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## Chapter 13: Cost

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: The ascent completes, but something came through -->

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The Foundation quarantined them.

Standard protocol. Something had come through the gate. Something was loose. The readings were anomalous, the seals were broken, and seventeen people had died in the attempt to contain whatever had been waiting in Kur. Protocol demanded observation. Documentation. The careful cataloging of anyone who might have been exposed to something that shouldn't exist.

"The containment team will monitor." Reyes's voice was controlled. Wrong. The woman had been holding her breath for eighteen months, and now that the gate was sealed and the triad had returned, she still couldn't let it out. Her shoulders were rigid, her jaw tight, her breathing shallow in a way that suggested she had forgotten how to take a full breath somewhere in the long months of watching the seals crack. "You came through the gates. You were in proximity to the anomaly. We need to observe."

"Observe what?" Ace sat in the quarantine cell. The same gray walls as everywhere else in the Foundation, the same recycled air, the same feeling of containment that she had learned to ignore years ago. "The gates are closed. Ereshkigal is gone. The queen of the underworld has been released. What exactly are you observing?"

"Whatever came through with you." Reyes's voice caught. "Something followed you. The atmospheric readings are—" She stopped. The words were tangling in her throat, caught up with eighteen months of fear that had become part of her identity. "We don't know what it is. We have no baseline for comparison. We have instruments that show something is there, but the instruments don't agree with each other, and the scientists are arguing, and no one knows what any of it means."

"Something ancient." Mai's voice was analytical, but softer now. Less sharp. The gates had changed her, sanded down her edges, made room for something new. Something that didn't rely so heavily on certainty. "Something that was sealed in Kur before human memory. Something that shouldn't exist in our world, but does now because the gates opened and we walked through."

"Something that shouldn't be free."

"Yes."

The quarantine facility was standard Foundation gray. Mai sat on the standard Foundation cot, her tablet powered down beside her. She wasn't calculating. She wasn't analyzing. She was just sitting. Being. Existing in a way that she hadn't allowed herself to do in years. Maybe ever. The gates had taken her certainty, and what remained was not the absence of thought but the presence of something quieter. Something that didn't demand constant calculation to feel safe.

Her hand wasn't shaking.

She noticed this distantly. The tremor that had started in the second gate, that had persisted through the ascent, that had become so normal she'd stopped noticing it. Gone. In its place was stillness. Not the stillness of numbness. Not the stillness of shock. But the stillness of acceptance. The stillness of someone who had finally stopped fighting something that couldn't be defeated.

She couldn't protect everyone.

She had known that intellectually. She had always known it. The probability calculations, the risk assessments, the cold mathematics of harm and prevention that had been her constant companions for years. But knowing and feeling were different things. You could know something with your mind and still believe something else with your heart. The gates had taken the believing. Had stripped it away like paint from old wood, revealing the raw truth underneath.

"How do you feel?" Shammy asked. Her voice came from the doorway of their shared quarantine cell. Tall, graceful, navigating the small space with the careful precision of someone who had learned to make herself smaller than she was. Mai watched her move, cataloging the differences. Shammy's steps were more deliberate now. More careful. She was relying less on her senses and more on the connection they had forged.

"My hand." Mai looked at her palm. Flexed the fingers. Watched them move, smooth and steady, without the tremor that had been her constant companion since the second gate. "I can't remember the last time it was still."

"The gates took it from you." Shammy stood by the window. Or what passed for a window, a screen showing the Iraqi desert that looked nothing like the real thing. "The certainty that you could protect everyone. And now—"

"Now it's gone." Mai flexed her fingers again, marveling at the stillness. "And I feel—"

"What?"

"Strange." She searched for the word. The tremor had been a kind of anchor. A physical reminder of what she had lost, what she couldn't get back. Without it, she felt untethered. Lighter, yes. Like she'd been carrying something heavy for so long that she'd forgotten what it felt like to put it down. But also unsteady. Like a ship that had lost its ballast.

"Lighter," she said. "That's the word. Like I've been carrying something heavy for so long that I forgot what it felt like to put it down."

Shammy nodded. She understood. She was feeling something similar. The blindness that had descended in Kur hadn't fully lifted, but it had changed. She couldn't feel the air, but she could feel the connection to Ace and Mai. That was different now. That was something new. Something that had been forged in the gates, tempered by the underworld, strengthened by surviving together.

"Better," Shammy said quietly. "It feels better. Not normal. I don't think we'll ever be normal again. But better. Different in a way that's almost good."

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Ace sat with the fragment.

It was quiet now. Not silent. Never silent, not anymore. The thing she had carried for so long, the weight that had dragged her down and lifted her up and eventually become part of her. It pulsed in her chest like a second heartbeat. A rhythm that was hers and not hers at the same time. Ancient and modern. Human and something else entirely.

