

[Index](#) | [Chapter 2](#) →

Chapter 1: The One Who Cannot Die

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: Bright's amulet—cold, then warm, then cold again | POV: Bright then Triad ->

The amulet burned against his chest.

Not burned. Wrong word. Burned meant heat, damage, something you could react to. This was pressure. The moment between his last breath and his next one. The moment when consciousness hadn't quite transferred, hadn't settled into the new skin. Jack Bright had experienced that moment more times than he could count. Four hundred and thirty-seven documented transfers. Probably more. He'd stopped keeping track after two hundred, after the counting itself became meaningless, after the numbers just kept climbing no matter how carefully he tried to hold them.

He opened his eyes.

Ceiling. Gray. Industrial. A water stain in the corner shaped like a hand reaching for something it would never touch. He'd seen this ceiling before. Not this exact one. This body hadn't been in this room. But the shape of it, the stain, the gray. A hundred ceilings in a hundred bodies across a hundred years. The Foundation built from templates. Same concrete. Same containment aesthetic. He could wake up on a new continent in a new century and still recognize the water stain.

Some things remained. The architecture. The bad coffee in every facility. The way new medical staff looked at him, curious and wary and sometimes pitying. They always knew. The amulet gave it away, hanging against his chest like a brand.

He sat up. The body responded. Male, thirty-something, reasonable muscle mass, no obvious defects. He'd been in worse. The previous body had been a woman in her seventies, a poet from Prague who'd died peacefully in her sleep. He'd woken up wearing her memories like an ill-fitting coat. The sunsets she used to cry over. The wine she loved and would never taste again. This one was simpler. A Foundation security officer who took a lightning bolt to the chest during a containment breach. Clean. Efficient. Forgettable.

Fourteen seconds until staff arrived. Thirteen now. Twelve. Getting slower.

The door opened. Twelve seconds. Better than average. They usually hesitated at the threshold, at the sight of the amulet, at what it meant. Someone who couldn't stay dead was waking up in their bed.

"Dr. Bright." A medic. Young. Badge said Sato. Her eyes kept flicking to the amulet like she expected it to bite. "Consciousness transfer confirmed. Vitals stable. You've been cleared for duty."

"Thank you, Sato." He stood, testing balance. Good. No lingering vertigo. "How long?"

"Fourteen hours since the incident. Site-19 containment breach. You were in the blast radius of—"

"I remember." He didn't. The transfer erased the last few minutes of the previous body's life. But he'd learned to say he remembered. It saved time. Saved questions. Saved the pitying looks. "What's my schedule?"

She checked her tablet. "Briefing in forty minutes. The Kur project. The triad is en route."

Bright stopped.

The Kur project.

He'd been waiting for this briefing for sixty-three years. Died waiting for it. Eighteen times. Eighteen bodies. Six decades. Every time the project was ready, something happened. A breach. An attack. A budget review. A death.

His death, usually. The irony wasn't lost on him. He couldn't die permanently, but he could die temporarily, and every temporary death meant a new body, a new face. New memories to sort through. And the Kur project got delayed. The bureaucracy ground forward without him. The gate stayed sealed.

Until now.

"The triad," he said. "Which one?"

The medic blinked. "Sir?"

"The triad. There's more than one."

"Ah. The Bright-file triad, sir. Codenames Ace, Mai, and Shammy. The containment specialist unit." A pause. The kind of pause that meant something. "The one you assembled."

Of course. The unit named after him. Named after him because he'd assembled it, trained it, recommended the three members for formation. Named after him because the Foundation believed in irony, in naming things after the people who built them as a way of claiming ownership. Named after him because he'd been waiting to send them into Kur for sixty-three years, and now, finally, in this body, on this day, in this briefing room that smelled like recycled air, he was going to get his chance.

"Good," he said. "I'll be there."

The hallway outside the medical bay was long and gray and exactly like every hallway in every Foundation facility. He'd walked these halls in bodies that were dust now. Made decisions that killed people he'd cared about. Laughed in these halls when nothing was funny, because laughter was easier than silence, and silence was easier than screaming.

The amulet pressed against his chest. Cold. It would warm when he needed it to. Cold when he was alive. Warm when death approached. The mechanism had never been explained to his satisfaction. No one at the Foundation had ever really explained SCP-963. But it had been around his neck since 1543, and it had carried him through fourteen documented deaths and more he'd stopped counting. Fourteen that stuck. Fourteen endings that held. The other hundreds, the ones where he woke up in new bodies, the amulet pulled him back. Dragged him forward into another life. Another body to wear like a costume that never fit.

He'd stopped counting at two hundred. The numbers meant nothing.

