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Chapter 2: Breath of the Dead

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: The containment site—a wound in the earth, Shammy says the air is “holding its breath” | POV: Shammy then Triad -->

The air in Iraq was wrong.

Shammy knew this before the transport touched ground. Before she could see the site. Before Mai's tactical readouts started flashing warnings. Before Ace's hand went to her blade in that unconscious reflex. She knew it the way a body knows it's about to be sick. Tightening in the chest. Pressure behind the eyes. A wrongness that had nothing to do with logic and everything to do with the fact that something in the atmosphere was not as it should be.

The pressure outside wasn't right.

“Shammy?”

Mai's voice. Measured. Always measured. Shammy opened her eyes. The transport's interior was standard Foundation gray. The same gray as every facility, every transport, every briefing room. Supposed to be calming. Professional. Actually suffocating, like living inside a filing cabinet, like breathing air that had been breathed through too many people already.

“I'm fine.” She wasn't. “The air outside is holding its breath. That's the only way I can describe it. Not still. Not calm. Holding its breath. Like something's about to happen. Like the atmosphere itself is waiting for a signal it's been waiting centuries to receive.”

She paused. The words weren't enough. They never were.

“Something is buried down there. Something sealed away. Something that's starting to wake up.”

“You've been quiet for forty-three minutes.” Mai's pen was moving. Always moving. Ink bleeding onto the page in patterns only she understood. “That's unusual, even for you.”

“I'm reading the air.”

“The air.”

“The pressure. The currents.” Shammy shifted. The transport was too small for her. Doorframes were going to be a problem. They were always a problem. But that wasn't what made her uncomfortable. It was the way the atmosphere pressed against her senses from miles away. Like hearing a scream in a frequency most people couldn't detect. Like feeling an earthquake before the tremors started.

“Something's wrong with the air here. Something old. Something that's been waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Ace hadn't looked up from her blade maintenance. The emerald glow caught the transport's harsh lighting, casting small shadows that seemed deeper than they should be.

"I don't know." Shammy closed her eyes. Let the pressure settle against her skin like a second shadow. "But it's been waiting a long time. Longer than the site. Longer than the Foundation. Something's down there, and it's waking up."

The atmospheric sense was harder to describe than people realized. Not sight. Not sound. More like feeling a room before you entered it, the way the air moved, pushed and pulled, the way it remembered everyone who had passed through. Most people filtered that out. Shammy never learned how. Every pressure change. Every subtle shift in density. Every whisper of wind telling her something about the space around her. That was how she knew when someone was coming before they arrived. How she knew a room was haunted before anyone said a word.

How she knew, now, that something beneath the Iraqi desert was starting to breathe.

Outside, the desert stretched toward a horizon that shimmered with heat. Somewhere ahead, a hole had been dug into the earth. Ancient seals cracking. The dead beginning to breathe, and the air above them holding its breath in anticipation.

"The containment site is forty-seven kilometers northeast," Mai said, reading from her tablet. "Site-47. Established three years ago after initial excavation revealed a Sumerian burial complex. Officially classified as an archaeological dig. Unofficially—" The pen slowed. "Something went wrong."

"Something always goes wrong," Ace muttered.

"Something went wrong eighteen months ago," Mai continued. Carefully neutral. But Shammy heard the tension underneath. "Three Foundation teams lost contact. The site was sealed. Classified as inactive. And now—" She looked up. Eyes meeting Shammy's. "Now it's active again. And we're being sent to find out why."

Shammy felt the air change as the transport began its descent.

Subtle. Most people wouldn't have noticed. But she felt it. The pressure shifted. The currents pulled toward a point on the horizon. Something was drawing the atmosphere toward it. Pulling the air down into the earth, like a drain in a bathtub, except the water was the sky. The air was being swallowed. Sucked down into the ground like something was drinking it, feeding on it, using it for something that required atmosphere instead of producing it.

"We should turn back," she said quietly.

The transport continued its descent.

Ace looked up from her blade maintenance for the first time since they'd boarded. Violet eyes fixed on Shammy with an intensity that would have been unsettling to anyone who didn't know her.

"You never say that. You always want to see what's on the other side."

"Not this time."

"This time is different."

"Yes." Shammy opened her eyes. "Something from before. Something that shouldn't be awake. Something that—"

She stopped. The words weren't enough. How did you explain to someone that the air was dreaming?

That the atmosphere was caught between states, between awake and asleep, between living and dead, because something underneath was breathing in ways that atmosphere wasn't meant to breathe?

"Something from before," Ace repeated. Her hand stilled on her blade.

"Yes."

Ace studied her. Then returned to her blades. "Then we go in with eyes open. Whatever's waiting, we face it together."

