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Chapter 25 — Vertical

Shammy felt the barrier break.

Not the Source. That was stable. Something else. Something beneath the transformation. Something old and stubborn that didn't want to let go.

The vertical axis of the optimization. The part that had held the atmosphere, the pressure, the storm. It was fighting back.

She stood in the plaza. Hand raised. Electricity crackling. The Source pulsed above but below, something was pushing against the third path. Hard.

The optimization wasn't dead. It was transforming. And transformation was violent.

"Shammy." Mai was beside her. "What's happening?"

"The vertical containment. It's trying to reform. To undo what we've done."

"Can you stop it?"

"I can try."

Shammy closed her eyes. Reached for the storm inside her. For Vera's key. For the vertical axis that had been passed down through a hundred and seventy-nine years of prisoners and forgetting and things too smooth to be real.

She pushed back.

The atmosphere cracked.

Not literally. But in the way that mattered. The pressure that had held Verdant Springs in its grip for so long was pushing against the third path. Trying to contain the fire again. Trying to erase the memories.

Shammy's electricity met it.

Lightning against shadow. Storm against stasis. Transformation against containment.

The Source amplified her.

The web of futures shimmered. Every choice that had been made, the people who had chosen truth, the resisters who had held on, the original Triad who had left a key, all of it added to her power.

Shammy wasn't alone. She was part of a pattern. A convergence. A vertical axis that stretched back

centuries.

Ace felt it.

The depth in her chest resonated with Shammy's storm. The pressure wasn't just her own. It was connected. Part of the same web the Source showed.

She pressed her hand against the ground. Went down.

The traces of the optimization were dissolving. But not passively. They were fighting. Trying to reform. Like a body rejecting a transplant.

Ace felt the fear. The ancient terror that had driven the original Triad to choose containment. It pressed against her ribs. Cold and heavy.

She chose differently.

Not because she wasn't afraid. Because she was. And she chose anyway.

Mai mapped it.

The web was shifting. Futures flickering in and out of possibility. Every choice Shammy made changed the shape. Every depth Ace reached changed the structure.

And Mai traced it all.

Her pen moved across her notebook. Sketching the battle. Recording the transformation. Lines and nodes and intersections that kept trying to rewrite themselves.

The horizontal axis, the spread of the optimization, the network of contained cities, was dissolving too. Not from outside pressure.

From within.

Every person who chose truth weakened the containment.

Every memory that returned eroded the erasure.

And the third path held.

Shammy's storm peaked.

Electricity poured out of her. Not destructive. Constructive. Transforming. The air around her hummed and cracked and rebuilt itself.

The optimization dissolved.

Not all at once. Not completely. But the barrier that had held Verdant Springs for a hundred and

seventy-nine years finally broke.

And the city breathed.

Not the held breath of containment. Real breath. Real air. Real atmosphere. The kind that changes direction without warning.

Shammy opened her eyes.

The sky above was clear. The Source pulsed. And the pressure was gone.

Mai's hand found Shammy's.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes." Hoarse. "It's done. The vertical containment is broken."

"And the Source?"

"Stable. Open. Showing everyone their choices."

"Good."

Ace appeared from the direction of the fountain. Her face was pale but steady.

"The depth is clear too. The traces are dissolving. The optimization is gone."

"Gone?"

"Transformed. Into what we chose." A breath. "Truth. Memory. The third path."

They stood together in the plaza.

The city around them was waking. Not from sleep. From a prison that had lasted a hundred and seventy-nine years.

People were crying. People were laughing. People were holding each other like they'd forgotten how and just remembered.

And every person was real.

"It's over," Ace said.

"No." Mai's voice was soft. "It's beginning. The future is open now. People will have to choose. Every day. Every moment."

"Is that better?"

Shammy raised her hand. Electricity flickered. Gentle. Controlled. Present.

“Yes,” she said. “That's what makes it real.”

end of chapter twenty-five

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