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Chapter 20 — Spread

Mai's map was growing.

Not just Verdant Springs anymore. The optimization had spread beyond the city. She'd traced it to three towns north, two south, one beyond the eastern mountains. And now that the Source was open, she could see the full extent of what had been contained. The scale of it.

"The optimization didn't just erase memories," Mai said. "It created a network. Connected nodes. Each city feeding into the next."

They stood in the plaza. The Architect was beside them, no longer the perfect custodian, but a woman remembering, grieving, facing. Looking less perfect by the hour. Looking more real.

"How many people?" Ace asked.

"In the network? Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands." Mai's pen moved across the page. "Everyone who was optimized. Everyone who forgot."

"And the Source?"

"Is showing them their choices. All of them. At once."

Shammy raised her hand. Read the atmosphere.

"The fire is moving. Through the network. From the original point here, spreading outward."

"How fast?"

"Fast." Shammy's voice was flat. "Days. Maybe less."

Mai's pen moved across her notebook. Calculating. Mapping. The more precise her calculations became, the more frightened she was.

"Then we need to reach the other cities. Warn them. Help them choose before the fire arrives."

"Can we?" Ace asked.

"We have to try."

They split up.

Mai went north, to the towns closest to Verdant Springs. Ace went south. Shammy stayed at the center, maintaining the connection through the Source.

The Architect accompanied Mai.

"You don't have to come," Mai said.

"I do." The Architect's voice was steady now. Steadier than it should have been. "If I'm going to face what I've done, I need to see the others. The ones I optimized."

"It will hurt."

"I know." A pause. "But hiding from it only made it worse. I see that now."

They walked out of Verdant Springs, through the too-white gate, past the fields that should have shown wear but didn't, toward the first town on Mai's map.

It was called Ashwick.

And it was wrong.

Ashwick had been optimized.

The streets were clean. The people smiled. The clocks, all of them, showed different times. The same wrongness. The same held-breath peace. But smaller. Tighter. The optimization had swept through quickly, erasing everything.

"What happened here?" Mai asked.

The Architect's face went pale. "I did this. During one of my maintenance cycles. They were at risk. The fire would have reached them."

"What fire?"

"There was a sickness. A plague. It would have spread." The Architect's voice faltered. "I optimized it away. Along with everyone who remembered."

Mai's pen stopped. Her hand trembled.

"You erased a plague?"

"I erased the knowledge of it. The people who had it. The memories of those who died."

"How many?"

"Three hundred." The Architect's voice was barely audible. "In a town of a thousand."

Mai stared at the perfect streets. The smiling people. The clocks showing their wrong times.

"You killed them."

"No." The Architect's voice cracked. "I contained them. They're still here. Still alive. Just... not remembered."

"That's not alive. That's erased."

The Architect's face twisted. "I know. I know now. But then... I thought I was saving them."

They walked through Ashwick.

The Source was reaching here now, through the network Mai had mapped. People were stopping. Their smiles flickering. Their eyes going distant.

Seeing their choices.

“What do we do?” Mai asked.

“We help them choose. Like we did in Verdant Springs.”

“How?”

“The third path. Acknowledge the truth. Let the memories return. Face what was lost.”

The Architect moved to the center of town. The fountain here was smaller. No inscription. No date. Just a simple stone basin, worn smooth by a century and a half of water that flowed because it was supposed to.

She raised her hand. A key, similar to Shammy's, appeared on her palm.

“This is what I used. To maintain the optimization. To keep the peace.”

“You have a key?”

“I was the caretaker. I needed access.” The Architect's voice was quiet. “I can use it now. To open instead of close.”

She pressed her palm against the fountain.

The Source pulsed through Ashwick.

And the people remembered.

It wasn't gentle.

The memories came back all at once. The plague. The dying. The loved ones who had been erased, who had existed and then hadn't, who had been reduced to a blank space where a person used to be.

Screams filled the streets. People collapsed. The perfect peace shattered like glass.

Mai moved through the chaos. Helping where she could. Recording everything.

The Architect stood at the center, her hand still pressed against the stone.

“I did this,” she said. “I took their grief and called it mercy.”

“But now they can choose,” Mai said.

“Is it better?” The Architect's voice was raw. “To feel this pain instead of the peace?”

"Yes." Mai's voice was steady. Precise. "Because it's real."

The Architect's tears fell. "I don't know if I can bear it."

"You don't have to bear it alone."

By evening, Ashwick was different.

Not perfect. Not peaceful. Real.

People gathered in the square, not smiling, not blank. Crying. Holding each other. Remembering. The fire had reached here, the change, the transformation. The past burning away to make room for what could come.

And the people had chosen.

Not all of them. Some collapsed under the weight of what they remembered. Some fled. Some raged at the sky, at the Architect, at the Source.

But most stayed. Faced. Endured.

"It's like Verdant Springs," Mai said.

"Yes." The Architect's voice was hoarse. "The third path. It works."

"We have more towns to reach."

"I know."

"Can you keep going?"

The Architect looked at the sky. The Source pulsed above.

"I have to. This is my fault. All of it." Her voice was steady again. Steadier. "I need to see it through."

Mai nodded. Her pen was ready.

"Then let's go."

They walked out of Ashwick.

Behind them, the town was transforming. The perfect peace dissolving. The real life emerging. Ugly and raw and alive.

Ahead, more towns. More optimizations. More people who needed to choose.

The fire was spreading.

But so was the truth.

end of chapter twenty

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