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## Chapter 22 — The Anchor

Shammy's storm was building again.

Not the same way. Not the overwhelming release that had transformed the seal. This was different. Steady. Continuous. Like a wire heating from the inside.

The fire was coming through her.

Mai found her at the edge of the plaza. Hand raised. Electricity flickering between her fingers, jumping, dying, jumping again. The air around Shammy tasted like copper. Hair lifting. Sparks crawling up her forearm like something trying to get out.

“Shammy.”

Nothing. Eyes distant. Fixed on something Mai couldn't see and didn't want to name.

“Shammy.” Mai moved closer. Her hand found Shammy's arm.

The electricity spiked. Mai gasped.

She didn't let go.

“I'm here.” Mai's voice came out steadier than she felt. “I'm the anchor. Remember?”

Shammy's eyes focused. Something shifted behind them. The storm turning from flood to blade.

“Mai.”

“Yes.”

“The fire.” Shammy's jaw was tight. “It's coming through me. The Source, Vera's key, I'm the conduit.”

“I know. I can feel it.”

“You need to let go.” The words came fast. “It's dangerous.”

“No.” Mai's grip tightened. “You said yourself. I'm the anchor. When the storm builds, I hold you.”

“This isn't just a storm.” Shammy's voice cracked. “This is the fire. The transformation. Everything the Source was meant to release.”

“Then I hold you through that too.”

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They stood together.

The electricity kept crackling. The atmosphere kept charging. Mai held on.

"I'm scared," Shammy said.

"I know."

"I might lose control. The storm might take over."

"Then I'll bring you back."

"How?"

"Same way I always do." Mai's hand moved to Shammy's face. Fingertips tracing. "Contact. Presence. Reality. I map your features. Your expression. Your reality. And I hold onto it."

Shammy closed her eyes.

The electricity peaked. A sound like tearing silk.

Then settled.

"How are you doing that?"

"Horizontal mapping." Mai's thumb traced the line of Shammy's cheekbone. "I'm tracing the pattern of your face. Giving your mind something stable to hold onto."

Shammy's lips curved. Almost.

"You're always analyzing."

"It's how I love."

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The storm built.

The fire approached. The Source pulsed. Shammy stood at the center, conduit, channel, the hole through which transformation would pour.

Ace appeared beside them. Her hand pressed flat against Shammy's other arm. Hard.

"Depth." Ace's voice was compressed. "I feel it too. The traces. The fire coming through you."

"Can you hold it?"

"No." A beat. "But I can feel it with you. Share the weight."

Ace's hand pressed harder. The pressure in her chest resonated with the storm in Shammy's. Two different kinds of weight. Same source.

Three vectors. Three perceptions. Connected.

"Whatever comes," Mai said, "we face it together."

"Together," Ace echoed.

“Together,” Shammy breathed.

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The fire reached them.

Not flames. Not heat.

Change.

Everything that had been hidden, every memory, every loss, every moment of grief that had been erased, poured through Shammy. Through the conduit. Through the third path.

And the city felt it.

Every person who had been optimized. Every person who had forgotten. Every person who had been made to live in a peace they hadn't chosen.

They remembered.

All at once. All together. All real.

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Mai held on.

Her hand on Shammy's arm. Her mind mapping her partner's features. Her presence an anchor against the storm.

She felt Shammy's fear. Felt the electricity course through both of them, sharp, bright, not quite pain. Felt the fire transform everything it touched.

She held on.

“Stay with me,” Mai said.

“I'm here.” Strained. Barely. “I'm here.”

“The storm will pass.”

“I know.”

“And when it does—”

“I'll still be here.”

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Hours passed.

The fire transformed. The memories returned. The city woke from its long sleep.

And Shammy's storm slowly settled.

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The electricity faded. The atmosphere calmed. The conduit closed.

Shammy opened her eyes.

"It's done."

"The fire?"

"Transformed. Integrated." Her voice was hoarse. "People are remembering. But gently. The third path."

Mai's hand came up to Shammy's face. Touched her cheek.

"You did it."

"We did it." Soft. "You held me. You didn't let go."

"I never will."

Shammy leaned into Mai's touch. The storm inside her was quiet. Finally.

Ace stood beside them. Her hand dropped from Shammy's arm.

"The city's changed," Ace said.

"Yes."

"People are crying. Screaming. Laughing."

"Yes."

"Is this better?"

Mai looked at the plaza. People emerging from buildings. Faces showing real emotion for the first time in a hundred and seventy-nine years. Not all of it beautiful. Some of it terrible. All of it real.

"Yes," she said. "This is better."

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They stood together.

The Triad. Three vectors. Three keys.

The fire had come. The memories had returned. The cost had been paid.

And the city, the real city, the remembered city, had finally woken up.

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*end of chapter twenty-two*

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