"It's strange," she said to no one in particular. "For so long, I felt like I was carrying something that didn't belong. A weight that was trying to drag me down. Something that was too big for me, too old for me, too powerful for me to hold without breaking."

She touched her chest. Where the fragment lived. Where it had always lived, really, even when she was fighting it.

"And now it feels like part of me. Like it was always supposed to be here. Like I was always supposed to carry it, and the years I spent fighting were just resistance. Refusing to accept what I was."

Mai looked up from her stillness. "Do you regret it? Accepting it?" She had been watching Ace carefully since they returned. The violet in Ace's eyes was different now. Deeper, darker, the fragment more visible than it had been before. Mai couldn't tell if that was concerning or reassuring. She was learning that some things didn't have clear answers. That was new.

"No." Ace's violet eyes pulsed. Not the fragment stirring. Just a reflection of something that was always there now. A permanent change. "I spent years resenting it. Fighting it. Trying to be free of it. And all that fighting was exhausting. I was so tired, Mai. Tired in ways I couldn't name. Tired of pretending I wasn't carrying something. Tired of acting like I was normal when I knew I wasn't."

"You were trying to survive."

"I was trying to be someone else." Ace's voice was flat. "Someone who didn't have to carry something heavy. Someone who could just be. Normal. Whatever that means. The fragment wasn't normal. I wasn't normal. And I thought if I fought hard enough, I could make the not-normal go away." She shook her head. "But it doesn't work that way. You can't fight your way into being someone you're not. You can only fight your way into being someone you're not sure you want to be."

"And now?"

"Now I know what I am." Ace smiled. It was thin. Tired. But real. "I'm someone who carries a fragment of an ancient goddess. I'm someone who exists in two worlds. The mortal world where I was born, and the space between states that the fragment opens up. I'm someone who can feel the boundaries between things because I exist at those boundaries. I'm—"

She stopped. The words were harder to get out than she expected.

"You're someone who's changed," Mai said quietly. "Not broken. Changed. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

"I think so." Mai's hand was still steady. Still not shaking. "The gates took something from me too. The certainty that I could protect everyone. And what they left was the knowledge that I was never supposed to protect everyone. I was just supposed to try. And trust that trying was enough."

"Is it?"

"I don't know yet." A pause. "But I think so. I think that's what the gates were trying to teach us. That

we can't control everything. That we can't save everyone. That the best we can do is show up, try our best, and trust the people we love to do the same.”

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Bright sat with the cold amulet.

For the first time in centuries.

The metal hung against his chest, and it was cold. Just cold. Not the cold of death approaching. That had always been a warmth before, a promise, a comfort. Not the cold of failure or finality. Just the temperature of the room. The ambient condition of the air. Nothing more. The warmth that had always told him death was near was simply gone, replaced by the same bland temperature that everyone experienced, that meant nothing at all.

He had been wearing SCP-963 since 1543. In all that time, through all those bodies, the amulet had always been his compass. His constant companion in the dance of dying and waking and dying again. When it was warm, he knew. Death was approaching. Either his death or someone else's. Either the ending he sought or the end he dreaded. The warmth had been his connection to the thing he wanted most, and his greatest fear, and everything in between.

Now it was cold.

And he was still alive.

“I don't know what to do.” He said it to the gray walls of his private quarantine cell. He didn't expect an answer. He wasn't sure he wanted one. “I've spent centuries wanting to die. Centuries of waking up each morning and calculating how many more mornings I could stand. Centuries of searching for a way to make the ending stick, to find the one death that wouldn't lead to another waking.”

He touched the amulet. Felt its coldness. The metal was smooth under his fingers, worn by centuries of touching, the same gesture repeated so many times it had become ritual. The coldness was a foreign sensation. He didn't know how to interpret it. Didn't know what it meant.

“Now I have to figure out what I want instead.”

The question hung in the recycled air. It was the question he had never allowed himself to ask. For five hundred years, he had known exactly what he wanted. An ending. A permanent stop. A way to finally put down the weight of immortality and become nothing. Everything else had been a step on the path toward that ending. A means to an end. A way to keep going until the ending finally came.

And now that the weight was somehow lighter. Not gone, just differently distributed, carried by all of them instead of just him. He had no idea what to do with it.

“What do people want?” he asked the ceiling. The Foundation hadn't designed their quarantine cells to provide existential guidance. The ceiling offered nothing. Gray concrete, water stains, the same institutional nothing that every Foundation facility provided. “What do people want when they're not looking for death?”

The ceiling didn't answer. Of course it didn't. It was a ceiling. It had never wanted anything. It had never known what it was like to want and then stop wanting. It had never been human.

