

[← Chapter 5](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 7 →](#)

Chapter 6: What the Dead Remember

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: A dead woman who recognizes Shammy. "You're still alive. Why are you here?" | POV: Triad rotating ->

The underworld had weather.

Not wind. Not rain. Nothing Shammy could feel before Kur stole her senses. But the gray dust moved in patterns that suggested currents. The sky shifted in ways that implied clouds. The atmosphere pressed against the skin in ways that would have meant something, if there had been anyone left who could read them.

None of it touched her.

I'm blind here.

She said it quietly. To Ace, to Mai, to no one. The admission landed harder than she expected. She had been the one who felt things. Read atmospheres and pressure systems and the subtle signs of weather approaching. Her senses were her identity, her way of navigating a world that never felt quite safe for someone like her. And here, in the place where atmosphere meant nothing, she was blind. Not the temporary blindness of a storm or a vacuum chamber. Something deeper. Past physical senses, into the absence of the thing that had always made her feel alive.

The air. There's nothing to feel. I can't sense—

You can feel me.

Ace's voice was flat. The shadow-pressure was still there, a depth Shammy could reach for even when the atmosphere was a void. The connection hummed between them. Like a current. Like a promise.

Use that. That's what I'm here for.

That's not— Shammy stopped. The denial caught in her throat. I'm supposed to be the one who feels. The air. The pressure. The weather patterns. That's what I do. That's what I'm for. And here I can't—

Here you're something else.

Mai's voice was analytical. Controlled. But underneath, the uncertainty showed. The crack the first gate had opened.

You're more than what you do. More than your function. More than the way you navigate the world.

I know what I am. Shammy's voice was wrong. Strained. Like something pressing against her throat, making it hard to breathe even though breathing was still possible. I know what I'm supposed to be. The elemental. The storm-sprung. The one who feels what others can't feel. And here—

She stopped.

The dead were watching.

They stood at the edges of the path. Gray figures, watching with eyes that didn't exist and attention that weighed nothing. Observing. Remembering. Waiting for something that would give them something new to carry.

One of them moved toward her.

Shammy felt it before she saw it. Not through the air, not through pressure. Through the connection to Ace. Through the fragment-stir that pulsed in the violet of Ace's eyes. Through the thing that linked the three of them together like a chain of hands in the dark. The dead woman moved like smoke. Solid when she wanted to be solid. Incorporeal when she wanted to pass through. And her eyes—

Her eyes remembered being human.

You.

The woman's voice was gray. Flat. Empty. The same dead woman from before, or a different one. It didn't matter. They all spoke with the same voice eventually. The voice of the underworld itself.

You're still alive. Why are you here?

Shammy looked.

The woman had been something like Shammy. Not human. Not elemental. Something between. The gray skin, the gray hair, the gray eyes that weren't eyes but remembered what eyes had been. She had existed between states, the way Shammy existed between states. Had the woman felt the air, once? Read pressure patterns and weather systems the way Shammy did?

What are you?

The question came out quiet. Reverent, almost. Shammy had never spoken to the dead before. Hadn't known she could. Had spent her whole life avoiding death, running from it, fearing it, knowing her elemental nature made her something other than fully alive and therefore something other than fully dead. And now—

I was—

The woman stopped. Gray pause. Gray silence. The hesitation of someone trying to remember something that hurt to remember.

I was like you. Between. Neither one thing nor another. I was—

Another stop.

I was air. I was pressure. I was weather that learned to think. Before Kur. Before I came here. Before I became—

Her voice faded into the gray.

And then I died.

The voice was flat. Not the death you're thinking of. Not the stopping. The other thing. The transition from one state to another. The becoming. I was weather, and then I was something else. Something that remembers being weather. Something that carries the memory of wind and pressure and the space between storms.

Does it hurt?

The question came out before Shammy could stop it. She wasn't sure why she asked. The dead woman was proof of what Shammy might become. What she might already be becoming, in some way she didn't understand.

No. The woman's voice was gray. It doesn't hurt. It's—

She paused, searching for words that might have been hard to find after so long without language.

It's like going home. Like finding the place you were always meant to be. Except—

Except you're still aware. Still conscious. Still—

Still me. Yes. The woman's voice was gray. Still me. Still aware. Still remembering what it was like to be air and pressure and the space between storms. Still feeling the pull of the underworld even though I'm already here. Still waiting for something that might never come.

The woman tilted her head. The gesture was human. Remembered. Something she had done when she was alive, before she came to Kur, before she became gray.

You're afraid.

It wasn't a question.

Yes.

The fear was a weight in Shammy's chest. Not the air she couldn't feel. Something heavier. Something that had nothing to do with atmospheres and everything to do with the unknown.

I'm afraid of becoming like you. Of losing what I am. Of forgetting what it felt like to feel.

You shouldn't be. The woman's voice was gray. The transition isn't painful. It's what you make it. If you fight it, it hurts. If you accept it—

Another stop.

