping.

"They became the jailers," Ace said. "And they made everyone else the prisoners."

"Yes."

"Then we're not just breaking the seal. We're breaking the prison."

Mai nodded. Her calculations were complete. Her map was drawn.

"The optimization spreads because it has to. It contains new fires by erasing new memories. It's not a solution. It's a metastasis. A disease that has to grow to survive."

"And the alternative?"

"Let the fire return. Let the memories return. Let people remember what happened to them."

Ace looked at the book. At the desperate words pressed into the page.

"Is that mercy?"

"I don't know. But it's truth."

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They gathered the resisters.

Mai spread her map. Showed them the spread. The towns to the north and south. The optimization reaching outward, containing, erasing.

"We're not just fighting for Verdant Springs," Mai said. "We're fighting for everyone the optimization will reach. Everyone whose memories will be taken. Everyone who will be made to forget."

Kade's face was hard. "How many?"

"I don't know. Thousands. Tens of thousands. More."

"And if we break the seal?"

"The fire returns here. The memories return here. But the spread stops."

Shammy moved to the front. Her hand was raised. Electricity flickered.

"I can channel it. Transform the seal into a valve. Let the memories return, but controlled. Slowly. So people can handle it."

"And the fire?"

Shammy looked at Mai. Mai looked at Ace.

“Fire can be managed,” Ace said. “If we know it's coming. If we're prepared.”

“That's a lot of ifs,” Kade said.

“It's all we have.”

The resisters looked at each other. At their scarred hands. At their fragmented memories.

“Do it,” Kade said. “Break the seal. Let us remember.”

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They moved at dusk.

The city was changing. Cracks in the perfect, dust on the windows, clocks that no longer matched. The resisters walked the streets, forcing themselves to remember. The optimization resisted. Shadows appeared, the same constructs that had attacked at the inn.

But this time, the Triad was ready.

Shammy's lightning cleared the path. Ace's hands found the shadows and crushed them. Mai directed them through the streets, her calculations perfect.

At the fountain, they stopped.

The seal was visible now. A barrier of light, holding back something immense. The presence from before was stronger. Waiting.

“Do it,” Kade said from behind them. The resisters had gathered. Watching. Ready.

Ace pressed her hand against the fountain rim.

Mai's pen traced the pattern.

Shammy's electricity built.

“Together,” Ace said.

And they went down.

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*end of chapter twelve*

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

