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Chapter 7: Pressure

<!-- Expanded Word count: ~5500 | Target: 5000+ | Anchor: The Galla—hounds that are not dogs, eyes that remember being human -->

The Galla found them before the fourth gate.

Not dogs. Not demons. Something between and neither. They emerged from the gray like shadows given form. Four-legged, but not animals. Their bodies were made of something that wasn't quite matter, moved through the underworld like smoke through air. Solid when they wanted to be solid. Incorporeal when they wanted to pass through. Eyes that were—

Eyes that remembered being human.

Shammy felt them before she saw them. Not through the air. There was no air to feel, not the way she had always felt it, reading pressure differentials and weather patterns like text on a page. But she felt them through something else. Through the connection to Ace. Through the shadow-pressure that still reached her even in Kur, even in the blindness the underworld had inflicted on her senses.

A cluster of attention. Vast and patient. Moving toward them through the gray.

They're watching.

Her voice was quiet.

Not attacking. Not threatening. Just—

Observing.

Ace's hand was on her blade. The fragment had settled after the third gate, but it was stirring again. The violet in her eyes pulsing with something that might have been recognition. She had felt the Galla before, in some deep place she couldn't name. They were familiar, somehow. Like faces she had known in a life she didn't remember.

They're—

Escorting.

Bright's voice was tired. He hadn't moved. The amulet at his chest was warm, not the warmth of approaching death, but something else. Something older. Something that recognized where it was.

The Galla don't attack in Kur. They didn't attack when I was here before. They just—

They drag the living to the underworld.

Mai's voice was analytical. Her hand was still shaking, the tremor that had started in the second gate and hadn't stopped. She had stopped looking at it. Started looking at the Galla instead. Analyzing. Calculating. Trying to find the pattern in something that seemed to have no pattern.

Sumerian mythology. Demons of Kur. Creatures that were said to drag the souls of the dead to the underworld whether they wanted to go or not.

Of Kur.

Bright's voice was tired.

They're not demons. They're—

He stopped. The words were hard to find, even for someone who had been speaking languages for five hundred years.

They're transformed. They were human once. Before Kur. Before they became what they are now. They gave up something to be here. Or something was taken from them. The line between those two things is thinner than you'd think.

They remember.

The Galla that had spoken, the largest of them, with eyes that Shammy could almost see as human, stepped closer. The voice came from the shadow-shape, from the gray that was its body, from the memory of a mouth that had once spoken living words.

We remember what we were. Before.

The remembering was painful. She could tell. A weight they carried like she carried the absence of air.

We remember, and we wait, and we watch the living pass through on their way to wherever they're going.

One of the Galla moved toward Ace.

The eyes, human, remembering, fixed on her with an intensity that made Shammy's blindness feel like a mercy. Ace was small. 120 centimeters of compressed kinetic potential. But she stood her ground. The fragment in her violet eyes pulsed with something that might have been recognition. Might have been fear. Might have been the ancient memory of a fragment that had once belonged to the goddess of this place.

You're alive.

The voice came from the shadow-shape. Not a bark. Not a growl. Words. Human words, from someone who remembered what it was like to speak.

Why are you here? Why are the living walking through the realm of the dead?

Shammy felt the connection to Ace pulse. Through it, she felt Ace's fragment stir. Not in response to the Galla, not in response to the question, but in response to something else. Something deeper. Something that resonated in frequencies Shammy couldn't hear but could feel through the bond.

We're passing through.

Bright's voice was quiet.

To see Ereshkigal. The queen. The one who rules here.

Ereshkigal.

The Galla's voice was gray with recognition. The recognition of something that had heard that name spoken in whispers for millennia. The gray of the underworld itself, the color of dust and silence and the space between breaths.

She's been waiting. For—

The eyes turned to Ace. Human. Remembering. Not to Bright. Not to Mai or Shammy. To Ace. To the small figure with the violet eyes and the fragment pulsing beneath the surface.

For you.

Ace's hand tightened on her blade. The metal was cold against her palm. The same cold she had always felt, the same anchor she had always relied on. But something was different now. Something was shifting.

What do you mean, for me?

The Galla didn't answer. It turned. Began to move. The other shadow-shapes followed. Five of them, circling the group like wolves circling prey, except there was no malice in it. No hunger. Just purpose. The focused attention of creatures that had been waiting for something for a very long time and were finally beginning to see it arrive.

Escort, Bright said. His voice was tired. They're escorting us. To wherever we're going. To whoever wants to see us. To—

To the throne, Ace finished.

Her voice was flat. The violet in her eyes was darker than usual. The fragment was stirring in ways she didn't fully understand.

To Ereshkigal. To the one who's been waiting for me.

The escort was silent.

The Galla didn't speak again. They moved through the gray, four-legged, shadow-shaped, eyes that remembered being human and would always remember, even if the humans they had been were gone. The triad followed. Mai's hand was shaking, had been shaking since the second gate, and she had stopped trying to make it stop. Ace's fragment was stirring, pulsing with rhythms she didn't recognize, ancient patterns surfacing from depths she couldn't reach. Shammy was blind. Feeling only through the connection, through the shadow-pressure of Ace's presence, through the thing that bound them together like a chain of hands in the dark.

