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Chapter 4: The Briefing That Wasn't

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: A Foundation log from three years ago—someone went in, something came out | POV: Mai then Bright ->

The seventh seal broke with a sound like thunder.

Not the sharp crack of the previous seals. Deeper. Fuller. The kind of sound that traveled through stone and bone and came out the other side as vibration. The entire chamber shuddered. Dust rained from the ceiling like gray snow. The gray light that had been seeping through the cracks became a flood, spilling into the excavation chamber like water through a broken dam, like memory through a wound.

And then.

Silence.

Absolute. Complete. The kind of silence that existed before sound was invented, before anything learned to speak or scream or beg. Silence with weight and presence and intent. The kind that pressed against the ears like depth pressure, like the stillness at the bottom of an ocean where nothing moved and nothing lived except the pressure itself.

The gate was open.

Mai's pen had stopped. She couldn't remember the last time her pen had stopped. It moved when she was calculating, moved when she was stressed, moved when she was trying to solve problems with no solutions. A kind of heartbeat. A way of processing the world that had become as natural as breathing. But now, standing in front of a doorway that wasn't a doorway, with seven seals that had just shattered, with something vast and ancient waiting on the other side, her pen had stopped.

She forced it to start. Writing. Recording. Documenting. The Foundation needed data. Analysis. The Foundation needed—

“Mai.”

Ace's voice. Flat. Direct. Always direct. Ace had never learned the art of subtlety, never seen the point in saying five words when one would do.

“I know.” Controlled. Analytical. Mai was proud of that. Proud that even now, even with the gates of the underworld open in front of her, she could sound like she had everything under control. “I'm calculating. The probability that Dr. Bright knew about the fragment—”

“He knew.” Bright's voice came from the doorway. He hadn't moved from the threshold. The amulet at his chest was glowing. Not warm, not cold. Something else. Something that felt like recognition. Like memory. “I've known for sixty-three years. I've been waiting sixty-three years.”

Sixty-three years. Mai's pen was moving now. Fast. Her handwriting was usually precise, architectural, designed rather than formed. Now it was jagged, urgent, the writing of someone trying to keep up with events moving faster than thought. "That predates Ace's recruitment. It predates the triad's formation. It predates—"

"Everything." Bright's voice was quiet. "It predates everything. That's the point. That's why I built the triad. Why I waited. Why I finally brought you here when I knew the seals were going to break."

The gateway pulsed with gray light. Through it, Mai could see—

Nothing.

Not darkness. Not light. Nothing. The absence of anything her mind could process. A blank space that somehow had weight, had presence, had intent. The concept of absence made manifest. The space between thoughts. The pause between heartbeats. Whatever was on the other side, it existed in a state human perception wasn't designed to handle.

"We need to discuss this." Mai forced her analytical mind to engage. "The mission parameters have fundamentally changed. We came here to retrieve an artifact. Instead, we've opened a gate to—"

"To Kur." Bright's voice was tired. "The Sumerian underworld. The land of the dead. And what's been waiting on the other side. What's been sealed there since before writing was invented. Trapped in the space between worlds, locked away from the living, locked away from the dying, locked away from everything except the endless gray."

"What's waiting?"

Bright turned. His eyes were ancient. The eyes of someone who had seen too much and lived too long and was very tired of both.

"A queen," he said. "I saw a queen. A throne. A goddess who had been trapped in her own kingdom for millennia, waiting for someone to finally open the door."

"Ereshkigal." Mai's pen stopped again. The name carried weight. Significance. The resonance of something that predated human memory. "Sumerian mythology. Queen of the Kur. Goddess of the underworld. The one who granted death to those who reached her."

"She's not mythology." Bright's voice was flat. "She's very real. And she's been waiting. For centuries. For someone who could open the gate. For someone who could give her what she wants."

"What does she want?"

Bright smiled. Not pleasant.

"Freedom," he said. "She's been trapped. Someone locked her in. Sealed the gate from outside. And she's been trying to get out ever since. Trying to find a way through. Trying to—"

"To die."

The word hung.

"To die," Bright repeated. "That's what she wants. The ability to end. To stop existing. To become nothing. She's been trapped in Kur so long she's forgotten what it felt like to want anything else. And now the gate is open, now someone has come who can help her—"

"Who locked her in?"

