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Chapter 10: Bargain

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: The offer: one of you stays, let the others go. And Bright stepping forward. ->

The question hung in the gray.

Ereshkigal stood at the edge of the throne room. The gray figure that had been waiting for millennia. The goddess who had wanted nothing more than to finally end. Her eyes, human-remembering, ancient, tired, fixed on the triad. On Ace with the fragment pulsing in her violet eyes. On Mai with her shaking hand and fractured certainty. On Shabby, blind in the Kur-atmosphere but present, anchoring, the connection that kept her grounded when nothing else could.

Someone must stay, she said.

Her voice was the gray of Kur itself.

In my place. To hold the gates closed from the inside. To—

To keep you trapped forever.

Ace's voice was flat.

So you can walk out into the mortal world and finally die.

Yes.

The simplicity of it hung between them. No euphemisms. No politics. Just a goddess who had been imprisoned for so long that she had forgotten what freedom felt like, asking for the basic mercy of an ending. The one thing the mortal world took for granted but that Kur could never provide. The mercy of stopping. The gift of finality. The ability to say “enough” and mean it.

And if no one volunteers?

Bright's voice was quiet. The amulet at his chest was warm. Warmer than it had been, warm with proximity to something he had been seeking for centuries.

What then?

Then the gates stay open.

Ereshkigal's voice was gray.

And I stay trapped. And you—

She paused.

You leave through the way you came. The fragment stays with Ace. And we all wait for another chance. Another group. Another moment when the seals weaken and someone comes who might be willing to stay.

How long?

However long it takes.

The goddess's voice was tired.

I've been waiting since before writing was invented. I can wait longer. I've become very good at waiting. It's all I have left. The waiting and the hoping and the remembering what it felt like to want things.

Ace looked at Bright.

Something was shifting in her. The fragment, the thing she had been carrying for so long, the weight she had fought and resented and finally accepted, was stirring in a new way. Not taking over. Not controlling. Suggesting. Showing her something that might have been possible, something that might have been the third option they were looking for.

I have an idea, she said.

The idea was impossible.

It was also the only option that didn't require anyone to die.

The fragment came from you, Ace said to Ereshkigal. It's part of you. It's been part of me since the Blood-Moon Rift. But it's not—

She paused, searching for words.

It's not me. I carry it. It doesn't own me. It doesn't control me. We're integrated but not fused. Separate but not split.

You're saying you can separate?

No.

Ace's voice was flat.

I'm saying the fragment doesn't need to be separated. It's already integrated. It's part of me. But if it's part of me, then it can be the anchor. Not me as a person. Me as a connection. The fragment links me to you. It came from you, it remembers Kur, it exists in the space between worlds. If I keep the fragment, I keep that link. And the link—

Can hold the gates closed.

Yes.

Ace's violet eyes pulsed.

The fragment is a bridge. It's always been a bridge. A connection between Kur and the mortal world, between the living and the dead, between states of being. If I accept that integration completely, if I stop fighting it and let it be what it is, it becomes the anchor. The gates stay closed because the connection itself is what holds them.

Ereshkigal was silent.

The gray around them shifted. Acknowledged, perhaps. Or confusion. Or the ancient consideration of a goddess who had seen civilizations rise and fall and had learned that the obvious answer was rarely the only answer.

You're saying the fragment can—

I'm saying I can.

Ace's voice was flat.

I'm saying the fragment and I are already one thing. And that thing can be the anchor. Not me as a person trapped in Kur. Me as a connection bridging both worlds. I stay in the mortal world, but the fragment keeps the link open. Keeps the gates sealed from the outside. And you—

Go free, Ereshkigal finished.

Her voice was thoughtful. Gray, but with something else underneath. Something that might have been the first stirring of hope in millennia.

The gates open. I walk out. I finally—

Die, Bright said.

His voice was quiet.

You finally die. In a world that isn't gray. Under a sun you've never seen. As something other than a goddess trapped in her own kingdom.

Ereshkigal was silent for a long moment.

The dead watched. The Galla waited. And the goddess of the underworld stood before the empty throne, considering an option she had never been offered before.

That's not how the gates work, she said finally.

The gates don't care about how they work.

