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Chapter 12: Ascent

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: The climb back through seven gates—carrying something that shouldn't be carried ->

The ascent was harder than the descent.

This was the first thing Bright said as they turned away from the mortal world and faced the gates again. Seven gates standing between Kur and the land of the living. Seven thresholds. Seven chances for something to go wrong. The gates didn't let things leave easily. They took things on the way down and gave things back on the way up, transforming everything they touched.

"It's always harder to go up," he said. His voice was quiet. The amulet at his chest was warm, not the warmth of approaching death, but something else. Something that felt almost like anticipation. Like the moment before a decision that had been waiting centuries to be made. "The gates don't like letting things leave."

Mai was calculating. She couldn't help it. The analytical part of her mind was trying to process what they were about to attempt. Seven gates. Seven thresholds. Seven chances for something to go wrong. The probability models she was running in her head kept returning the same answer.

Zero.

"The probability of successfully traversing all seven gates without casualties is—"

"Zero." Bright said it before she could. "That's the number you're looking for. The gates don't work on probability. They work on something else."

"On what?"

"Hope." Bright smiled. It was strange on his face. The muscles weren't used to the expression. "Stubbornness. The refusal to let go even when you should." He looked at her. "Sound familiar?"

Ace walked beside him. The fragment was quiet in her chest. Not silent, never silent, but settled. Integrated. Part of her in a way it had never been before, in a way that felt more natural than the fighting had ever felt. She had spent years resisting what she was, and now she was finally letting it be what it was.

"We're not casualties," she said. "We survived the descent. We survived Ereshkigal. We'll survive the ascent."

"You sound certain."

"I'm not." Ace's violet eyes pulsed. "But I'm choosing to believe it anyway. That's different. That's what the gates taught us. That's what survival means when you're not alone."

The first gate was behind them.

The gray light of Kur spread before them, endless and patient. The dead watched from the edges of the path. Silent. Observing. Remembering. They didn't interfere. They never did. They just watched the living pass through on their way to wherever they were going, their human-remembering eyes following every step with the attention of creatures who had nothing else to focus on.

"This is where we entered," Mai said. Her voice was quiet. Reverent, almost. "The first gate. I remember—"

She stopped.

The memory was vivid. The way the certainty had left her. The foundation she'd built her life on crumbling like wet paper. The shaking hand that hadn't stopped trembling since. The moment when her armor had cracked and everything she'd relied on had come pouring through.

"What did it take from you?" Bright asked. Not mockingly. Genuinely curious. "The first gate. What did you lose?"

Mai was quiet for a long moment.

"My belief that I could protect everyone," she said finally. "I thought if I just calculated enough, planned enough, accounted for every variable, I could keep everyone safe. I thought analysis was a kind of armor." She looked at her hands. "The first gate took that."

"And left what?"

"Uncertainty." Mai smiled. It was a strange expression on her face. The analytical mind behind it, but something softer in front. "The knowledge that I can't protect everyone. That bad things happen even when you plan for them. That the best you can do is try. And sometimes trying isn't enough." A beat. "But you do it anyway."

"Is that enough?"

Mai looked at Ace. At Shammy. At the way they moved together. The silent communication, the wordless understanding, the bond that had been forged in years of fighting and surviving and being broken together.

"It has to be," she said. "It's all we have. But it's more than enough."

The second gate took defense.

Ace felt it leave. The last certainty that her blade could save her. Not the skill itself. She could still fight, still kill, still protect. But the belief that violence was the answer to everything. That if she just hit hard enough, fast enough, decisively enough, she could keep the people she loved safe. That belief had been armor, and the armor had been a lie.

"The blade isn't the answer," she said quietly. "It never was. It's just a tool. A way to buy time until the real answer shows up."

“What is the real answer?”

Ace looked at Mai. At Shammy.

“Them,” she said. “The real answer is them. The people who stand with you. The people who catch you when you fall. The people who remind you that you're not alone and that alone is not the same as safe.”

Bright was quiet. The amulet at his chest pulsed.

“I had forgotten that,” he said finally. “For centuries. I had forgotten that the answer was ever anything other than alone. That there was ever anyone I could rely on. That the endless cycle of dying and waking was something I had to face by myself.”

“You're not alone now.”

“No.” Bright's voice was quiet. “I'm not.” A long pause. “I think I'm only now realizing how long I've been pretending otherwise.”

The third gate took trust.

Shammy felt it go. The last certainty that she could feel anything at all. Not the connection itself. The bond with Ace and Mai remained, thrummed like a second heartbeat, stronger than it had ever been. But the belief that she could navigate the world through her senses alone. That the atmosphere was something she could read like text. That pressure patterns were a language she spoke fluently.

“I'm still blind,” she said.

“No.” Ace's voice was flat. Firm. “You're anchored. There's a difference. You were always anchored. You just didn't know it.”

“What's the difference?”

“The difference is that I can see for you.” Ace's violet eyes met Shammy's. “And Mai can calculate for you. And together, we make up for what you can't do alone.” A beat. “That's not weakness. That's the truth. That's what the gates showed you.”

