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Chapter 28 — Tomorrow

Morning came.

Not the too-bright, too-rehearsed morning of the optimization. A real morning. The sun rising over a city that was waking up, not from false peace, but from a long sleep.

Ace stood at the fountain.

The stone was different now. Not smooth. Not perfect. Weathered. Real. The inscription still read 1847 but the fountain looked its age now. Like it had lived through something.

Mai appeared beside her. Notebook closed. Pen still.

Shammy emerged from the plaza. Her hand came up. Not electricity this time. Just a wave.

“Are we ready?” Mai asked.

“No.” Ace's voice was compressed. Real. “But we're here.”

The city gathered.

Not everyone. Some had left. Some had chosen forgetting. Some had chosen to carry the truth elsewhere.

But many had stayed.

Henrik. Miriam. Cora. The Architect, who had a name now, not just a title. Eleanor.

Kade's widow. Anna. The resisters who had survived.

And all the people who had chosen the third path.

“The Source will stay open,” Mai said. “It's part of the city now. Part of the world. People will see their possibilities. They'll choose.”

“And what if they choose wrong?”

“There is no wrong. There's only what they choose. And what comes from it.”

“Like us.”

“Yes. Like us.”

Shammy raised her hand. The atmosphere shifted. Not the held breath of containment. A real breath. A real wind. The kind that changes direction when it wants to.

"The storm is gone," she said. "Not suppressed. Not contained. Gone. Transformed into something else."

"What?"

"The future."

Ace looked at the sky.

The Source pulsed above. Not a hole anymore. A window. A way forward.

"We came here looking for answers," she said. "What happened to this city. Why it was perfect. What was buried."

"And what did you find?"

"That perfect is a prison." A breath. "That peace without truth is a cage. That the only way forward is through."

"Through what?"

"Through the fire. Through the change. Through the choice."

They stood together at the center of the plaza.

The fountain behind them. The Source above. The city around. The future ahead.

Three vectors. Three perceptions. Three keys.

And the web of possibility stretching out in every direction.

"Where do we go from here?" Shammy asked.

"Anywhere," Mai said. "The Source is open. The path is clear."

"And Verdant Springs?"

"Stays. Changes. Grows." Ace's hand pressed against her chest. "Like everything else."

The clocks began to sync.

Not to the same time. To the same direction.

Forward.

The Triad left the plaza.

Not because they were done. Because they had just begun.

The Source was open. The truth was free. The future was waiting.

And they would face it.

Together.

In the weeks that followed, Verdant Springs transformed.

Not into perfection. Not into peace. Into something better. Something messier.

A city that remembered. A city that chose. A city that lived.

The people argued. They cried. They laughed. They built and rebuilt and built again, sometimes in the same spot, sometimes getting it wrong twice.

And every morning, the sun rose over a city that was waking up.

Not from the optimization.

From reality.

The Triad traveled.

To other cities. Other optimized places. Other people who needed to choose.

They carried the third path. The possibility of truth. The chance to face the fire.

And everywhere they went, people chose.

Not all the same way. Not all at once. Individually. Each person facing the Source, seeing their futures, making their own decisions.

Years passed.

Verdant Springs grew. Changed. Became something the original Triad had never imagined.

A city of choice. A city of truth. A city where the fire had come and gone, leaving only transformation in its wake.

And at the center, the Source still pulsed.

Showing possibilities. Offering paths. Waiting for those who would choose.

On the anniversary of their arrival, the Triad returned.

Ace. Mai. Shammy. Older now. Changed. But together.

They stood at the fountain. The same fountain where they'd first felt the wrongness of the city. The same fountain where they'd chosen the third path.

The stone was worn. The inscription faded. But the water still flowed.

Above, the Source pulsed.

"What do you see?" Ace asked.

Mai's pen moved. "Possibilities. Futures. The same thing we've always seen."

"And what do they show?"

"Everything. Nothing." She looked up. "Whatever we choose to make of them."

Shammy raised her hand.

The atmosphere shifted. Not a storm. Not a pressure. Just air. Just wind. Just reality.

"The fire is gone," she said. "Transformed. Integrated."

"And what remains?"

"We do. This city. These people. The choices we've made."

"And the ones we'll make."

"Yes." A pause. "Those too."

Ace pressed her hand against the fountain rim.

The pressure in her chest was different now. Not a weight. Not a trace. A presence. A connection.

To Mai. To Shammy. To the city they'd saved. To the future they'd chosen.

"The third path," she said.

"Yes."

"Is it over?"

"No." Mai's hand found Ace's. "It's just beginning."

The sun set over Verdant Springs.

Not the too-bright, too-rehearsed sunset of the optimization. A real sunset. Orange and pink and gold, bleeding into purple at the edges.

And in the fading light, the Triad stood together.

Depth. Horizontal. Vertical.

Three vectors. Three perceptions. Three keys.

Facing tomorrow.

Together.

end of chapter twenty-eight

EPILOGUE

The clocks in Verdant Springs began to sync.

Not to the same time. But to the same direction.

Forward.

And every person who had chosen the third path, who had faced the fire and come through it, carried that direction with them.

Into the cities beyond. Into the lives they would live. Into the futures they would choose.

The Source remained. The possibility remained. The third path remained.

For anyone who was willing to face it.

For anyone who was willing to choose.

For anyone who was willing to believe that truth was worth the cost.

The End

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