The containment site looked like a wound.

Shammy saw it first. The way the earth folded inward. The ground carved open and then covered over with Foundation prefab structures. The excavation extended deeper than the surface suggested, burrowing into the earth like a tick digging into skin. She could feel the void beneath, the way the air moved into it and didn't come back. The wound went deep. Deeper than anything had a right to go. Deeper than the digging should have allowed.

Not just holding its breath now. Wrong. The pressure didn't move the way pressure should. It pooled. It collected. It sank into the excavation and stayed, like water finding cracks that had been waiting for it since before humans learned to dig. Something was keeping the air trapped. Refusing to let go.

"This is where they found it," Mai said. Analytical. But tense underneath. "The Book of Kur. Whatever that actually means."

"The Foundation built on top of an existing excavation." Ace's voice was flat. Eyes scanning the perimeter, cataloging exits, assessing threats. "That's not standard protocol. They should have cleared the site first."

"Maybe they didn't know what was here." Mai adjusted her tablet. "Or maybe they did know and built anyway. The Foundation has a history of building on top of things it doesn't fully understand."

"Building on top of," Shammy repeated. "Like burying something you can't get rid of."

The others looked at her.

"That's what it feels like. The air is being pulled down. Into the ground. Like something underneath is breathing it in and not breathing it out."

She struggled for words. The sensation was difficult to describe. Not like normal breathing. Like the way a fire breathes. Slow, patient, consuming something most people couldn't see. Something that had been consuming for a very long time.

"The pressure is layered," she said slowly. "There's the normal pressure from the atmosphere. And then underneath, something else. Pressing up from below. Not geological. Not natural." A pause. "It's been pressing for a very long time."

"And?"

"And it's getting stronger." Shammy looked toward the prefab structures. Toward the gates that led

into the earth. "Whatever is down there, it's waking up. The pressure is building. It's going to break through, unless—"

She didn't finish. She didn't know what would happen.

Mai had gone quiet. Her pen had stopped. That was more alarming than anything Shammy had said. Mai's pen never stopped. It was like a heartbeat. The only way she knew how to stay calm.

"You're saying there's something conscious down there," Mai said finally. Carefully neutral. "Not just an anomaly. Something aware."

"I don't know if aware is the right word." Shammy watched the way the air moved, or didn't move, around the excavation site. "But something is paying attention. Something has noticed us. The pressure around the site is different from anywhere else. Like standing in a room with someone watching you. You can't see them, but you can feel their eyes."

Ace's voice was flat. "How long until it becomes a threat?"

"I can't tell. The patterns are strange. Not like weather or pressure systems I've felt before. It's—"

Shammy struggled. The closest she could come: it was like trying to read the emotions of something that didn't have emotions the way humans understood them. Something vast. Something old. Something aware of them the way a hurricane might be aware of buildings in its path. Not caring. Not hostile. Just present. Just doing what it had always done, and they happened to be in the way.

Mai wrote that down. Pen moving again, but slowly. Deliberately. Processing.

"Then we need to be careful," Mai said. "Foundation personnel have been here for three years. Whatever this is, it's been contained this long. We just need to assess and report."

"Unless the containment is failing," Ace said quietly.

No one answered that.

The Foundation containment team was waiting.

A woman in tactical gear. Military posture. Face professionally neutral. Badge said Captain Reyes. Shammy could feel the tension in her like a knot in a rope. Tight. Controlled. About to snap. The woman's breathing was wrong. Too fast. Too shallow. The breathing of someone who had been scared for so long they'd forgotten what it felt like to be calm. Eighteen months of holding her breath and not remembering how to let it go.

"Welcome to Site-47." Clipped. Professional. "Containment team lead. We've been expecting you."

"Expecting us." Ace's voice was flat. "For how long?"

Reyes checked her tablet. "The briefing indicated you would arrive at 1400 hours. It's 1415. You're ahead of the timeline we were given."

Shammy studied her. Something wrong with the way she was holding herself. Not quite fear, but something adjacent. Something that came from spending too long near a thing that shouldn't exist.

Something that had seeped into her bones, the way cold becomes part of a stone left outside too long.

"You're not standard Foundation military," Ace said. Unblinking assessment. "Your posture is wrong."

Reyes's professional mask flickered. Just for a moment. "I was military before I was Foundation. Eleven years Army, three in Foundation tactical response. The posture never leaves."

"Your files indicated unusual capabilities." Her tone hardened. "Your team was specifically requested. I'm to brief you on-site and coordinate extraction. We have a containment breach situation."

"Breach." Mai's pen had stopped. "The briefing indicated retrieval. Not containment."