"That's the question." Bright walked back into the chamber, away from the gate. The light didn't follow him. It stayed at the threshold, a wall of gray that somehow felt more solid than the stone around it. "The Sumerian texts don't say. They talk about Inanna's descent, about the goddess who walked into the underworld and never returned. But they don't talk about who built the gates. Who sealed them. Who decided Ereshkigal should stay trapped forever, watching the dead come and go, remembering everything, unable to leave."

"And you? What do the Foundation files say?"

Bright's laugh was hollow. "The Foundation files say whatever I put in them. I've been editing this story for sixty-three years. Making sure no one came looking until I was ready. Making sure the gate stayed closed until I had the pieces in place. Until I had—"

He stopped.

"Until you had what?"

The question hung.

"To decide," Bright said finally. "Whether I was going to take her offer."

The Foundation logs were in the tactical station.

Mai found them while Bright stood at the threshold, while Ace's fragment stirred, while Shammy felt the nothing on the other side like pressure against her blind senses. The logs were incomplete. Gaps. Missing sections. Pages redacted so thoroughly they were more black than white. But the pattern was clear. Three years of documented attempts to understand what they had found. Three years of people dying, one by one, in ways that weren't fully explained.

EXCAVATION LOG - DAY 1 Initial discovery. Sumerian structure. Sealed doorway. No mechanism visible. Proceeding with caution. Dr. Elam on-site for initial assessment. Initial readings suggest anomalous energy signatures inconsistent with known geological sources. Recommending further investigation.

EXCAVATION LOG - DAY 14 First seal cracked. No external force applied. Internal pressure detected. Something pushing from the other side. Documenting. Dr. Elam requesting additional resources. Security team increased to twelve personnel. No explanation for the pressure readings.

EXCAVATION LOG - DAY 23 Second seal cracked. Sound from inside. Voices. Not Sumerian. Not any language we recognize. Sound like—[REDACTED]. Dr. Elam is experiencing something. Described as "recognition." Said something spoke to him. Said something knew him. Said—[REDACTED]. Recommending site-wide psychological evaluation.

EXCAVATION LOG - DAY 31 Third seal cracked. Team member Martinez experienced something. Described as "recognition." Said something spoke to her. Said something knew her. Said she could feel it waiting for her. Said—[REDACTED]. Dr. Elam has ordered the site sealed. I don't think he's wrong.

EXCAVATION LOG - DAY 45 Fourth seal cracked. Martinez is gone. Through the doorway. We don't

know what happened. The doorway is—[REDACTED]. Dr. Elam says we need to leave. Dr. Elam says the thing behind the door knows we're here. Dr. Elam says—[REDACTED].

The logs stopped there. A gap. Then:

INCIDENT REPORT - SITE-47 Contact lost with excavation team. Team status: unknown. Anomaly active. Site designated inactive pending further assessment. Dr. Bright on-site for initial containment evaluation. Recommend immediate quarantine.

ASSESSMENT REPORT - 18 MONTHS LATER Seismic readings indicate renewed activity. Anomaly is becoming active. Recommend containment team. Recommend—[REDACTED]. Dr. Bright has recommended no action. Filing for extended quarantine. No explanation for the continued pressure readings.

And then, buried in the personal logs, in a file that shouldn't have been accessible to her:

BRIGHT LOG - PERSONAL She's still there. I can feel her. After all these years, she's still waiting. She offered me what I wanted. I was afraid to take it. I came back. I've been waiting to see if I'm still afraid. I've been editing the reports for sixty years. Making sure no one comes. Making sure the gate stays closed. Making sure she stays trapped until I'm ready to face her again. Until I know what I want. Until I know if I want to live or if I just want to stop wanting to die.

The logs ended.

Mai's pen had stopped. She forced it to start. Writing. Recording. Documenting.

The Foundation needed data. The Foundation needed analysis.

But what the Foundation needed and what was happening were two very different things.

Ace found her there, an hour later, still reading.

The logs had consumed her. Every gap a mystery. Every redaction a secret. Every entry built on the bones of the one before, creating a picture of something happening for decades, maybe centuries. Seventeen people had died. Or disappeared. Or both. And Bright had been here for all of it, editing reports, sealing files, making sure no one came looking until—

Until now.

"The briefing was incomplete." Ace's voice came from the doorway. Compact. Contained. The fragment pulsing in her violet eyes. It had settled after the sixth gate, but it was still there. Present. Integrated. Part of her in a way it hadn't been before.

"The briefing is always incomplete." Mai didn't look up. "That's the nature of Foundation briefings. Information classified. Details redacted. We never get the full picture because the full picture is too dangerous to share."

"You've been reading classified files."