It's just change. The same change that happens when a storm passes and the air after is different from the air before. Not worse. Not better. Just different.

What if I don't want to change?

The woman was quiet for a long moment. The gray around them shifted. Acknowledged, maybe. Or condolences. The acknowledgment that some fears were too big for comfort.

Then you don't change, she said finally. Not yet. Not until you're ready. The dead aren't in a hurry. We've been here forever. We can wait a little longer. The gates take things from the living. They take certainty and defense and trust. But they don't take choice. Not unless you let them.

The dead remembered.

Not like the living. Not with images, sounds, feelings that could be called up like files from a cabinet. The dead remembered differently. Through traces. Through marks left on the world. Through the echoes of choices made and words spoken and paths taken.

Through what you leave behind.

Bright's voice was quiet. They had passed through the second gate. Mai had felt something leave her, some core certainty that she could protect the people she loved, and now she walked with her hand shaking and her eyes too bright. Bright walked ahead, navigating the gray like he knew where he was going, the amulet at his chest warm with proximity to death.

The dead don't have memories the way you do. They have residue. Impressions. The marks that living things leave on the world.

Something like that.

Bright's smile was wrong. Tired.

When you live, you leave traces. Things you touched. Places you stood. Choices you made that rippled outward. The dead carry those traces. They remember through them. Not the way you remember a face or a name. More like the way a room remembers someone who has been there. The weight of presence. The echo of attention.

What do they remember of us?

Everything.

His voice was quiet.

Everything you've done. Everything you've failed to do. Everything you've wanted and never done. They remember it all. They can't forget. They don't have the capacity to—

Does it drive them crazy?

No.

Bright shook his head. The motion was strange in the gray, where movement seemed to slow and thicken.

They stop caring. Eventually. The weight of it, remembering everything and being unable to change any of it, they stop feeling it. They become—

He struggled.

Gray. Like the rest of this place. Just another shade in the gray. Another memory the underworld carries.

Mai thought about that. Carrying every moment of her life, every choice, every failure, forever. Being unable to forget even the things she wanted to forget most. The faces of people she couldn't save. The calculations that had been wrong. The certainty that had been misplaced. The weight of all of it,

forever.

That's worse, she said quietly. Worse than forgetting. Worse than the death you're afraid of. At least death is an ending. This is—

That's death.

Bright's voice was tired.

That's what waiting in Kur means. Not punishment. Not reward. Just existence. The dead exist here until the world ends. And they remember everything. Every moment. Every choice. Every breath they took when they were alive.

Ace's voice cut through.

What remains of you? In the underworld. Do you leave traces?

She was walking beside them, compact and contained, the fragment pulsing in her violet eyes. The question seemed to surprise Bright. He was quiet for a long moment.

Nothing, he said finally. I haven't died. Not permanently. I keep coming back. The dead—

He smiled again. Wrong. Tired.

The dead have something I don't. They have permanence. They have endings. They have the completion that I'm always reaching for and never achieving.

Is that why you want it?

The question hung in the gray.

Is that why you want to stop?

Mai's hand wouldn't stop shaking.

It had been shaking since the second gate. Since the certainty that she could protect everyone had been taken. Since the knowledge that no matter how well she planned, no matter how thoroughly she prepared, there would always be things beyond her control. People she couldn't save. Outcomes she couldn't prevent.

She had known that. Intellectually. Analytically. She had always known that no matter how many variables she accounted for, the universe would always do what it wanted. Knowing and feeling were different things.

And the gate had taken the feeling.

I can't—

Her voice came out wrong. Analytical, but underneath, fractured. The analytical voice was still there, still trying to function, but the foundation it stood on was crumbling.

I can't protect everyone. I know that. I've always known that. But knowing doesn't help. The gate

made me feel it. Not just know it. Feel it.

The bone-deep knowledge that no matter what she did, there would always be gaps. Always be things she couldn't reach. Always be people who fell through the cracks no matter how carefully she built the net.

The gate had taken the pretense. The armor.

And left her with the truth.

The gates take what you need to lose, Bright said quietly. Not what you think you're giving. What you—

He stopped.

What you actually need to release. The things you've been clinging to that are holding you back.

I don't need to release the ability to protect people.

You need to release the certainty that you can.

Bright's smile was tired.

There's a difference. And that difference—

He gestured at her shaking hand.

That's what you're learning. That's what the gates are teaching you.

How? The question was almost a plea. How do I learn to live without that certainty? Without the feeling that I can keep them safe?

By taking away the padding. By making you feel what it's like to not know. To not be certain. To—

He stopped again.

To trust something other than your own planning.

Trust what?

Them.

Bright gestured at Ace and Shammy.

Trust that you don't have to protect everyone. Trust that—

Another stop.

Trust that they can protect themselves. That protection isn't just your job. That it's—

A shared burden, Ace said quietly.

Mai looked at her. At the violet eyes. At the fragment that pulsed behind them like a second heartbeat. At the small frame that carried more weight than anyone realized.

You've been where I am, Mai said.