"The briefing was incomplete." Reyes started walking toward the site entrance. "The situation has evolved. The artifact is not a book. It's a doorway. The protocols we were given were for an object. The protocols for a doorway are different."

"What kind of doorway?" Ace's hand was near her blade. Not on it. Near.

Reyes turned. "I'll show you. But I should warn you. The site has unusual atmospheric properties. Some of our personnel have reported difficulty with sensory perception."

Shammy felt the air shift again. The wrongness was spreading. Expanding. Reaching toward them like fingers that had been reaching for a very long time.

"I can feel it," she said. Everyone looked at her. "The air. It's not just holding its breath. It's being held. Something is holding the air still. Not geological. Not natural. Something is doing this."

Reyes's mask flickered again. Longer this time. Shammy saw it. The woman's shoulders tightened. Her breathing changed. Not just scared. Relieved. Like someone who had been carrying a weight for a very long time and was finally seeing someone else who might understand how heavy it was.

"Your files said you had atmospheric sensitivity," Reyes said. "That's one of the reasons you were selected."

"One of the reasons." Ace's voice was flat. "What are the other reasons?"

Reyes didn't answer. She just kept walking.

Ace and Mai exchanged glances. Shammy saw it. The silent communication. The calculation that something was being hidden. Reyes knew more than she was saying. Had been knowing more than she was saying for eighteen months, and the weight of it was crushing her.

"We should talk to her," Mai said quietly as they walked. "Whatever she's not telling us, it's affecting her."

"Notice her hands," Ace said equally quietly. "She's been touching her sidearm. Grooming behavior. Displacement activity. She's scared but hiding it."

"I noticed." Mai's pen was moving again. Taking notes on human behavior. Always working. "Whatever she knows, it's bad enough that she's afraid to share it."

"Or she's afraid she'll be relieved of command if she does."

"Foundation commanders don't get relieved for telling the truth. They get relieved for losing control."

"Is there a difference?"

Mai didn't answer. They had reached the entrance. No more time for private conversation.

The excavation went deep.

Shammy felt it before she saw it. The void beneath the prefab structures. The ground carved open and then covered. The Foundation had built containment on top of something much older, sealing it with concrete and classification levels instead of understanding. Burying it the way humans had always buried things they couldn't deal with. Deeply. Permanently. With the hope that if they couldn't see it, it couldn't hurt them.

But the air knew.

"Initial excavation was three years ago," Mai said, reading from her tablet. "Archaeological team found the doorway. Foundation established containment. The team lost contact with headquarters eighteen months ago. The team that went to investigate lost contact nine months after that. Site-47 was designated inactive. Last week, seismic readings indicated the doorway was becoming active."

"You've been monitoring this for three years," Ace said to Reyes. "And you still don't know what's down there?"

Reyes's jaw tightened. "We've been monitoring. Containing. We've been—" She stopped. "We've been losing people."

"How many?"

"Seventeen. Total. Including the original excavation team, two response teams, and support staff who got too close."

Shammy felt the weight of those numbers in the air. Seventeen people. Seventeen absences where there had been presence. Seventeen gaps in the atmosphere where living bodies used to be. The air remembered them.

"The atmospheric readings are—" Reyes stopped. "They're not normal. Pressure readings don't match the geological data. Air quality sensors show oxygen levels that shouldn't exist at this depth. And the—" She hesitated. "Thermal imaging shows heat signatures below the sealed chamber that don't correlate with any known natural process."

"What kind of heat signatures?" Mai asked.

"The kind that suggest something is alive down there." Barely above a whisper. "Something that's been alive for a very long time."

Ace's hand moved to her blade. "Define 'something.'"

"I don't know how to classify it." Reyes's composure was cracking. "It's not human. Not animal. Not any form of life in our database. But it's breathing. And it's been breathing for a very long time."

Shammy tried to translate what she was feeling into something the others could understand.

"The breathing isn't coming from one thing," she said slowly. "It's more like the way a forest breathes. Or an ocean. The sum of many parts working together. But this isn't a forest. This is—"

"Something else," Reyes finished. "Something that shouldn't exist."

The descent was longer than Shammy expected.

Foundation lights mounted on Sumerian walls. Industrial cables against carved relief. Electrical conduit against cuneiform carved before writing was invented. The contrast was jarring. Like finding a modern streetlight embedded in a cave painting. The Foundation had built their infrastructure on top of something ancient, and the ancient was showing through the cracks.

Shammy paused at a section where a temporary lighting rig had been mounted directly over an ancient relief. Figures descending into what looked like a great darkness. Hands raised. Mouths open in silent screams. Begging. Or warning. Hard to tell, after so many thousands of years.