Ace's violet eyes pulsed.

They care about what holds them. They care about what closes them. And I'm telling you, this is what holds them. This is what closes them. The fragment. The connection. The bridge between states that exists because I chose to integrate instead of fight.

It's not—

Ereshkigal's voice was gray.

It's not that simple.

It never is.

Ace smiled. Thin. Tired. But real.

But it's possible. I've been carrying this fragment for years. I know how it works. I know what it can do. And I'm telling you, this is the answer. This is the third option. The thing that lets everyone walk away.

The bargain took shape.

Not the simple trade of one life for another. Something more complicated. More modern. The kind of arrangement that required the triad to work together in ways they hadn't before, in ways the Foundation had never trained them for, in ways no amount of calculation or violence could have prepared them for.

The fragment anchors the gates, Ereshkigal said slowly, testing the idea. You remain connected to Kur even while living in the mortal world. You become—

A bridge, Mai said.

Her voice was analytical, but there was something new in it. Something that sounded almost like wonder.

A connection between two states. Not dead, not alive. Something in between. Something that exists at the boundary.

That's what Shammy is, Ace said.

She looked at her friend. Tall, graceful, blind in the Kur-atmosphere but present, anchoring. Storm-sprung. Elemental. Existing in the space between.

She survived Kur because she learned to feel through connection what she couldn't feel through senses. I can do the same. I can exist in the space between. I can be the bridge that holds the gates closed.

And Bright?

Ereshkigal's eyes turned to the man who had been trying to die for centuries. Gray, remembering.

What happens to him?

Bright was quiet.

The amulet at his chest was warm. Not the warmth of death. Something else. Something he hadn't felt in a very long time. Something that felt like being alive.

The fragment doesn't need Bright to die, Ace said. It needs someone to hold the connection. Someone to be the anchor. That person is me.

And Bright?

Bright's voice was quiet.

I stay alive.

The words hung in the gray.

You wanted to die for so long, Mai said. Her analytical voice was cracking. Not breaking. Changing. Becoming something that included more than calculation.

And now—

Now someone is offering me a reason not to.

Bright looked at Ace. At the small frame that carried more weight than anyone realized. At the violet eyes that held a fragment older than civilization. At the woman who had refused to let him die alone, who had offered him something no one had ever offered him before. Reasons. Hope. The possibility that tomorrow might be worth waking up for.

Someone is telling me to live. And I—

He stopped.

I don't know how to do that, he said. I've been wanting to die for so long. I don't know what I want instead. I don't know how to want something. How to hope for something. How to believe that anything might be worth—

You don't have to know right now.

Shammy's voice was quiet. The voice of someone who had learned, in the blindness of Kur, that not knowing was not the same as failing.

You just have to choose to find out. Choose to try. Choose to see what happens next.

Choose to live, Ace finished. Just like that.

Just like that, Bright repeated. Just like that.

The silence that followed was different.

Not the gray silence of Kur. Not the held-breath silence of the dead watching. Something new. A silence filled with the weight of what had just been offered. A choice none of them had expected. A third option that broke the binary of sacrifice and refusal.

Ereshkigal was studying Ace with eyes that had watched civilizations rise and fall.

You understand what you're offering, the goddess said.

Not a question. A warning.

The fragment will connect you to Kur permanently. You will feel it always. The pull of the underworld,

the presence of the dead, the weight of millennia. It will never be silent. It will never let you forget what you carry.

I know, Ace said.

You will dream of gray, Ereshkigal continued. You will wake feeling the breath of things that don't breathe. You will carry Kur inside you for the rest of your life. The boundaries between states will be thin for you. Always. You will exist in the spaces between in ways that most people cannot imagine.

I know.

And you offer this freely. Without being asked. Without being told this is your duty or your purpose or your fate.

Ace's voice was flat.

I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for them. For Bright, who has spent centuries looking for a reason to stop looking for death. For Mai, who needs to know that her calculations don't have to save everyone to mean something. For Shammy, who learned that feeling through connection is not the same as weakness.

I'm doing it because Bright deserves a chance to find out what he wants. Even if he doesn't know yet. Even if he might never know.

I'm doing it because that's what the triad does.

She looked at her team. Her family.