Bright walked ahead. He knew the way, or knew it well enough from sixty-three years ago, from the last time he had walked this path. The amulet at his chest was warm with the proximity of death, warm with the presence of the underworld. He had forgotten what that warmth felt like. Forgotten

what it was like to walk toward something instead of away from it.

You've been here before.

Ace's voice was flat. Not a question.

Bright's smile was wrong. Tired. Five hundred years of wearing different faces, and this face still couldn't manage a real one.

I've been here before. Sixty-three years ago. Five gates broken. I made it through two more and—

He stopped.

And came back. Because I was afraid. Because I didn't know what I would find. Because I thought I knew what I wanted, and then I got close enough to see it clearly, and I realized—

Realized what?

That wanting something and being ready for it are different things.

His voice was quiet.

I wanted to die. I had wanted to die for centuries. But when I got close to actually achieving that, when Ereshkigal offered me what I'd been searching for, I realized I wasn't ready. I didn't actually want to die. I just wanted to stop wanting. And those are different things. That's the kind of difference that matters more than almost anything else.

The fourth gate took trust.

Mai felt it leave. The last certainty that her calculations could keep everyone safe. Not her weapons. She still had her disruptor pistol, her rune-marked sidearm that hummed with contained energy. Not her stabilizing field. She could still feel it, a soft hum around her, the thing that had saved a Tokyo containment breach and cost her everything else. But the certainty. The deep, bone-level certainty that if she just thought through every variable, accounted for every possibility, she could see what was coming and prevent it.

She stopped calculating.

I can't—

Her voice came out wrong. Thin. Stretched.

I can't plan for this. I can't—

The gates were taking something, and she didn't know what to do with the space they were leaving behind. The certainty had been a kind of armor. A way to walk through the world feeling like she had some control. Without it, she felt exposed. Unarmored. Like she had walked out of a bunker into a storm.

The gates take what you need to release.

Bright's voice was quiet.

Not everything you have. Everything you've been pretending you need but actually don't. The certainty you had wasn't keeping anyone safe. It was keeping you from seeing that you couldn't keep anyone safe. That's the difference. That's what the gates are trying to show you.

I need my certainty.

Mai's voice was sharp.

I need to be able to predict—

You need to trust.

Bright's voice was tired.

In the underworld, certainty is a liability. The gates strip away the things that are holding you back. They give you what you actually need to move forward. And what you need isn't certainty. It's trust. The choice to believe in something other than your own calculations.

To trust them?

Shammy's voice was quiet. She was standing beside Mai. Tall, graceful, blind in the Kur-atmosphere but present. Anchoring. The connection between them hummed like a current, like a promise.

To trust that even if you can't calculate the outcome, even if you can't predict what happens next—

We'll still be here.

Ace's voice was flat. She was standing on Mai's other side. Compact. Present. The fragment in her eyes pulsing but contained. The three of them forming a wall, a unit, a single entity made of three parts.

We'll still be here. We'll still catch you if you fall. That's what trust is. That's what the gates are trying to teach you.

Mai's hand was still shaking.

But something else was happening. Something underneath the fear. Something that felt like—

Relief.

Trust isn't my strength, she said quietly. The admission cost her something. More than she expected. More than the gates had taken.

It doesn't have to be your strength.

Ace's voice was flat.

It just has to be something you're willing to try. Willing to accept. Willing to let in, even when every calculation tells you it's safer to keep it out.

The fourth gate closed behind them.

The fifth gate took defense.

Ace felt it leave. The last certainty that her blade could protect. The certainty that she could intercept any attack, deflect any threat, end any fight before it began. The certainty that violence was a language she spoke fluently, and that fluency could keep everyone around her alive.

She stopped being certain.

I can't protect—

Her voice came out wrong. Stretched. The gates were taking something, and she didn't know what to do with the space they were leaving behind. The blade had always been her answer. Her solution. Her way of solving problems that couldn't be solved any other way. And now—

The gates are taking what you're holding too tightly.

Bright's voice was quiet.

Defense. Certainty. Trust. They take what you think you need. And they leave what you actually need. What you can't see yet because you're too busy holding onto something else.

What do I actually need?

I don't know.

Bright's smile was wrong. Tired.

That's the point of the gates. You find out by losing. You find out by having the thing taken away and discovering that you're still standing. That you can still fight. That violence isn't the only language you speak, and maybe it was never the best one.

Ace's fragment stirred. The violet was darker. The recognition was stronger. But this time, instead of fighting it, instead of tensing against the intrusion, she let it pulse. Let it move through her like a current. Let it show her what it wanted to show her.

What did the gates take from you? she asked. Sixty-three years ago?

Bright was quiet for a long moment. The amulet at his chest pulsed with warmth that felt like memory.