Bright laughed. It was a strange sound. Rusty, unpracticed, genuine in a way that surprised him. He

couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed without it being a defense mechanism, a way to deflect attention, a mask for the emptiness he carried. This was different. This was laughter that came from somewhere real, somewhere that had remembered how to feel something other than weariness.

"I'm going to have to learn," he said. "Like a child. Like someone who's never lived before. Which, in some ways, I suppose I haven't. I've been alive for five hundred years, but I've spent most of it wanting to stop. That's not the same as living. That's something else. That's just waiting for an ending that kept not coming."

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Something was loose in the mortal world.

The Foundation couldn't contain it. The readings were impossible. Thermal signatures that didn't match any known process, atmospheric anomalies that had no source, electromagnetic disturbances that appeared and disappeared without pattern. The instruments at Site-47 were going crazy, spitting out data that made no sense, showing spikes and drops and fluctuations that violated every law of physics the Foundation thought they understood.

"It's like trying to track a ghost," Mai said. She was in the analysis room now, running calculations that kept coming up empty. "Every time I think I have a lead, the readings change. It's adapting. Learning. Moving in ways we can't predict because it doesn't think like we do."

"Can you feel it?" Ace asked. She stood by the window. Or what passed for a window, a screen showing the projected forest that looked nothing like the real thing. "Through the fragment?"

Ace was quiet for a moment. The fragment pulsed in her chest. Quieter now, integrated, but still present. Still connected to Kur in ways she was still learning to understand. The ancient presence that had followed them through the gates was out there somewhere, moving through the world like a fish through water, unseen and yet present.

"Yes," she said finally. "It's far away. But it's there. Watching. Waiting. Learning. Not hostile. Not exactly. It's just alien. Different. Something that doesn't think like us. Doesn't want like us. Doesn't understand concepts like threat or safety in ways we would recognize."

"Can you track it?"

"We can try." Ace's violet eyes pulsed. "It's not easy. It's not like the fragment is giving me directions or showing me a map. It's more like feeling a presence at the edge of perception. Like standing in a doorway and feeling the draft from the other side. You know something's there. You can feel it. But you can't see what's causing it."

"What do we do about it?" Shammy asked.

The question hung in the air.

They had spent so long surviving. Focused on the mission, on the gates, on getting through to the other side and back again. They had been so focused on the immediate that none of them had stopped to think about what came next. About what you did when you survived the unsurvivable. About what you did when you brought back something that shouldn't exist.

What did you do when the crisis was over but the consequences weren't?

"We figure it out," Ace said. Her voice was flat. "Together. That's what we do. We don't have answers yet. But we have each other. And that's more than we had before."

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The cost of refusal was paid.

Not in death. Not in the permanent ending that Bright had been seeking. Not in the separation that Ace had feared.

In change.

In the slow, difficult work of becoming different people. In the acknowledgment that everything they had been through had left marks on them that wouldn't fade. In the acceptance that the people who had walked into Kur were not the same people who had walked out.

Bright walked out of quarantine three days later. His amulet was still cold. He was still alive. And he was still trying to figure out what that meant. What it could mean, what it might mean, what he wanted it to mean. The questions were new and uncomfortable and strangely exhilarating.

"I've been alive for five hundred years," he told the triad. They were sitting in a Foundation break room. The same bad coffee, the same uncomfortable chairs, the same gray aesthetic that made everything feel like a holding cell. But it wasn't a holding cell anymore. It was a choice. They were here because they wanted to be. "I've never once asked myself what I wanted. I always knew. I always wanted to stop. To find the ending that would finally stick. And now—"

"Now you're asking different questions."

"Yes." Bright's smile was strange. Uncertain. New. Not the tired smile of a man who had seen too much and lived too long, but the tentative smile of someone who was learning that smiling could be something other than a defense mechanism. "I'm asking things like: what does good coffee taste like when you're not drinking it to mark time? What does a sunset look like when you're not thinking about how many more you'll see? What does it feel like to want tomorrow to come?"

"And what are the answers?"

"I don't know yet." Bright looked at the window. The projected forest was the same as always. Fake, synthetic, nothing like the real thing. But he was looking at it differently now. Not as a prison. As a possibility. "I'm going to have to live long enough to find out."

Ace nodded. She understood. The fragment was part of her now. Had always been part of her, even when she was pretending otherwise. And carrying something ancient didn't mean carrying it alone. It meant learning to live with change. Learning that the marks left by impossible things didn't have to be scars. They could be something else. Something like growth.

The coffee was terrible. None of them cared. They drank it anyway, three people who had walked into the underworld and walked out transformed, and for the first time in a very long time, Bright didn't want to die.

He wanted to find out what came next.

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