

[← Chapter 2](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 4 →](#)

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## Chapter 3: The Locked Door

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: The artifact—not a book, a sealed doorway with seven locks | POV: Triad rotating ->

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The voice came from the stone.

Not through it. Not around it. From it. As if the doorway itself had spoken, or something behind it had pressed words through the cracks like water through a dam, like memory through a wound. The sound was not a sound. The air hadn't moved fast enough to carry sound. It was pressure. Weight. Words waiting in the stone for someone to finally arrive and hear them, pressed into the rock like fossils.

You're late.

The voice was gray.

Not in tone. Tone implied sound, and this wasn't sound. This was something older. Something shaped by silence until it learned to speak anyway, formed by absence until presence was the only answer left. The voice was the color of dust. The color of the space between living and dead. The color of something that had forgotten what breathing meant but remembered what wanting felt like.

Shammy felt the air release. The holding, the stillness, the pressure pressing down on the site since before any of them were born, all of it let go at once. The air rushed back into the chamber, filling a void she hadn't even realized was there. She could breathe again. Feel again. The atmospheric pressure that had been holding its breath around her since they arrived finally exhaled.

For the first time since arriving at the site, the world felt normal.

But not normal. Different. Something had changed.

"That's not possible." Mai's voice was analytical, but Shammy heard the crack underneath. The pen had stopped. The first time Mai's pen had stopped since they'd boarded the transport. That pen had been moving for as long as Shammy had known her, a constant rhythm, a way of processing the world Mai had never been able to turn off. And now it was still. "The doorway is sealed. Seven locks. No mechanism for—"

"It spoke." Ace's hand was on her blade. Not near it. On it. The difference was significant. Ace's hands were always near her weapons, but this was different. This was the grip of someone who had decided violence was the answer before anyone had asked the question. "The doorway spoke."

"It's not the doorway." Shammy's voice came out wrong. Strained. She was still processing what she had felt. The rush of air. The sudden presence of atmosphere after so long with nothing. The way the pressure had shifted from holding to releasing, from waiting to acknowledging. "It's something behind it. Something on the other side."

Reyes had gone very still. Her professional mask was gone. What remained was compression, tightness, the held breath Shammy had felt since they arrived. A knot of fear held together by training and duty. A human being placed in proximity to something she didn't understand and unable to leave for eighteen months. Compression all the way down.

"The first seal cracked two weeks ago," Reyes said. Flat. Controlled in a different way now. Not professional. Desperate. "The second seal cracked this morning. We were told to expect your team. We were told—"

"You were told to contain a book." Ace's voice was flat too. Hers was the flat of someone who had already drawn conclusions and was verifying, testing edges. "You were told this was a retrieval mission. You were told the object was inert."

"The assessment was—"

"Incomplete." Mai finished. Her pen had started again, fast, agitated, writing something Shammy couldn't see but could feel through the tension in the air. "Everyone's briefing was independently incomplete. Dr. Bright's. The containment team's. Ours. The probability that multiple independent briefings were all incomplete without coordination is statistically insignificant. Someone orchestrated this."

Ace's hand tightened on her blade. "Or someone is lying."

"Same result." Mai's voice was sharp. "Either way, we're not getting the full picture. Someone has been withholding information since before we arrived. And the pattern suggests it's not accident. It's design."

Shammy stepped forward. The air was moving now. Not the wrong, held, draining movement from before. Actual movement. Pressure currents. Weather patterns. For the first time since arriving, she could feel the atmosphere doing what atmospheres were supposed to do.

But underneath the movement, something else.

Recognition.

"The thing that spoke," she said quietly. "It knows something. It's not just waiting. It's—"

"It's been waiting." Ace finished. Her violet eyes were fixed on the doorway, dark with something Shammy could feel through the connection but couldn't see. "For us. Specifically. For the triad. For whatever we're carrying that it's recognizing."

The doorway didn't move. The stone didn't change. But Shammy felt something shift. Not in the air. Not in the pressure. In the recognition itself. The thing behind the doorway was aware of them. Not just aware. Paying attention. Like a sleeper disturbed, like something that had been waiting so long it had become part of the stone and was now remembering how to be awake. How to want. How to reach toward something it had been reaching toward for centuries.

"Ace." Mai's voice was sharp. "The locks."

Ace was already moving. She approached the doorway, not close, not touching, but close enough to see. Shammy followed. Mai followed. Reyes stayed where she was, her fear a weight in the air Shammy could feel pressing against her senses.

