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Chapter 13 — Below

Ace descended.

The pressure in her chest plummeted. Through the stone, through the earth, through layers of time and violence and absence. The seal was open now. The barrier that had held for a hundred and seventy-nine years was weakening.

She could feel Mai above, mapping the spread. Shammy at the surface, electricity building. The three of them, connected by something deeper than distance.

Down here, the traces were stronger.

Violence. Battle. Fire. The impressions came in fragments. Not Ace's memories, but the city's. Echoes of what had happened here, preserved in the stone.

She passed through corridors that shouldn't exist. Rooms carved from bedrock. Walls scarred by flames that had been extinguished before they could finish burning.

The spiral shape Shammy had described was visible here. Not just in the architecture, but in the traces. Winding down, down, down. Toward the center.

Toward the source.

Ace pressed her hand against the wall. Read the stone.

This place had been built before the optimization. Before the erasure. Before the peace. It had been a shelter. A place where people had hidden from something.

From what?

The traces wouldn't say. The optimization had erased the name. But it couldn't erase the fear. The desperation. The knowledge that something was coming.

Ace counted her heartbeats. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen.

She went deeper.

The bottom of the spiral was a chamber.

Round. Stone. Dark. The air was wrong here. Not held, not suppressed. Waiting.

Ace stepped into the chamber.

The presence was there. Not a voice. Not a form. A weight. A pressure. The echo of what the original

Triad had become.

You came.

"I came."

To break the seal.

"To transform it. To change the containment from erasure to release."

The presence shifted. Considered.

That was not our choice.

"You chose erasure. You chose to make everyone forget."

We chose peace. We chose to stop the fire.

"By taking their memories."

By taking their pain.

Ace pressed her hand against her chest. The pressure confirmed. This was true. This was the choice they'd made.

"Is peace worth it? If people don't remember what they lost?"

They don't know what they lost. That is the mercy.

"That's not mercy. That's theft."

The presence was silent.

Ace moved to the center of the chamber. There was something there. A gap in the stone. A void. The place where the fire had been contained.

"The fire," she said. "What was it?"

The presence hesitated.

We don't know. We contained it before it could be understood.

"Then how do you know it was dangerous?"

Because it was spreading. Because it consumed everything it touched. Because the city was burning and we could not stop it.

"So you contained it. And erased the memory. And spread the containment to other places."

Yes.

"And called it peace."

Yes.

Ace's hand pressed against the void. Cold. Empty. The fire had been here, but it had been pushed out. Not extinguished. Displaced.

"The fire isn't gone," she said.

No.

"It's somewhere else. Waiting."

Yes.

"Then the seal didn't contain the fire. It just... moved it."

The presence shifted. For the first time, Ace felt something like fear.

We don't know. We can't know. The seal holds the memory of containment. Not the fire itself.

"Then where is the fire?"

Silence.

Ace thought of Mai's map. The optimization spreading. Reaching toward new cities. Containing new fires before they could start.

"Is the fire inside the optimization?"

The presence didn't answer.

But the pressure in Ace's chest confirmed it.

The seal hadn't contained the fire. It had become the fire. The optimization, the erasure, the forgetting, the spreading, was the fire transformed.

Not contained. Transmuted.

And every new city it reached was fuel.

Ace ascended.

The traces guided her. Vectors pointing upward, toward the surface. She emerged at the fountain, gasping, her hand pressed flat against the stone.

Mai was there. Shammy.

"The seal isn't what we thought," Ace said. "It's not containing the fire. It's..."

She couldn't finish. The pressure in her chest was overwhelming.

"What?" Mai asked.

"The optimization is the fire. The erasure. The forgetting." Ace's words came compressed, fragmented. "That's what the original Triad did. They didn't contain the flames. They became them."

They transformed the fire into something that spreads through peace instead of burning.”

Shammy's hand came down. Electricity flickered.

“Then breaking the seal...”

“Releases the fire. But the fire is already here. It's been here for a hundred and seventy-nine years. Eating memories. Erasing people. Spreading to new cities.”

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

“Then we don't break the seal,” Mai said. “We transform it again.”

“How?”

“Into something that doesn't spread. That doesn't erase. That contains the fire by acknowledging it, not denying it.”

“Is that possible?”

Mai looked at Shammy. Shammy looked at Ace.

“I don't know,” Mai said. “But we have to try.”

end of chapter thirteen

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