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Chapter 27 — The Choice

They stood at the center of the plaza.

The fountain behind them. The Source above. The city around. And before them, the people of Verdant Springs. Every person who had been contained, erased, optimized.

Waiting.

“The Source is open,” Ace said. “It shows possibilities. Futures. What comes next.”

“But we have to choose,” someone said. Kade's widow. Mai had found her in the integration, sitting alone, hands shaking. “We have to decide.”

“Yes.”

“What happens if we choose wrong?”

“There is no wrong.” Ace's voice was compressed. Flat. Real. “There's only what you choose. And what comes from it.”

The Source pulsed.

Images appeared. Not just for the Triad but for everyone. The futures that were possible. The paths that could be taken.

Some saw peace. Some saw conflict. Some saw the fire returning, contained and transformed, but still change.

And everyone saw themselves.

Not who they had been. Who they could be.

“What do we choose?” a man asked. Henrik.

“You choose what feels true,” Mai said. “The Source shows possibilities. You pick the one that resonates.”

“And if none of them do?”

“Then you make your own path. The Source shows what might be. You decide what will be.”

One by one, they chose.

Not all at once. Not uniformly. Individually. Each person, facing the Source, making their own decision. Some quickly. Some taking a long time.

Some chose to stay in Verdant Springs. To rebuild the city. Not perfect but real.

Some chose to leave. To carry the truth to other places. Other optimized cities.

Some chose to forget. The cost was too high. They wanted the peace back, even knowing it was false.

And most chose the third path.

To remember. To feel. To face what came.

The Source stabilized.

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

At the center, the Triad stood.

"We didn't solve everything," Shammy said.

"No. We opened a door." Ace's hand pressed against her chest. "The people have to walk through it."

"And the fire?"

"Is part of them now. The transformation. The change."

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. Recording the choice. Every choice.

"This is the third path," she said. "Not containment. Not erasure. But truth."

"And what comes next?"

"We face it. Together."

The city chose.

Not perfect. Not peaceful. But real.

And the Source, the nexus of possibility, held open the door.

For everyone who wanted to walk through.

end of chapter twenty-seven

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