The briefing room was the same as every briefing room. Same table. Same chairs. Same water jug that was never refilled often enough. Same fluorescent lights that made everyone look like they were being interrogated. At least in an interrogation, people wanted something from you. In a briefing, they just wanted you to listen and leave.

The triad was already there when he arrived. He watched them through the reinforced glass before entering. Cataloging.

Ace stood near the wall. Compact. Contained. Her hand rested on the hilt of one of her katanas. Not gripping. Just resting. The weapon was part of her in a way that went beyond training, beyond muscle memory, into something more fundamental. Violence given human form. Compressed into 120 centimeters of shadow-pressure and barely contained kinetic potential.

Mai sat at the table, pen moving constantly. Writing something. Calculating. Documenting. The pen was her weapon, her shield, her way of processing a world that didn't always make sense. She'd been doing that when he first met her, back in Tokyo, back when the world was simpler and his wanting was clearer. Still doing it now, all these years later.

Shammy stood near the window. Strange, because Foundation facilities didn't have real windows. She was reading the projected view the way she read actual weather. She'd always been able to do that. Read things that weren't there. Feel patterns that didn't exist yet. Sense the shape of things to come in the pressure of the air. It was what made her valuable. What made her strange. What had made him choose her.

He remembered when Ace was small. Not small the way she was still small, 120 centimeters, compact, shadow-pressure presence. Small the way a child is small. He'd found her in a village that no longer existed, during an event that shouldn't have happened, holding a blade she shouldn't have been able to lift. She'd looked at him with violet eyes that weren't quite her own and asked if he was there to kill her.

He'd said no.

He'd been lying. But not in the way she thought. He wasn't there to kill her. He was there because the Foundation sent him to contain or terminate the anomaly. She was the anomaly. Or part of it. The fragment she carried was the anomaly, the piece of something ancient that had attached itself to her during the Blood-Moon Rift, that had been trying to communicate with her ever since, that recognized in her something most people couldn't see.

He'd brought her back instead. Taught her. Trained her. Watched her grow into something that could hold her own against things that would destroy most people. Watched her find Mai. Find Shammy. Watched the triad become something the Foundation's containment algorithms couldn't predict. Something that worked together in ways that shouldn't have been possible. Greater than the sum of its parts.

He'd sent teams into Kur before.

None of them had come back.

This team might.

"So," he said, stepping into the room, hands on the table. "Any questions?"

Tension. He felt it the way anyone would. Shoulders tightening. Eyes not quite meeting his. Silences stretching longer than they should. Three people who trusted each other with their lives suddenly uncertain about why they were here.

Ace's hand on her blade. Mai's pen moving, moving. Shammy near the window, reading something he couldn't see.

"So," Ace said. Flat. Direct. "The briefing. The one where you tell us what we're actually walking into."

"The briefing is the briefing." He smiled. "Intelligence is presented. Questions are asked. Mission parameters are established. Standard Foundation protocol."

"Standard Foundation protocol," Mai repeated. The pen hadn't stopped. "The briefing document references a retrieval mission. Artifact designation SCP-XXXX. Classification pending. Containment status: breached. But there are no specifics about what we're retrieving, what the artifact does, or why it suddenly became urgent after three years of inactivity."

"Probability assessment," Ace added. "The probability that a dormant containment site becomes active the same week you reassemble this specific triad—"

"Coincidence," Bright said. "Or fate. Or the Foundation's scheduling algorithm finally aligning with my availability. Ask the people who run the budget."

"We're asking you." Ace's hand hadn't moved from her blade. "You recruited us for this. You specifically requested the Bright-file triad for a Kur-related retrieval. We've never worked a Kur case. We've never even been cleared for Kur-adjacent operations. And now we're the only team available for what's being described as a 'critical containment breach.'"

A small smile. She wasn't wrong. She'd pieced together more than the briefing should have allowed. But Ace had always been observant. It was why she'd survived. Why the fragment had chosen her. Why, when he closed his eyes and thought about the team he wanted beside him when he finally walked back into Kur, he thought of her first.

"Kur is not a standard containment designation," he said. "Kur is a place. The Sumerian underworld. The land of the dead. And the artifact we're retrieving is not an object."

He let that sit for a moment.

"It's a gate."

Silence.

Then: "Explain." Mai's pen had stopped. That was unusual.

"The Book of Kur," Bright said. "That's what the Foundation calls it. An ancient Sumerian text containing necromantic rituals and instructions for communicating with the dead. The official assessment is that it's a book. Containable. Classifiable." He spread his hands. "The unofficial assessment is that it's something else entirely."

"Something else," Shammy said. Quiet. The air around her had shifted. "What kind of something else?"

"The kind that might be a doorway to the underworld." He spread his hands. "The kind that might

already be opening.”