"I read everything I can." Flat. "It's how I stay alive. How I've always stayed alive. By knowing more than the people around me. By understanding patterns they don't see."

"Staying alive." Ace's voice was flat too. "Interesting goal."

Mai finally looked up. Ace in the doorway. Compact. Contained. The fragment pulsing in her violet eyes like a second heartbeat. Waiting. Her hand wasn't on her blade, but there was something in her posture. Readiness. Attention. Preparing.

"Your goal is the same," Mai said. "You just express it differently."

"I express it through violence. You express it through analysis." Ace stepped into the room. "We're more alike than either of us wants to admit. That's why Bright chose us. That's why he built the triad. Because we're both survivors. People who've learned to do whatever it takes to keep breathing."

"That's not—"

Mai stopped. The denial died on her lips. It was true. Both survivors. Both carrying weights they didn't fully understand. Both trying to protect people in ways that weren't always healthy. Mai calculated and Ace fought and both were trying to hold something together that couldn't be held. Both trying to save people who couldn't be saved. Both carrying burdens that were slowly crushing them.

"Bright knew," Ace said. "About the fragment. About Ereshkigal. About all of it. He knew, and he brought us here anyway."

"Yes."

"He's been lying to us."

"Not lying." Mai's pen started moving again. "Omitting. There's a difference. Lying is active deception. Omitting is letting people believe what they need to believe to function."

"Is there a difference that matters?"

Mai considered. The analytical part of her mind, sharpened by years of planning and predicting, said yes. Intent mattered. Technique mattered. The difference between a lie and an omission was the difference between action and inaction.

But the part that had learned to understand people, to read motivations and fears, to see the shapes of hearts beneath the surfaces of faces—

"Not to the people who were hurt," she said finally. "Not to the seventeen who died. Not to Martinez, who walked through the gate and never came back. Not to the ones left behind not knowing what happened to the ones they loved."

Ace was quiet. The violet in her eyes pulsed.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"We finish the mission." Mai stood. "Whatever Bright's reasons, whatever he was hiding, the gate is open now. Something is on the other side. Something that's been waiting for centuries to get out. We deal with it."

"And then?"

Mai's pen stopped.

"Then we have a conversation with Dr. Bright about honesty and trust. About the difference between omission and lie. About seventeen people who died because he decided to keep secrets. About the fact that even in the Foundation, even with everything classified, there are some things you don't get to hide."

Ace nodded. Not agreement. Acknowledgment. They were going to do something most Foundation personnel never did. Hold Bright accountable.

Whatever happened after that, they would figure it out together.

The gate pulsed in the distance.

Through the reinforced windows of the tactical station, Mai could see it. The gray light spilling from the threshold like water from a broken vessel. The air around it was wrong. The pressure was wrong. Everything was wrong.

But the data was clear.

"We can survive going through," Mai said. Standing at the tactical console, running calculations, projecting outcomes. "Not all of us. Not with certainty. But some of us. The probability models suggest—"

"The probability models don't account for Kur." Bright's voice came from the doorway. The amulet at his chest glowing with that strange light. "The underworld doesn't follow rules. It makes them. It takes. It gives. It transforms. It doesn't calculate odds because odds don't matter in a place where the laws of probability are suggestions at best."

"Then how do we survive?"

"You don't." Bright's voice was quiet. "You adapt. You change. You become something that can survive in an environment that should kill you. That's what the gates are for. They strip away what you don't need. They give you what you do. They—"

He stopped.

"What do we need?"

"Each other." Bright looked at the triad. At Ace with the fragment in her eyes. At Shabby, blind in the Kur-atmosphere but present, anchoring. At Mai, analytical and afraid but still calculating. At the three of them who had walked into Kur and would have to walk out again, changed but together. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. That's why I brought you here. Because you're the only team I trust to come back changed. To come back together. To come back at all."

"And if we can't?" Ace's voice was sharp. "If the gates take too much?"

"Then you find each other on the other side." Bright's smile was different now. Not tired. Not sad. Something else. Something that looked almost like hope. "That's what the triad is. That's what we've built. A connection that survives even when everything else is stripped away. A bond the gates can't break because it was forged outside their jurisdiction. In the world above. In the life you chose together."

The gate pulsed again.

Gray light growing brighter.

And somewhere in the distance, on the other side of the threshold, in the place where the dead walked and the living couldn't stay, something ancient began to wake.

Something that had been waiting.

Something that recognized the fragment in Ace's eyes.

Something that knew, finally, that the door was open.

And it was time to come home.

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