The seals were carved deep into the stone. Not symbols. Not writing. Shapes that seemed to exist in more dimensions than three, edges curving in ways that hurt to follow. Shammy tried to look directly at one and her eyes slid away, refusing to process what they were seeing. Wrong. Not broken. Wrong. As if geometry itself had been bent into configurations human eyes were never meant to interpret.

"They're not locks," Ace said. Flat. "Not physical locks. They're seals. Gates within the gate. Doors that are supposed to stay closed until someone opens them from the other side."

"The first seal cracked two weeks ago." Mai was writing, documenting, her tablet catching the dim light. "The second seal cracked this morning. Based on the acceleration pattern—"

"Pressure from inside." Ace interrupted. "Something is pushing. Not pulling. From the other side. Trying to get out."

Shammy felt it. The recognition was becoming clearer, sharpening into something she could almost name. It wasn't directed at her, not specifically. It was directed at the air around her. At the pressure she carried. At the part of her that wasn't quite human. The part that had always existed between states, between the air and the world, between the living and the—

"The third seal is cracking," she said.

Everyone looked at her.

"The air is—" She struggled. "The air wanted to go through there. It's being pulled toward the third seal like water toward a drain, like breath toward a lung. It's the weakest point. The place where the pressure is most concentrated. The place where—"

"How do you know?" Reyes. Sharp with fear.

"Because I can feel it." Shammy stepped closer to the stone. "The air wants to go through there. It's been trying for two weeks. It's almost—"

The third seal cracked.

The sound was different from the first two. Not a release. A fracture. The stone split along lines that hadn't existed a moment before, and through the crack came light that wasn't light. Gray. The gray of the voice. The gray of the space between. The gray of something that had been waiting so long it had become part of the stone, fossilized into the very rock now breaking to let it through.

"What the hell—" Reyes stepped back. The professional mask was gone entirely now. Raw fear. Eighteen months of holding it together, finally running out of the ability to pretend.

"It's not harmful." Shammy said, though she wasn't sure. The light-gray pressed against her senses like a hand against a window. Like something looking out. Like something wanting in but not knowing how to ask. "It's just old. It's been waiting so long it's become part of the stone. Forgotten how to be anything else."

The light stabilized. The crack remained.

"Ace." Mai's voice was suddenly very quiet. "Your eyes."

Shammy turned. Ace was standing rigid, hands still on her blade, face locked in an expression Shammy had never seen before. And her eyes—

The violet was darker. Not just darker. Deeper. Like something was looking out from behind them. Like a window had opened in Ace's face and something was standing on the other side, watching through eyes that weren't quite Ace's anymore.

"Ace?" Shammy reached for her, then stopped. Touching during a fragment surge could make things worse. Could create feedback. Could push the fragment further out or further in. Ace needed to come back on her own. "Ace, can you hear me?"

"I—" Ace's voice came out wrong. Stretched. Like two voices overlapping. Like the fragment was speaking through her throat at the same time she was. "I can feel it. The fragment is—it recognizes something. Something from—"

She didn't finish. Her hand went to her head, pressing against her temple like she was trying to hold something in. Keep something from spilling out.

"Something in there knows what Ace is carrying," Shammy said. She felt it too now, paying attention. The way the recognition had shifted, focusing on Ace like a spotlight. On the fragment. On the thing that had been part of Ace since the Blood-Moon Rift, since before any of them knew who Ace would become. "It's been waiting. For her. Specifically."

"Why?" Mai. Sharp. "Why her?"

"Because of the Blood-Moon Rift." Ace's voice was her own again, but strained. "The fragment came from somewhere. From when my village was destroyed. I don't remember what happened, but the fragment does. It remembers. It knows."

The fourth seal cracked.

This time everyone felt it. Not just Shammy. The wrongness surged through the chamber like a wave, and even Reyes gasped. Air pressure spiked, dropped, stabilized at a new normal that was worse than before. The air tasted different now. Older. Like something had been released that couldn't be put back.

"The pattern is accelerating." Mai. Her pen was a blur. "First seal: two weeks. Second seal: hours. Third seal: minutes. Fourth seal: seconds. At this rate—"

"The fifth seal will break while we're standing here." Ace finished. Flat, but her eyes were still dark with fragment-stir. "We need to decide. Now. Run, or go through?"