Ace's hand tightened on her blade. “You've been to Kur.”

Not a question.

“I've been a lot of places,” Bright said.

“You've been there. And you're sending us.”

“I'm not sending you anywhere.” He stood. “I'm going with you. If you have a problem with that, file a complaint with HR. I'm sure they'll get back to you in six to eight weeks.”

“You're not answering the question.”

“No,” Bright agreed. “I'm not. Because the answer is complicated, and this isn't the place for complicated answers.”

“Then give us a simple one.” Mai's voice was sharp. Analytical. “Why us? Why this team? Why now?”

Bright looked at her. Silver hair. Runic eyes. The stabilizing field she carried like a shield. He'd found her in Tokyo, after the breach that should have killed her. She'd held the line when nothing else could. Held it until he arrived, and then she'd let herself fall, and he'd caught her, and she'd never quite forgiven him for that. For making her need someone. For proving she couldn't do everything alone.

“Because you're the only team I trust,” he said. “And because I've been waiting sixty-three years for this. And because—”

He stopped. The words caught. Tangled up with sixty-three years of wanting and running and pretending he wasn't afraid.

“Because the gate is opening whether we're ready or not. And if we're going to walk into the underworld, I'd rather walk with people who won't hesitate when things get difficult.”

“What things?” Ace asked.

He smiled. Not a kind smile.

“You'll find out.”

The briefing continued. Bright presented intelligence he knew was incomplete. Dodged questions the way he always did, with charm, misdirection, and just enough truth to make the lies believable. The triad pushed back. They always pushed back. It was one of the things he appreciated about them. They didn't accept things at face value. They didn't trust authority just because it was authority. They questioned everything. Especially him.

But underneath the questions, underneath the resistance, he could feel something else.

Recognition.

They knew something was different this time. They could feel it the way Shammy felt pressure changes, not directly, but through subtle shifts. Something was coming. Something that had been

waiting.

He'd told them the gate was opening. He hadn't told them what was on the other side. He hadn't told them about Ereshkigal. The offer she'd made sixty-three years ago. The offer he'd been too afraid to take. He hadn't told them he was going back because he hoped this time he'd finally have the courage to accept it.

He hadn't told them he was afraid. That was the one thing he could never tell them.

"The mission parameters," Mai said. Her pen had started again. "Retrieval of the Book of Kur. Closure of the gate. Return to Foundation custody within seventy-two hours. Extraction team on standby."

"That's the official version," Bright said.

"There's an unofficial version?"

"There's always an unofficial version."

Ace's eyes narrowed. The violet caught the fluorescent light. The fragment inside her was stirring. He could always tell. Something in the way space folded around her. The way the air bent toward her presence.

"You're not telling us something," she said.

"I'm not telling you everything." He touched the amulet. Cold. For now. "There are things I don't know yet. Things that will become clear when we arrive at the site. Things that—" He stopped. "Things I need to see for myself."

"See for yourself," Mai repeated. "At the site. In Iraq."

"Site-47. Yes."

"The site that was sealed eighteen months ago after three separate teams lost contact."

"Four teams," Bright corrected. "The original excavation team. Two Foundation response teams. And me."

Quiet.

"You were there," Ace said. "Recently."

"I was there." He didn't elaborate. "Before the site was sealed. I assessed the situation. Made recommendations."

"Recommendations that were ignored."

"Recommendations that were filed and forgotten. It's what happens to most recommendations. The Foundation is very good at forgetting things it doesn't want to remember."

"What did you recommend?"

"To wait." Quiet now. "To let the gate stay closed. To not poke the sleeping dragon."

"And instead, someone poked it."

"Someone always pokes the sleeping dragon." He smiled. "That's the nature of the Foundation. We poke things until they wake up. Then we deal with the consequences."

The triad exchanged glances. Wordless communication he'd never quite decoded. Three people who had learned to read each other so completely they didn't need words anymore. Who knew what each other was thinking before the thoughts were fully formed.

"You're going to get us killed," Ace said.

"Probably," Bright agreed. "But not today. Today, we're just going to walk into the underworld and see what happens."

"And if we can't come back?"

Bright looked at her. The violet eyes. The fragment stirring behind them. The shadow-pressure filling the space around her like a second skin. The small frame carrying more weight than anyone realized.

"Then I'll make sure you can," he said. "That's what I'm there for."

The cafeteria had the worst coffee he'd tasted since 1847.

He remembered 1847. London. The cholera outbreak. He'd been working for the Foundation's predecessor, different name, same purpose, and the coffee had been boiled tar served in cups that hadn't been washed since the previous century. This was worse. At least the 1847 coffee had been hot. This was lukewarm. The coffee of people who had given up on quality and were just going through the motions.

