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Chapter 24 — Depth

Ace went down.

Not into the stone this time. Deeper. Into the memory of the fire. Into the place where the original burning still echoed, still pressed against the inside of her ribs like something trying to claw its way out.

The Source showed her everything. The original burning. The choice that had been made. The containment that had become a prison.

And something else.

The fire hadn't been an accident.

Someone had set it.

The Source showed her a face. Not Kira. Not Marcus. Not Vera.

Someone else.

A fourth figure. Standing at the edge of the burning city. Watching. Not running. Not helping. Just watching.

“Who is that?”

The Source didn't answer. But the pressure in Ace's chest intensified. Pushed. Like a hand between her shoulder blades.

She pressed deeper. Past the images. Past the memories. To the truth beneath.

The fourth figure was part of the original Triad.

Not one of the three who had descended. Someone who had been there before. Someone who had called them. Someone who had been waiting for them to arrive.

The fire had been a test. A trial. A way to see what the Triad would choose when everything burned.

And the fourth figure had been watching.

Ace emerged.

Mai and Shammy were waiting. The Source was stable. The city was integrating.

"There's someone else," Ace said.

"What do you mean?"

"The original Triad wasn't alone. There was a fourth figure. Someone who set the fire. Someone who was testing them."

"Testing them for what?"

"I don't know." Ace's hand pressed against her chest. The pressure there was different now. Heavier. "But I saw their face. And they're still here."

Mai's pen moved. "Where?"

"Watching. Waiting." A breath. "They've been here all along. The optimization wasn't just the Triad's choice. It was theirs too."

They searched the city.

Ace followed the traces. The pressure led her through streets that had changed. The perfect peace dissolving. The real history emerging through the cracks like water through broken plaster.

At the edge of the city, beyond the gate, they found her.

A woman. Old. Weathered. Real. Standing at the place where the original fire had started. Like she'd been standing there for a very long time.

"You found me," she said.

"Who are you?"

"I was the one who called the Triad. The one who set the fire. The one who needed to know what they would choose."

"Why?"

"To see if the Source could be trusted. If the ones who found it would choose containment or release." The woman's eyes were clear. Steady. "If the future could be changed. Or if it was fixed."

"And what did you learn?"

"That it's never fixed. Every choice matters. Every path is possible." Her eyes went to the Source above. "You found the third path. The one Vera saw. The one that was hidden."

"We transformed it."

"Yes." Something shifted in her face. Almost a smile. "You did what the original Triad couldn't. You chose truth."

The woman's name was Cora.

She had been the keeper of the Source before the Triad arrived. She had watched them choose containment. Had watched the optimization spread like a stain across the city. Had watched a hundred and seventy-nine years of forgetting.

And she had waited.

"For what?" Ace asked.

"For you. For the ones who would find the third path." Cora's voice was old. Not tired. Just old. "For the moment when the fire could be transformed instead of contained."

"How did you know we would come?"

"I didn't. But the Source showed me a possibility. A future where someone would choose differently. I waited for that future."

"And if we hadn't come?"

"Then the fire would have returned anyway. The containment would have failed. And the cost would have been paid without the third path."

Cora walked with them back to the plaza.

The city was alive now. Not the false life of the optimization but real life. People talking, arguing, crying, laughing. Not all of it beautiful. Most of it not.

"The third path changes everything," Cora said.

"How?"

"The Source is open. People can see their futures. They can choose. And every choice changes the web."

"Is that dangerous?"

"It's reality. The Source was never meant to be contained. It was meant to be used. To help people choose."

"And the fire?"

"Was a test. One that the original Triad failed." Cora looked at the plaza. At the people gathering. "They ran from their choice instead of facing it."

"And now?"

"Now the test is over. The fire has transformed." She looked at the Source above. "The future is open."

end of chapter twenty-four

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