“That's not how I used to work.”

“No.” Ace smiled. “That's how you work now. That's how we all work. The gates changed us. Not into different people. Into people who know what we need. Into people who know that needing help isn't the same as being broken.”

The fourth gate was different.

This was where Bright had stopped. This was where he had turned back sixty-three years ago, afraid of what waited ahead, afraid of what Ereshkigal would offer, afraid of how much he wanted it.

“This is where I turned back,” he said. His voice was quiet. The amulet at his chest was warm.

Warmer than it had been. "Sixty-three years ago. I made it this far, and I was so afraid of what waited on the other side that I—"

"That you ran."

"Yes." Bright's smile was tired. "I ran. I sealed the gates from outside. I spent sixty-three years trying to forget what I saw. Trying to pretend I hadn't stood in front of the goddess of death and wanted everything she offered."

"What did you see?"

Bright was quiet for a long moment.

"A goddess who wanted to die," he said. "A queen of the underworld who had been trapped for so long that she forgot what freedom felt like. She offered me what I thought I wanted. An ending. Permanent death. The one thing the amulet couldn't give me." He looked at the gate. "And I was afraid. Afraid of what I wanted. Afraid that if I stayed, I would take what she offered and regret it. Afraid that I wouldn't take it and regret that instead."

"And now?"

Bright looked at the triad. At the three people who had walked into Kur with him and were walking out changed.

"Now," he said, "I'm not afraid anymore." He touched the amulet. "I don't know what I want. But I'm not afraid to find out. That's different. That's something."

The fifth gate took choice.

Mai felt it leave. The last certainty that she had any control over what happened next. Not the ability to choose itself. She could still decide, still act, still direct her life. But the belief that her choices were entirely her own. That she was the author of her own story. That if she just planned enough, she could write the ending she wanted.

"I didn't choose to be here," she said. "I was recruited. Trained. Shaped into something the Foundation needed. Every choice I made was affected. By them. By us. By the people around me. I thought my choices were mine. I thought if I planned enough, I could predict where I would end up."

"Is that a bad thing?" Ace asked.

"I don't know." Mai's analytical mind was spinning. "I've spent my whole life believing I was in control. That my choices were mine. That I was the author of my own story, not just a character in someone else's."

"And now?"

"Now I know that's not true." Mai smiled. It was strange, the certainty of her uncertainty. "And that's okay. Because my choices being affected by others doesn't make them less valuable. It makes them connected. Part of something larger." She looked at Ace. At Shammy. "My choices matter because I make them. Not because they're mine in isolation, but because they're mine in relation to other people. That's what the gates taught me. That's what choice actually means."

The sixth gate took certainty.

Shammy felt it leave. The last belief that she understood what she was. Not her nature, not her origins, but the narrative she had built around herself. The story of who she was and why. The framework she had used to interpret everything she experienced.

"I'm not what I thought I was," she said.

"No." Bright's voice was quiet. "None of us are. That's what Kur does. It strips away the stories we tell ourselves and leaves us with what we actually are. The truth underneath the narrative. The reality beneath the self-image."

"And what are we?"

Bright looked at the triad. At the three people who had walked into the underworld as a team and were walking out as something else. Something more. Something that had been forged in the gates and tempered by the underworld.

"We're connected," he said. "That's what we are. That's what the gates showed us. We're not alone. We never were. We just thought we were because the stories we told ourselves didn't have room for anyone else."

The seventh gate was different from all the others.

It stood at the threshold between Kur and the mortal world, and it was darker than the others. More solid. More present. The light that spilled through it wasn't gray. It was something else. Something that looked almost like—

"Daylight," Mai whispered. "That looks like daylight."

"That's what waits on the other side." Bright's voice was quiet. "The mortal world. Sunlight. Air that doesn't taste like dust and death." He paused. "Everything you left behind."

"Everything we left behind," Ace corrected. "Including what we went in for."

"The Book of Kur," Mai said. "Except it wasn't a book. It was a gate. And we didn't retrieve it. We opened it. And now—"

"Now we close it." Bright's voice was firm. "That's the mission. The original mission. Close the gate. Come back." He smiled. "Though I suspect 'come back' means something different now than it did when we left. Something more complicated. Something that includes the things we learned about ourselves."

The triad stood at the threshold.

Behind them: Kur. The gray. The dead. The gates that had taken so much and given so much back. The goddess who was finally free.

Before them: the mortal world. Sunlight. The Foundation. The life they had left behind.

Between them: the seventh gate. The last threshold. The final passage.

"We're ready," Ace said.

"No," Bright said. "We're not. But we're going anyway."

He stepped through first.

The others followed.

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—

"Like freedom," Shammy said.

She was crying. She didn't know when she had started. The air was rushing back into her senses, the pressure patterns were becoming readable again, the world was becoming real in a way it hadn't been since they descended. And she could feel it all. Feel the storm systems far away, feel the pressure front moving in from the west, feel the weather that was her birthright, her element, her home.

Mai was blinking, adjusting, her hand still shaking but her mind already racing. Processing. Calculating. The world had changed while they were gone. Or rather, she had changed, and now she was seeing the world with new eyes. Eyes that knew uncertainty. Eyes that had learned to trust.