"This is wrong," she said aloud.

Everyone stopped.

"Wrong how?" Ace. Immediate. Alert.

Shammy pointed at a wall. Not at the wall itself. At the space around it. "There's a door here. Not the one you're taking us to. Another one."

Reyes went still. "What?"

"The air." Shammy closed her eyes, tried to feel past the wrongness. "It's moving toward something. The pressure is going somewhere. Not down. In." She moved her hand. "Through. There's something behind this wall."

"That area was sealed during the initial excavation." Careful now. "The Foundation determined it was structurally unsound."

"The air is moving toward it."

"Then it's structural." Harder. "We don't have time to explore sealed sections. The primary doorway is this way. Follow me."

Shammy watched her walk away. The air around Reyes was wrong. Held. Compressed. Professional. But underneath, something else. Desperation. A woman ordered to guard something she didn't understand, doing it for so long she'd forgotten what it was like to not be afraid.

"She knows," Shammy said quietly to Ace. "She knows something is wrong. She's just not telling us."

"How do you know?"

"Because she's been holding her breath for months. You can see it in how she moves. Waiting for something to happen and hoping it doesn't."

"You see a lot, for someone who can't see the air."

"I see what matters." Shammy followed the group. "And what matters is that something down here is waking up. Something that doesn't want to be contained anymore."

The primary doorway was carved stone. Seven locks visible in the surface.

Not locks in the traditional sense. Seals. Marks. Patterns Shammy's eyes couldn't quite follow. The lines shifted when she looked directly, rearranging into configurations that hurt to think about. The air moved through the cracks between them, pooling at the base, sinking into something underneath. The stone was drinking the air.

The stone was hungry.

Mai stopped in front of the seals. Her analytical mind was trying to process what she was seeing. The patterns resisted categorization.

"This isn't Sumerian cuneiform," she said. "It's related, but older. These symbols predate the historical record."

"How old?" Ace asked.

"Based on the weathering patterns, the style, the context—" Pen moving again. "Thousands of years. This could be proto-writing. Or something older than writing itself."

Shammy stepped forward. The air moved with her. Or toward her. Or through her. Hard to tell. The wrongness pressed against her senses, making it difficult to feel the pressure clearly. Like hearing music over static. Like reading text through frosted glass.

"There's something behind it," she said. Not a question.

"Yes," Reyes confirmed.

"Not a book."

"No."

"Not an object."

"No."

Shammy closed her eyes. The air was pulling. The pressure was sinking. And underneath the wrongness, underneath the holding and the pooling and the draining, something else.

Something that recognized her.

She opened her eyes.

"Ace." Her voice came out wrong. Tight. "I can feel something."

Ace was beside her immediately. Not touching. Shammy didn't like to be touched. But present. The shadow-pressure from Ace was like a familiar weight in the air. Something she could anchor to.

"What do you feel?"

"The air is wrong. But underneath the wrongness, something knows I'm here." She stopped. "It's like standing next to a door that someone is standing behind, waiting to open. It's been waiting. For someone like me."

"Someone like you?"

"Someone who isn't—" Shammy struggled. "Someone who isn't quite human. Someone who exists between."

Ace's hand found Shammy's shoulder. Brief. Grounding. "You're human enough."

"Am I?" Shammy looked at the doorway. The seven seals. The stone pulling the air down, in, through. "Because whatever is behind that door doesn't think so. It sees me and—" She stopped. "It sees what I am. And it's been waiting for that."

The first seal cracked.

Not a sound. A feeling. The air moved. Not right, wrong, but wrong in a new way. The holding was releasing. The breath was being let out.

Shammy felt it first. Pressure shifting. Wrongness changing. Then she heard it. A crack. Not loud. Soft. Like stone giving way after centuries of stillness. Like ice cracking in spring. Like something that had been waiting to break finally finding the strength.

Then a voice. Barely audible. Coming from the doorway. Not through it. From it. As if the stone itself had learned to speak.

"You're late."

Old. Older than the stone. Older than the seals. The voice of something that had been waiting so long it had become patient, become stillness, become the space between one breath and the next. Something that had been holding its breath for millennia and was finally allowed to speak.

The air in the chamber shifted.

Something was coming.

Ace's hand moved to her blade. Not gripping yet. Just touching. Ready.

"What just happened?" Reyes's voice was sharp with barely contained fear.

Shammy took a breath. The air tasted like dust and age and something else. Something metallic. Something wrong. Something that had been sleeping and was now beginning to stir.

"The first seal cracked," she said quietly. "And something spoke."

"Something?"

"Something that knows we're here."

The second seal began to crack.

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