We don't let each other drown alone. We don't let each other make impossible choices without offering alternatives. We don't let each other sacrifice themselves without at least trying to find another way.

Ereshkigal was silent for a long moment.

Then, slowly, the gray of her form shifted. Changed. The ancient goddess who had been trapped in her own kingdom for millennia, who had forgotten what hope felt like, who had stopped believing that anything might ever change—

Something in her eyes changed.

Yes, she said. Yes. That is acceptable.

The bargain was struck.

Not the simple trade of one life for another. Something more complicated. More hopeful. The kind of arrangement that required everyone to give something and everyone to gain something. The kind of arrangement that the gates had perhaps always been designed to facilitate, even if no one had ever used them this way before.

I accept, Ereshkigal said.

Her voice was gray, but there was something underneath it. Gratitude, maybe. Relief.

The fragment as anchor. The connection as chain. You remain linked to Kur, Ace, even while living in the mortal world. You become the bridge. And the gates—

Stay closed, Ace finished.

Yes.

The goddess's eyes softened. Gray, remembering, but softer now.

They stay closed. And I am—

She paused.

For the first time in millennia, she was—

Free.

Go, she said. All of you. Through the gates. Back to the mortal world. The fragment will hold me here. Ace will be the bridge. And I—

She looked at the throne. The darkness-made-solid that had been her prison and her purpose for longer than human memory.

I will finally rest.

The gates were ahead.

Seven gates to descend. Seven gates to ascend. Seven thresholds between one state of being and another.

Mai was quiet as they walked. Her hand was still shaking, the tremor that had started in the second gate and hadn't stopped, but her mind was working. Processing. Analyzing the bargain they'd just struck and what it meant for everyone involved.

The logic holds, she said finally.

Her voice was analytical, but softer now. Less sharp.

The fragment is already integrated with Ace. It's already connected to Kur. Using that connection as the anchor is—

She paused.

No, it's not efficient in the way the Foundation would define efficiency. But it's consistent. It's elegant, in its own way. The gates respond to the fragment. The fragment responds to Ace. The circuit completes.

You understand it better than I do, Ace said.

I understand systems.

Mai's voice was analytical, but the edges were different now. Softer. More human.

I understand connections and flows and the way things link together. And this—

She paused.

This is a kind of magic I've never calculated before. But the principle is sound.

The principle is hope, Shammy said quietly.

Is there a difference?

Less. Shammy smiled. But more.

Hope is what happens when calculation fails and you choose to believe anyway. When the numbers don't add up and you decide to trust anyway. When the path forward doesn't make sense and you walk it anyway because the alternative is standing still.

Mai considered that. She had spent her whole life calculating, predicting, trying to force the world into patterns she could understand. And now—

Now I think I understand hope, she said.

It's what I'm feeling right now. Even though I can't calculate the outcome. Even though I don't know what happens next. Even though the numbers say this shouldn't work. I'm choosing to believe it works anyway.

That's hope. That's what the gates gave back to me.

The first gate loomed ahead.

Bright stopped.

This is where we entered, he said.

His voice was quiet. Old.

The first gate. We passed through it on the way down. It took certainty from Mai. Defense from Ace. Trust from Shammy. It took the things we thought we needed and left us with the truth of what we actually had.

And on the way up? Ace asked.

The gates give back what they took.

Bright's voice was tired. But different. Changed.

The certainty you had before wasn't real. It was just assumption. The certainty you'll have after is different. It's earned. It's—

How?

By losing it.

Bright smiled. It was strange. Muscles in this face not used to the expression.

By going through the gates without it and surviving. That's how you earn real certainty. Not the absence of doubt. The presence of experience. The knowledge that you can lose things and still stand.

Ace nodded. She understood that. She had lost certainty in the gates. The certainty that she could protect everyone, that she could fight the fragment, that she knew who she was and what she was for. And she had survived anyway. Had found Mai and Shammy to anchor her. Had found Bright to show her that carrying weight didn't have to mean carrying it alone. That was different from never having doubted at all. That was something earned.

I remember losing it, she said quietly. I remember not knowing who I was for a moment there. Wondering if the person I had been was gone for good.

You survived.

I had help.