"The gate," she said. "Look."

The seventh gate was sealing itself behind them. The cracks were filling with light. Not gray light, but something else. Something that was closing the passage, sealing the breach, locking the door that had been open for millennia.

"It's closing," Ace said. "The fragment is—it worked. The connection is holding."

"How do you know?"

Ace closed her eyes. The fragment pulsed in her chest. The bridge between Kur and the mortal world, the anchor that held the gates closed without anyone having to stay. She could feel it: Ereshkigal, somewhere far away, stepping into the sunlight for the first time in millennia. The gratitude. The peace. The finally.

"I can feel it," she said. "Ereshkigal. Resting. Finally at peace." She opened her eyes. "The gates are closed. The mission is complete."

The Foundation containment team found them an hour later.

Captain Reyes was the first to arrive. Her face a mask of controlled panic, her eyes wide with

something that might have been hope or might have been terror. The woman had been guarding this site for eighteen months. She had watched the seals crack one by one. She had lost seventeen people to whatever was behind that door. And now the door was just a wall, and the three people who had gone in were coming out.

"The readings," she said. "The gate is—the doorway is—"

"Closed." Bright was sitting against a prefab wall, the amulet at his chest cold for the first time in centuries. Strange. Foreign. But not unwelcome. "The breach is sealed. The Book of Kur is contained."

"The Book of Kur?"

"The gate," Bright clarified. "Same thing, apparently. The ancient Sumerians weren't big on precise terminology."

Reyes looked at them. At the triad standing together, at Bright sitting apart, at the sealed doorway that looked like it had never been open at all. Her professional mask was cracking. Eighteen months of controlled terror showing through.

"What happened in there?"

Mai opened her mouth to answer, then closed it. How could she explain? The gates? The bargain? The goddess who wanted to die and the triad who had refused to let any of them do it alone? The transformation that had stripped away everything they thought they knew and left them with something stronger?

"We completed the mission," she said finally. "That's all you need to know."

Reyes looked like she wanted to argue. But something in Mai's voice. Something in the way the triad stood together, something in the changed quality of their presence. Made her hesitate. These were not the same people who had descended into Kur eighteen hours ago. They had been through something. Become something. Changed in ways she couldn't begin to understand.

"Very well," she said. "We'll debrief you at Site-19. For now—" She paused. "For now, welcome back."

She left them there, in the Iraqi sun, in the world they had left behind.

Ace sat beside Bright.

The amulet was cold against his chest. Strange, after so long warm. But he wasn't complaining. Cold meant alive. Cold meant the death he had been seeking wasn't coming. Cold meant a future he didn't have to face alone.

"I don't know what to do now," he said quietly. "For centuries, I knew exactly what I wanted. An ending. A way to stop. And now—"

"Now you have to figure out something else."

"Yes."

Ace was quiet for a moment. The fragment pulsed in her chest. The bridge, the anchor, the

connection that would never fully leave her. She would carry Kur inside her forever now. Would feel the pull of the underworld, the presence of the dead, the weight of millennia. It would never be silent. It would never let her forget what she carried.

"What do you want to do first?" she asked.

Bright considered the question. For so long, he had wanted only ending. Peace. Rest. The finality that the amulet had always denied him. He had measured time in deaths, not lives. Had counted the moments until the next waking instead of the moments between them.

"I want to drink good coffee," he said finally. "I had Guatemalan once, in 1989. I've been chasing that taste ever since. The way the steam had curled above the cup. The way the bitterness had been balanced by something almost floral." He laughed, barely. "I've been a different person several times since then. Literally, in body after body. But I've remembered that coffee across all of them. I think I'd like to do that again. Find another cup of coffee that makes me remember why living can be worth it."

"That's a start."

"It's more than I've had in centuries." Bright looked at the triad. At Ace with the fragment, Mai with her shaking hand, Shammy with her blindness transformed into anchoring. "You gave me that. You gave me a reason to try. You showed me that wanting to stop wasn't the same as wanting to die. That there might be something worth living for, even when I'd forgotten what living meant."

"We're not done," Ace said. "The mission is complete, but we're not done. Something came back with us. Something that was sealed in Kur. We need to find it. Contain it. Before it causes problems."

"I know." Bright's smile was different now. Not tired. Not sad. Something else. Something that looked like the first stirrings of hope. "And I'll help. That's what I do. What I can do. What I want to do."

"Why?"

"Because for the first time in centuries, I actually want to see what happens next."

The sun was setting over the Iraqi desert.

The triad sat together, watching the light change, feeling the air that didn't taste like dust and death. The gate was closed. The goddess was at peace. The fragment was integrated.

And something else had come through with them. Something that was loose in the world now, something that needed to be found. Something ancient, something patient, something that had been sealed in Kur since before human memory and was now walking around in a reality it had never seen.

But that was tomorrow's problem.

Tonight, they were alive. Together. Changed, but together.

For the first time in a very long time, Bright wasn't thinking about death.

He was thinking about coffee.

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