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Chapter 16 — The Bond

Ace found Mai on the roof.

Not the inn. Another building. An abandoned warehouse near the edge of the city, the kind of place where the optimization hadn't bothered to look. Mai sat on the edge, her notebook open, her pen moving.

Ace sat beside her.

The pressure in her chest had changed. Not heavier. Different. Like something was loosening. Or something was about to snap.

"You're not sleeping," Ace said.

"Neither are you."

Ace nodded. Pressed her palm flat against her thigh. Grounding.

"The Source," Mai said. "Whatever it is, it's been here longer than the optimization. Longer than the Triad."

"How do you know?"

"The books. They mention the Third Triad came here searching for something. Which means the Source was here before them."

Ace looked at Mai. At her partner's face, tired, focused, beautiful in the moonlight that was too bright because nothing in this city was allowed to be imperfect, not even the dark.

"Are you scared?"

Mai's pen stopped. "Yes."

"Me too."

Mai turned to her. Their eyes met. Depth and horizontal. Pressure and pattern.

"I don't know what's going to happen," Mai said. "When we go down. What we'll find."

"No."

"But I know I don't want to face it alone."

Ace's hand found Mai's. Contact. Grounding. The one thing that felt real in a city where nothing else was.

"You won't. I'll be there."

"I know." Mai's voice was quiet. Careful. "But promise me. Whatever happens, whatever we find down there, we face it together."

Ace squeezed her hand. "Together."

They stayed on the roof.

The city below was awake. People moving, talking, processing their returned memories. The sound of crying and laughing and screaming mixed together into something that sounded almost like a city should sound. Almost.

But on the roof, it was quiet.

"I've been thinking," Mai said. "About the original Triad. About what they chose."

"And?"

"They chose containment. They chose to sacrifice themselves to stop the fire." Mai's voice went careful. Analytical. The more precise she became, the more she was feeling. "But they also chose to take away everyone's memories. To make them forget."

"Because they thought it was mercy."

"Or because they were afraid." Mai turned to Ace. "What if they weren't saving people from pain? What if they were saving themselves from guilt?"

Ace considered this. The pressure in her chest shifted.

"Guilt?"

"The fire destroyed the city. People died. Families were lost." Mai's voice was steady. Too steady. "If the Triad had let everyone remember, they would have been blamed. They would have been held responsible."

"So they erased it."

"And made themselves the seal. Forever. To make sure no one ever found out what they'd really done."

Ace's hand tightened on Mai's.

"You think they were hiding something."

"I think we don't know enough yet." Mai looked at the stars above. Too bright. Too clear. The kind of sky that only existed because someone had decided it should. "But the Source might tell us. Whatever they were looking for, whatever they found, it's still down there."

"And we're going to find it."

"Yes."

The silence stretched.

Ace leaned against Mai. Contact. Pressure. Realness.

"I'm glad you're here," Ace said.

Mai's arm came around her. "Me too."

"I couldn't do this alone. The depth. The traces. The weight."

"You're not alone." Mai's voice was soft. "You have me. You have Shammy."

"I know." Ace's voice compressed. Tight. The words coming out smaller than she meant them to. "But sometimes I forget. The pressure gets so heavy. I forget there's anything else."

"Then let me remind you." Mai's hand found Ace's cheek. "Every time you forget."

Ace looked at her partner. At the analytical mind that made sense of chaos. At the steady presence that anchored her depth.

"I love you."

The words came out compressed. Simple. Real.

Mai's eyes softened. "I love you too."

They kissed. Soft. Brief. Grounding.

And then they sat together, watching the city below, preparing for what they'd find in the deep.

Shammy found them an hour later.

She climbed onto the roof, her height blocking the stars. Her hand was raised. Reading.

"The atmosphere's changing," she said. No playfulness. No warmth. Just flat information. "The Source is stirring."

"Stirring?" Mai asked.

"Waking. Like it knows we're coming." Shammy sat beside them. "The presence, the vertical one, told me something else. About the Source."

"What?"

"The original Triad didn't just find it." Shammy's voice was quiet. "They made it. They created the Source. And then they tried to destroy it."

"Failed?"

"Partially. They contained it. But they couldn't erase it. So they erased everything else instead."

Ace's hand pressed against her chest. The pressure confirmed.

"Then the fire wasn't random," Ace said. "The Source was the target. They burned their own city to contain what they'd made."

"And then erased the memory to hide what they'd done."

They sat in silence. The weight of it settling like sediment. Like ash.

"Tonight," Shammy said. "We go down. We find the Source. We learn the truth."

"And then?"

Shammy's hand came up. Electricity flickered across her knuckles. No play in it. Just voltage.

"Then we decide what to do with it."

The night deepened.

The city below was exhausted. People retreating to their homes, processing what they'd remembered. The valve was working. The memories were flowing. But the cost was high.

On the roof, the Triad sat together.

Depth. Horizontal. Vertical.

Three vectors. Three perceptions. Three keys to the same lock.

"Whatever we find," Ace said. "We face it together."

"Together," Mai echoed.

"Together," Shammy confirmed.

And they prepared for the deepest descent of all.

end of chapter sixteen

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