Reyes made a sound like a laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Going through isn't an option. The protocols clearly state—"

"The protocols are meaningless." Ace turned on her. "Seventeen people have died here. The seals are breaking. Something is coming through whether we want it or not. We can face it on our terms or be overwhelmed by it."

"You don't understand what you're suggesting—"

"I understand perfectly." Ace's hand was on her blade. "Something sealed this gate from the inside. Something trapped itself here rather than face what was coming. And now that seal is failing, and whatever is on the other side is waking up, and we have about five minutes before it breaks through completely."

"How do you know all that?"

Ace pointed at her own eyes. "Because the thing on the other side is telling me. Not in words. In recognition. It's known the fragment since before it was a fragment. Since before I was me. It's been waiting for this moment for a very long time. Waiting for someone who could carry what it needed to give."

The fifth seal cracked.

The chamber shook. Dust fell from the ceiling. The gray light from the third seal pulsed like a heartbeat. The heartbeat of something that had been waiting for centuries to be born again.

"Four minutes." Mai. "Maybe less."

"Or more." Shammy said quietly. "The acceleration might plateau. The seals might stabilize."

"Or they might not." Ace looked at Shammy. "What does your gut tell you?"

Shammy closed her eyes. Felt the air. The pressure. The wrongness that had become almost normal in the past hour. The thing pressing against the seals, pressing for two weeks, for centuries, for longer than human memory. She felt its patience. Its desperation. Its hope.

"It tells me we're past the point of no return. Whatever is happening, we can't stop it by standing here. The thing on the other side has been waiting too long. It's not going to stop because we ask it to."

"So what do we do?"

"We wait for Bright." Ace's voice was flat. "He's the one who knows what's on the other side. He's been here before. He's been hiding information since before we arrived. We don't make any decisions until he arrives."

"And if he doesn't arrive in time?"

Ace smiled. Not pleasant. The expression of someone who had already made peace with what came next.

"Then we improvise."

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Bright arrived in the chamber three minutes later.

He walked in like he owned the place. Like he'd never left, like sixty-three years hadn't passed, like the body he wore now was just a costume chosen for convenience. The amulet at his chest caught the gray light and gleamed like a promise. Like a threat. Like a question that had been waiting centuries for an answer.

The fifth seal had stabilized. The sixth was beginning to show hairline fractures, tiny cracks spreading like lightning, like the veins of something alive, like the surface of a mirror about to shatter.

"I see you've met my old friend." Bright looked at the doorway. Light. Casual. Like commenting on the weather. "She's in a talkative mood today."

"Talkative." Mai repeated. "You knew this would happen."

"I knew the seals were failing. I didn't know it would happen today." He spread his hands. "Seismic activity. Lunar cycles. The Foundation's inability to leave well enough alone. Many factors. Many variables. Many things that could have been prevented if someone had listened to me sixty-three years ago."

"You've been here before." Ace. Flat. "In this exact chamber. Sixty-three years ago."

"Give or take." Bright walked toward the doorway, stopping just out of arm's reach. The seals pulsed with gray light, with pressure, with the weight of something pressing against them from the other side. "I came through five seals before I turned back. Made it through two more before—" He paused. "Before I decided I wasn't ready."

"Ready for what?"

Bright turned. His eyes were old. Tired. Not the chaotic, joking eyes from the briefing. Something underneath. Something that had seen too much and lived too long and was very, very tired of both.

"Ready to die." He said simply. "Ready to accept what was being offered. Ready to stop running from the one thing that's been chasing me since 1543."

The sixth seal cracked.

The chamber shuddered. Dust fell. Gray light pulsed brighter. And through the cracks in the stone, through the fractures in the gate, Shammy felt something new.

Not recognition this time.

Invitation.

"It's letting us in." She said. "The thing behind the gate. It's—"

"It's been waiting." Bright finished. "For me to come back. For the fragment to return. For all the pieces to finally align. For the moment when everything I set in motion sixty-three years ago would finally complete itself." He touched the amulet at his chest. It was warm. Not the warmth of death approaching. Something else. Something that felt almost like hope. "For the last sixty-three years, it's been waiting."

"For what?"

"For this." Bright smiled. The saddest smile Shammy had ever seen on his face. "For someone to finally open the door."

The seventh seal began to crack.

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<!-- End Chapter 3 -->

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[← Chapter 2](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 4](#) →—

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:19**

