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Chapter 15 — The Memory

Mai found Miriam at the fountain.

The woman who'd witnessed the fire stood at the edge of the water, her face wet. The seal had transformed. The valve had opened. And the memories were coming back.

Miriam's memories.

"It's real." Miriam's voice cracked like old glass. "I remember it now. All of it."

Mai stood beside her. Notebook open. Pen moving.

"What do you remember?"

"The fire. The burning." Miriam's eyes went somewhere far away. "And before that... we were happy. My daughter. She was going to have a baby. I was making a rocking chair."

"Henrik's chair."

Miriam turned. "You know Henrik?"

"He was a carpenter. He remembered fragments. Your daughter."

"My daughter." The words came out broken. "Anna. Her name was Anna. She was pregnant when..."

She couldn't finish.

Mai waited. Counted her own breaths. One, two, three.

"What happened to Anna?"

Miriam's hand came up to her face. "She didn't make it. The fire took her. The baby too."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Miriam's eyes were fierce through the tears. Wet and raw and furious. "Just let me remember. I'd rather know she's gone than live as if she never existed."

Mai wrote that down. Data. Evidence. Proof.

"Are others remembering?"

"Yes." Miriam gestured at the plaza. People were gathering, confused, tearful. Real. "Everyone. The valve is opening. The past is—"

Her voice caught.

"Is it painful?"

"More than I can say." But Miriam's voice had gone steady. Steady the way only someone who'd been hollow could sound when finally filled. "But it's mine. My pain. My loss. My life."

Mai nodded. Her calculations confirmed it. The valve was working. The memories were returning at a rate the human mind could process. Not all at once. Not overwhelming. But real.

"Can you tell me more about the fire?" Mai asked. "About what caused it?"

Miriam's face shifted. Something darker crossed her features. Something that didn't want to be seen.

"I remember something else now. Something I'd forgotten."

"What?"

"The reason." Miriam's voice dropped. "The fire didn't start by accident. Someone set it."

Mai's pen moved faster.

"Who?"

"I don't know their face. But I remember the feeling. The intent. Someone wanted to burn this city."

"Why?"

Miriam closed her eyes. Concentrated. The fountain water reflected nothing. Just stillness, like everything else in this too-perfect place.

"There was something here. Something valuable. Someone wanted it destroyed."

"What was it?"

"A library." Miriam opened her eyes. "Not the public one. A real library. Hidden beneath the city."

Mai looked up. "Beneath the city?"

"Yes. In the same place you found the seal. The chamber below."

Mai's mind raced. The traces Ace had found. The spiral Shammy had described. The void where the fire had been contained. It connected. All of it connected.

"The fire wasn't random," Mai said. "It was targeted. Someone wanted to destroy something beneath the city."

"And the Triad stopped it."

"But they didn't just stop the fire. They contained it. Erased it." Mai's pen was barely keeping up with her thoughts. "And in doing so, they erased the evidence."

"Of what?"

"Of whatever was in that library."

They went below.

Mai and Ace. Shammy stayed above, maintaining the valve. The chamber was different now. Not sealed. Not hidden. Open. The kind of open that felt like a mouth waiting to swallow.

The traces were clearer. The fire had burned here. But beneath the fire, something else.

Books.

Not many. A few dozen. Surviving volumes from a library that had been destroyed.

Mai picked one up. The cover was burned. The pages were damaged. But the words were still there. Stubborn. Refusing to vanish.

She read aloud:

"The Third Triad came to Verdant Springs in search of the Source. The Source of what, we do not know. But they found something here. Something that changed them. Something that made them choose containment over freedom."

Ace's hand pressed against her chest. "The Source."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But the presence mentioned it. Below. Something that was never contained." Ace's voice went tight. Compressed. "Something the seal was really protecting."

"You think the fire was a distraction? That the real target was something else?"

"Yes."

Mai looked at the burned books. At the chamber that had been hidden for a hundred and seventy-nine years. At the words that refused to die.

"Then we need to find the Source. Before someone else does."

They emerged at dusk.

The city was transforming. The perfect peace was gone. In its place: grief, anger, confusion. But also hope. The real kind. The kind that costs something.

At the fountain, Shammy waited. The valve was stable. The memories were flowing.

"We found something," Mai said.

"What?"

"A library. Burned. But some books survived. And they mention something called the Source."

Shammy's hand came up. Reading the atmosphere.

"I feel it." Her voice was quiet. Too quiet. "Beneath everything. Something deeper than the seal. Something the fire was meant to destroy."

"Can you find it?"

Shammy closed her eyes. Reached out with her perception.

"Yes. But it's deep. Deeper than the chamber. Deeper than the traces."

"How deep?"

Shammy opened her eyes.

"Deep enough that we'll need all three of us to reach it."

They stood at the fountain.

The city spread around them. Not perfect. Not peaceful. Real. People were crying. People were screaming. People were remembering what they'd been made to forget.

And beneath it all, something deeper. The Source.

"Tonight," Ace said. "We go to the bottom."

"Together," Mai said.

"To find what they were really protecting," Shammy added.

And what might destroy them all.

end of chapter fifteen

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