He was thinking about this, the coffee, the four hundred and thirty-three complaints, the Guatemalan blend that had made him weep, while four hours counted down to a gate that led to the Sumerian underworld. While locks cracked on a doorway that shouldn't exist. While the thing he'd been searching for finally came within reach.

Because thinking about coffee was easier than thinking about what came next.

The door opened behind him.

Ace. She didn't announce herself. Never did. Just stood there, shadow-pressure filling the room, hand not quite on her blade. Waiting.

"The briefing was incomplete," she said.

"The briefing is always incomplete."

"You've been to Kur."

"I said that."

"You didn't say you made a deal with its queen."

He turned. Studied her. 120 centimeters of compressed kinetic potential. Violet eyes darker in the fluorescent light. The fragment was quiet right now. He could always tell when it stirred. Something in the way space folded around her.

"You've been reading classified files," he said.

"I read everything I can." Flat. "It's how I stay alive."

"Staying alive." He smiled. "Interesting goal."

"It's your goal too. You said you're looking for a way to stop. Stop dying. Stop waking up. Stop—"

"I said I'm looking for a way to stop." He stood. Walked to the window. The projected forest that didn't exist. "I didn't say I'm looking for a way to stay alive. Those are different things."

She was quiet. Then: "Mai says you're lying about something. She can't calculate what. But the probabilities are wrong."

"Mai calculates probabilities. I calculate centuries. We're both right. We're both wrong."

"You're deflecting."

"I'm always deflecting." He turned back. "But I'll tell you this. The gate is opening. The Book of Kur is not a book. And the queen of the underworld made me an offer sixty-three years ago that I've been waiting to take."

"What kind of offer?"

He looked at her. The violet eyes. The fragment that had been with her since the Blood-Moon Rift. The small frame carrying more weight than anyone realized.

"The kind you don't refuse," he said. "Unless you're afraid."

"Are you?"

"Afraid?" He laughed. The first genuine laugh in this body. "I've been afraid of the same thing for five hundred years. I've gotten used to it."

She didn't move. "What are you afraid of?"

He looked at her. Really looked.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that this time I'll take the offer. And I'm afraid I won't. I haven't decided which is worse."

He finished his coffee. Set down the cup. Walked past her.

"Four hours," he said. "Pack what you need. Say what you need to say. And don't tell anyone what I just told you, because I'll deny it, and the Foundation will believe me over you."

He walked out.

Four hours.

He'd been waiting sixty-three years.

He could wait four more.

The transport was a standard Foundation cargo shuttle, modified for personnel transport with uncomfortable seats and inadequate climate control. Bright sat in the back, watching the triad prepare in their own ways. Ace cleaned her katanas. Not because they needed it. Because cleaning helped her think. Mai ran calculations on her tablet, pen still moving across a separate notebook. Shammy stared out the window at clouds she could probably read better than any weather satellite.

He remembered his first time in Kur. Different body. Different century. He'd gone in alone, thinking his immortality made him invincible. He'd learned otherwise. The underworld didn't care about immortality. Death was death there, and death was everywhere, and the only way out was through seven gates that took something from you with every passage.

He'd made it through five before he turned back. Not because he was strong enough to resist. Because he was afraid of what Ereshkigal would offer. Afraid of how much he wanted it.

Now he was going back. With three people who had become, against his better judgment, something like family.

"Ace," he said.

She looked up. The cleaning had stopped.

"When we get there, stay close to Mai. Your fragment will respond to what's in that place. Mai's field can help stabilize it."

"And Shammy?"

"Shammy will need to stay close to you. The underworld has no air to feel. She'll be blind there. You can be her anchor."

"You know a lot about how we work."

"I've been watching you for years." He smiled. "It's what I do. I watch. I wait. I send people into places I won't go alone."

"Is that what this is? You're using us?"

"I'm asking you to come with me." He met her violet eyes. "There's a difference."

"Is there?"

"You tell me."

She held his gaze for a long moment. Then she went back to cleaning her blade.

"I don't trust you," she said.

"You shouldn't."

"But I'll go anyway."

"Why?"

She didn't answer. She didn't have to. He knew why. They all knew why.

Because that's what the triad did. They went anyway. Someone had to. The alternative was letting the world burn, and even if they were tired, even if they were scared, even if they didn't fully understand what they were walking into.

They went anyway.

The transport banked east. Below them, the desert stretched toward a horizon that promised nothing except heat and dust and the gate that had waited sixty-three years for Jack Bright to return.

The amulet was cold against his chest.

It would warm when death approached.

It always did.

<!-- End Chapter 1 -->

[Index](#) | [Chapter 2](#) →—

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