Bright looked at her. At the violet eyes that held the fragment, at the small frame that carried ancient weight. And felt something shift in his chest. Not the cold of the amulet. Not the warmth of approaching death. Something else. Something that felt like the first stirrings of something he had forgotten how to name.

You did, he said. And so will I.

The gates opened.

Not all at once. Each one separately. Each threshold a passage between states. The first gate was gray light and the sensation of something returning. Certainty, but different. Harder. More earned. Not the pretense of control but the reality of resilience.

Mai felt it come back like a second breath.

She could calculate again. But differently. Not with the cold precision of before. With something that accounted for uncertainty. That included the unknown. That recognized that numbers were maps of territory, not the territory itself.

I can feel it, she said. The certainty. But it's not the same. It's not the armor I used to wear. It's something else. Something that includes the possibility of failure.

Yes, Bright agreed. It never is.

The second gate opened. The third. Each one returning something that had been taken, defense for Ace, trust for Shammy, but transformed. Made harder by loss. Made stronger by survival. Made into the kind of certainty that didn't pretend to know everything but could still stand.

The gates are giving back what they took, Mai said.

Her analytical mind was cataloging, documenting, trying to understand.

But each time, it's different. Like they're upgrading the parts they took. Refined. Tested. Made into something that can handle the weight of what comes next.

That's what doesn't kill you, Bright said.

Makes you stronger?

That's the saying.

His smile was different now. Still strange on this face, but more natural. More genuine.

Though I'm not sure the Sumerians had that saying. They were more about balance. What the gates take and what they give. What you lose and what you find. The economy of transformation.

What did you find? Ace asked.

Bright was quiet for a long moment.

I don't know, he said finally. Something different. Something I didn't have before. Something that—

He paused.

Ask me again when we reach the mortal world.

The mortal world was ahead.

The last gate, the seventh, was before them, and beyond it, gray light was giving way to something else. Something that wasn't gray. Something bright and harsh and real. Something that smelled like air instead of dust, like life instead of memory.

We're almost there, Mai said.

Her voice was quiet. Almost reverent.

Shammy was crying.

Not audibly. She was too well-trained for that. But tears were running down her face, and she wasn't bothering to hide them. In the Kur-atmosphere, she had been blind, unable to feel the air. Now, approaching the threshold, she could feel it beginning to return. The first faint whisper of atmosphere against her skin. The first distant rumble of pressure systems she could read. The first reminder that she was a creature of air and storm, and that the world of air was still there, waiting for her.

The air, she whispered.

I can feel it coming back. Like meeting an old friend after a long time apart. Like remembering what it felt like to belong somewhere.

Almost, Ace said. Almost home.

They passed through the seventh gate together.

The mortal world hit them like a wall.

After the endless gray of Kur, the Iraqi sun was blinding. After the stillness of the underworld, the desert wind was chaos. After the weight of ancient stone and ancient seals, the empty air felt like freedom. The first breath after drowning. The first step after a long fall. The first moment of waking after a nightmare that had lasted too long.

Mai stood at the threshold, blinking, adjusting. Her hand was still shaking, but she barely noticed. She was alive. They were all alive. Against all probability. Against all calculation. Against everything the Foundation's models had predicted.

We made it, she said.

Her voice was analytical, but cracked. Something that wasn't calculation anymore. Something that included hope.

Against all probability.

There was no probability involved, Bright said. Just hope. And stubbornness. And—

He stopped.

And something else, he finished quietly.

Ace was standing beside him, the fragment quiet in her chest, the connection to Kur thrumming like a second heartbeat. She could feel it. The anchor that held the gates closed. The bridge between worlds that would never fully leave her. She could feel Ereshkigal, somewhere far away, stepping into the sunlight for the first time in millennia. She could feel the goddess's gratitude like warmth against her skin.

Is it done? Mai asked. The bargain. Is it—

Done?

Ace closed her eyes. Felt the fragment. Felt the connection that would never fully leave her.

No. It's just beginning. I'll carry this forever now. The bridge. The anchor. The connection to Kur that will never fully close. But—

She opened her eyes. Looked at her team. Her family. The three people who had walked into the underworld with her and walked out transformed.

But it's worth it.

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