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## Chapter 19 — The Cost

The Architect found them at dawn.

She stood at the edge of the plaza. Perfect posture. Perfect composure. Perfect smile. But her eyes had changed. No longer blank. No longer fixed on nothing.

She remembered.

“You've broken everything,” she said.

“No,” Mai replied. “We've opened it. There's a difference.”

The Architect's smile flickered. Cracked. “I spent a hundred and seventy-nine years maintaining the optimization. Keeping the peace. And you've undone it in days.”

“The peace was a prison.”

“It was mercy.” The Architect's voice cracked. The word mercy came out like it cost her something. “Do you know what they would have remembered? The fire. The burning. Their families dying. Everything they'd lost.”

“They would have remembered the truth.”

“The truth destroys.” The Architect stepped forward. “I've seen what happens when people remember. They can't bear it. They break.”

“Some do.” Ace's voice was flat. Compressed. The way it got when she felt most. “But some heal. And they deserve the chance to choose.”

The Architect stopped. Her face was wet with tears. Real tears, from real memories. The kind that don't stop once they start.

“You don't understand,” she said. “I was there. When the fire came. I lost...”

She couldn't finish.

Mai's pen moved. Recording. Calculating.

“Who did you lose?”

The Architect's face crumpled.

“Everyone. My husband. My children. My parents. Everyone I loved burned in that fire.”

“And the optimization?”

“Was my choice. My gift.” Her voice was barely a whisper now. “I made myself the caretaker. I made

myself forget. And then I made everyone else forget too.”

Ace pressed her hand against her chest. The pressure confirmed.

“You were one of them. The original Triad.”

“No. I was the first to forget. The first to choose peace.” The Architect's voice was barely there. “The Triad found me afterward. Made me the caretaker. Because I wanted to forget more than anyone.”

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They stood in the plaza.

The city was transforming. The optimization was dissolving. People were waking, remembering, choosing. Some screamed. Some wept. Some stood very still, remembering how to feel.

And the Architect, the woman who had maintained the prison, was breaking.

“The cost,” Mai said. “You said the cost would be paid. What did you mean?”

“The fire returns.” The Architect's eyes were distant. “The original fire. The one that was displaced, not destroyed. It comes back when the containment fails.”

“And the people who were optimized?”

“They remember. They feel. They suffer.” The Architect's voice was bitter. Sharp. “That's the cost. That's what I've been preventing for a hundred and seventy-nine years.”

Shammy stepped forward. Her hand was raised, still glowing with Vera's key.

“And the third path?”

“Shows them their futures. Gives them a choice.” The Architect's mouth twisted. “But it doesn't stop the fire. Nothing stops the fire.”

“Then we face it.”

The Architect stared at her. “You don't understand. The fire isn't just flames. It's change. It's transformation. It's everything the city was, burning away to make room for what it could become.”

“Then we let it burn.”

“Everything will change.”

“Yes.” Shammy's voice was flat. “That's the point.”

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The Architect was silent.

The Source pulsed above them. Not contained. Not erased. Open. Showing everyone their choices.

“You've already made your decision,” the Architect said.

“Yes.”

“You've already chosen the third path.”

“Yes.”

“And the fire? When it comes?”

“We face it together. We transform it. We let it burn what needs to burn and protect what needs to stay.”

“That's impossible.”

“No.” Shammy's hand came down. The glow faded. “It's what Vera wanted. What she prepared for. What we're going to do.”

The Architect stared at them. At the Triad standing together.

“You're not afraid.”

“We are.” Ace's voice compressed further. Tight. “But we're not going to hide from it.”

“And the guilt? When people remember what happened to them? When they realize what was taken?”

“We'll help them bear it. Together.”

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The Architect laughed.

A broken sound. Full of grief and memory and loss. The kind of laugh that isn't really a laugh.

“You really believe that? That people can bear the truth?”

“We have to believe it. Because the alternative is what you've been doing. Taking their choice. Making them forget.”

“And that's wrong?”

“Yes.”

The Architect's laughter faded. Her face went still.

“I used to believe that too. Before the fire. Before the loss. Before I chose to forget.”

“What changed?”

“I couldn't bear it. The grief. The guilt.” Her voice cracked again. “The knowledge that I survived when everyone I loved didn't.”

Ace stepped closer. Her hand pressed against the Architect's arm.

“The Source is showing you your choices. Not just the fire. The futures. What happens after.”

“And what happens after?”

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"You choose. Again." Ace's voice was compressed. Small words for big feelings. "Not forgetting this time. But facing."

The Architect's eyes went to the sky. The Source pulsed above.

"Is it showing you something?"

"Yes." The Architect's voice was quiet. "A future where I remember. Where I feel the loss. And where I still go on."

"That's the third path."

"It hurts."

"I know."

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They stood together in the plaza.

The Architect. The Triad. The city beyond.

"I spent a hundred and seventy-nine years maintaining the optimization," the Architect said. "Keeping the peace. Preventing the pain."

"And now?"

"Now I have to feel it. All of it. Everything I've been running from."

"Yes."

The Architect looked at Mai. At Ace. At Shammy.

"Will you help me?"

"That's what the third path is. We face it together."

The Architect nodded. Her tears were drying. Her face was setting. Like something that had been held together by nothing finally finding its real shape.

"Then let it come. Let the fire return. Let the memories come back."

"Yes."

"I'm ready."

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The Source pulsed one last time.

Above, the sky shifted. Not the too-blue hole. Not the held-breath atmosphere. Something new. Something that hadn't been allowed to exist for a hundred and seventy-nine years.

A future being chosen. A path being taken.

The fire was coming.

But so was the truth.

And for the first time in a hundred and seventy-nine years, the people of Verdant Springs would choose for themselves.

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*end of chapter nineteen*

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