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## Chapter 23 — The Source

Mai mapped the center.

The Source was visible now. Not just a point of light but a shape. A nexus where futures converged. Every choice, every outcome, every possibility threading together like veins.

She stood at the edge of the chamber below the fountain. The place where Kira, Marcus, and Vera had first found the convergence. The place where they had made their choice.

The Source showed her everything.

“You're seeing it?” Ace asked.

“Yes.”

“What does it look like?”

“Like...” Mai struggled. Words weren't built for this. “Like a web. Every thread is a choice. Every intersection is a person. And at the center—”

“What?”

“Us.”

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The Source showed Mai the Triad.

Not just the current one. Every Triad that had ever been. Every group of three who had found a nexus and made a choice, stretching back further than she could count.

And every choice had led here. To this moment. To this city. To this fire.

“We're not the first,” Mai said.

“We know that.”

“No. I mean we're not just following the original Triad. We're part of a pattern. Every Triad faces a fire. Every Triad makes a choice. And every choice shapes what comes next.”

“What choice did the others make?”

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. Sketching the web. Lines and intersections. Nodes branching into nodes.

“Most chose containment. One chose release. One chose destruction.” She paused. “And the original Triad—”

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“What?”

“They chose both. Containment and release. They couldn't decide, so they split the difference. They contained the fire but left a key. They erased the memories but preserved the Source.”

“They couldn't commit.”

“No. They were afraid of both options. So they created a third that wasn't really a choice at all. Containment that would eventually fail. A prison with a key.”

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Ace pressed her hand against the wall. Read the stone.

“The fire was a test.”

“What?”

“The Source showed the original Triad a fire. Not a real fire. A potential one. A choice they would have to make. And when they saw it, they were afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Themselves.” Ace's voice was flat. “Afraid of what they would choose. So they created containment to prevent themselves from ever having to choose.”

“But containment became the fire.”

“Yes.” A beat. “The optimization. The erasure. Everything they feared became real because they ran from it.”

Mai's pen stopped. Her eyes went distant.

“The Source doesn't just show futures. It creates them. By showing possibilities, it makes them real.”

“Then we created the third path by choosing it.”

“Yes. And the original Triad created containment by fearing it.”

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Shammy appeared at the entrance.

The atmosphere in the chamber shifted. The vertical axis adding its perception to depth and horizontal. The air tasted different when she entered. Charged.

“The Source is stable now,” Shammy said. “People are integrating their memories. The third path is working.”

“For now,” Mai said.

“What do you mean?”

“The Source is still showing possibilities. Every person in the city, and beyond, is seeing their futures.”

And every choice they make changes the web.”

“Is that dangerous?”

“It's reality.” Mai's pen moved again. “The Source isn't a tool. It's a mirror. It reflects what we choose back at us. And we've chosen truth.”

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

“Vera's key is part of me now. I can feel what she felt. She wanted the third path. She wanted release.”

“But she was overruled.”

“Yes.” Quiet. “She had to wait. A hundred and seventy-nine years. For us.”

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They stood before the Source.

The nexus pulsed. The web shimmered. At the center, their own threads, woven together.

“We need to stabilize it,” Mai said. “The Source can't stay open forever. People need time to process what they've remembered.”

“How?”

“The same way we opened it. Depth to feel the shape. Horizontal to map the structure. Vertical to channel the flow.”

“Together,” Ace said.

“Yes. Together.”

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They approached the Source.

Ace pressed her hand against the light. The pressure in her chest resonated with the nexus. Something old and deep.

Mai's pen traced patterns in the air. Mapping the web. Directing the flow. The structure of possibility under her fingertips.

Shammy raised both hands. Electricity poured through her. Not destructive now. Constructive. Building.

The Source responded.

The web stabilized. The futures settled into focus. Not fixed. Not erased. Present. Available.

At the center, the Triad stood.

Three vectors. Three perceptions. Three keys.

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Holding open the door.

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“It's done,” Mai said.

The Source hummed. The web glowed. And around them, the city was waking. Not from the optimization but from the fire. From the transformation.

People crying. People laughing. People holding each other in streets that had forgotten what holding meant.

And every person was real.

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*end of chapter twenty-three*

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