I've been where you are.

Ace's voice was flat.

Wanting to protect. Needing to protect. Carrying the weight of everyone else's safety like it was my job. Like if I just tried hard enough, planned well enough, was good enough, I could keep everyone safe. Forever.

How did you learn?

Ace's smile was thin.

By losing. By failing. By—

She stopped. The memory was old, worn smooth by time, but it still had edges. Still cut when she pressed too hard.

By realizing that the people I loved were stronger than I gave them credit for. That they didn't need me to save them. They needed me to stand with them.

Mai's hand was still shaking.

But something was settling. Not the shaking. That remained. The fear underneath it, though. The terror of not knowing what came next. The certainty that without her planning, without her calculations, without her constant vigilance—

She wasn't alone.

That was what the gates hadn't taken. What remained. The connection to Ace and Shammy. The bond that had formed over years of fighting together, surviving together, being broken together.

She wasn't alone.

Ace's fragment was stirring.

Not taking over. Not controlling. Just stirring. Responding the way it always responded when they approached something ancient, something connected to the place it had come from. The gates had taken certainty and defense and trust, but they hadn't taken the fragment.

You feel it, Ace said. Not a question.

Shammy nodded. Through the connection.

The fragment is—

She struggled to describe it.

It's recognizing something. Here. In Kur. Something from before. Something that—

Something from before. Ace's voice was flat. Her hand was on her blade. Not gripping. Just touching.

Grounding.

From the Blood-Moon Rift. From—

She stopped.

From before I was—

Another stop.

From before I became this.

From before you were what?

Ace was quiet for a long moment. The violet in her eyes pulsed. Darker. Deeper. Something old looking out through her. Something that remembered.

From before I was me, she said finally. The fragment came from somewhere. It came from—

She stopped again.

It came from here. I think. From Kur. From the gates and the queen and the gray. From a time before human memory.

That can't be right. Mai's voice was analytical, but uncertain. The Blood-Moon Rift was in Japan? Korea? Somewhere in East Asia. The fragment came from that event, not from Sumer.

The gates don't care about geography.

Bright's voice was quiet.

The gates exist between places. Between states. Between life and death. They don't recognize borders or nations or the categories humans use to sort the world. The fragment might have come from here originally. Might have been sent out somehow. Through the gates. Through the space between worlds. Until it found someone who could hold it.

Me. Ace's voice was flat. It found me.

And now it's recognizing where it came from.

Shammy's voice was quiet.

The fragment recognizes Kur. It recognizes—

She stopped.

It recognizes what's ahead. The gates. The queen. The—

The queen.

Ace's voice was flat.

Ereshkigal. The fragment recognizes her. From before. From when it was hers. From when it was part of the goddess instead of part of me.

What does it want?

Ace was quiet for a long moment. The violet in her eyes pulsed. Darker. Deeper. Something old looking out through her. Something that had been waiting for this moment for a very long time.

I don't know, she said. But it's been—

She stopped.

It's been waiting. Like the gates. Like the dead. Like something that wants to finish what it started.

The third gate was ahead.

Mai saw it first. The calculation, the analysis, the pattern recognition that was still her nature even without its foundation. Seven gates. Seven thresholds. Seven things to lose or gain. The gates were designed to transform. To strip away what you didn't need and leave what you did. Each one a test. A passage. A choice about who you were and who you wanted to become.

What does the third gate take?

Bright's smile was tired. Wrong.

Something different for everyone, he said. The third gate—

He stopped.

The third gate takes what you're holding onto. What you're afraid to release. The thing that keeps you awake at night. The choice you can't unmake. The—

And what does it leave?

Choice.

Bright's voice was tired.

It leaves you the ability to choose. To decide what to let go of. What to keep. What to carry forward. That's what the third gate is. The gate of choice. The gate that asks you what you actually want versus what you're afraid to lose.

Ace stepped toward the gate.

The third gate stood in the gray. Not like the first two. Different. The stone was darker, closer to black, and the seals carved into it seemed to shift when viewed directly. The dead watched from the edges. The fragment stirred in Ace's depth. Mai's hand was still shaking. Shammy couldn't feel anything but the connection to Ace.

This is where I turned back, Bright said quietly. Sixty-three years ago. I came this far. And I was—

He stopped.

I was afraid. Afraid of what I would have to give up. Afraid of what I would find on the other side.

Of what?

Of taking what she offered.

Bright's smile was wrong.

Of finally getting what I wanted. Of being so tired that I would do anything to stop. And getting exactly what I asked for and realizing it wasn't—

Wasn't what?

Wasn't mine.

His voice was quiet.

The ending. The peace. It wasn't mine to take. It was hers to give. And I wasn't—

He shook his head.

I wasn't ready to receive it. I thought I was. I thought wanting something was the same as being ready for it. But they're different. That's the kind of difference that matters.

Ace stepped forward.

The third gate opened.

<!-- End Chapter 6 -->

[← Chapter 5](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 7 →](#)—

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