Everything I thought I needed, he said finally. And left—

He stopped.

Left what I was too afraid to name. The gates don't just take. They expose. They show you what you're really holding onto. And sometimes what you're holding onto is the thing that's holding you back.

The fifth gate closed behind them.

The sixth gate was ahead.

Bright stopped.

Shammy felt it through the connection. The way his presence changed. The way the air around him seemed to thicken. Not the blindness of Kur. Something else. Something personal. Something that had been waiting for him since the last time he stood in this place.

This is where I turned back, he said.

His voice was quiet. Old.

Sixty-three years ago. I came this far. And I was—

Afraid.

Yes.

Bright's smile was wrong. Tired.

I was afraid of what Ereshkigal offered. Of—

He stopped. The words were harder than he expected.

Of wanting it so badly that I would take it, no matter the cost. Of discovering that I had spent centuries wanting something and then finally getting it and realizing it wasn't what I thought it would be.

What did she offer?

She offered me an ending.

His voice was quiet.

Not death. I get death all the time. Death is just a door I walk through. She offered me an ending. A real one. The kind that doesn't lead to waking up in a new body. The kind that SCP-963 can't undo. The kind that mortal death is supposed to be but never is for me.

Ace's hand was on her blade. The metal was warm now. Warm with her grip, warm with the tension she was holding. She could feel the fragment pulsing in her chest, responding to the mention of Ereshkigal, to the proximity of the one who had first created it.

She can give you that? True death?

She can.

His voice was quiet.

That's her domain. The underworld. The finality that even immortality can't bypass. She offered me exactly what I'd been searching for. And I was afraid. Because I didn't know if I actually wanted it, or if I just wanted to stop wanting it.

What's the difference?

Everything.

His voice was tired.

That's everything. Because if I didn't actually want to die, if I just wanted to stop feeling like I wanted to die, then taking her offer wouldn't fix anything. It would just trade one problem for another. It would give me an ending but not a resolution. Peace but not rest. And I wasn't ready to find out which one it was.

Ace was quiet for a long moment. The violet in her eyes pulsed with something that might have been understanding. Might have been compassion. Might have been the recognition of someone who had once wanted to stop existing and had eventually found something else to want instead.

What's the difference between wanting to die and wanting to stop? she asked.

Bright looked at her. Through the gray. Through the centuries. Through the weight of everything he had carried and everything he had lost.

The same difference as between wanting to stop and wanting to start, he said. And I don't think I ever learned that difference until now. Until you. Until the gates showed me what I was really holding onto.

Ace's fragment was stirring.

Not taking over. Not controlling. Just responding. To the proximity of Ereshkigal. To the presence of the one who had first created the fragment and then given it away. To the ancient connection that had been waiting for this moment for longer than any of them could understand.

I can feel her.

Ace's voice was flat. Her violet eyes were violet, dark, deep, the fragment pulsing like a second heartbeat.

Through the fragment. Ereshkigal. She's not here yet, but she knows we're coming. She's been waiting for—

For me. For the fragment. She recognizes it.

She gave it to someone who couldn't hold it, Bright said. Long ago. Before you were born. Before your grandmother's grandmother. It's been drifting through the mortal world ever since, looking for someone who could contain it. Who could carry it without being consumed. Who could—

Who could become its home.

Yes.

His voice was quiet.

And she recognizes that you've done it. That you've carried it this far. That you've—

That I've become what she wanted someone to become.

The Galla stopped at the sixth gate.

The shadow-shapes turned. The eyes that remembered being human looked at the triad. At Bright. At

Ace. At the small figure with the violet eyes and the ancient fragment and the impossible endurance.

You brought them.

The voice was gray. The voice of the underworld itself, the color of dust and silence and the space between breaths.

You brought the ones she's been waiting for.

I brought them.

Bright's voice was quiet.

I brought—

He stopped. The words caught in his throat.

I brought myself. And they came with me. Because they refused to let me come alone. Because they refused to let me make this choice by myself.

Why?

Ace stepped forward. The fragment pulsed in her eyes.

Because I need them to say no, Bright said.

His voice was quiet.

I need them to refuse to let me die. I need—

He smiled. It was the saddest smile Shammy had ever seen.

I need them to be stronger than I am. That's what I couldn't do sixty-three years ago. I couldn't let anyone help me carry the weight. I thought I had to do it alone. And I was right. But alone isn't the same as strong. I know that now.

The Galla's eyes, human, remembering, turned to Ace.

She's been waiting for you too, the voice said. The fragment, she gave it once. To someone who couldn't hold it. She's been waiting to see—

Gray silence. Gray pause.

To see if you can.

Ace's hand tightened on her blade.

What if I can't?

Then she takes it back.

The Galla's voice was gray.

And you become—

Another stop.

You become like us. Part of Kur. Part of the gray. Remembering what you were. Waiting for the next one who might be strong enough.

The sixth gate opened.

The gray light spilled through. Different from the light of the earlier gates. Older somehow. More patient. The light of a place that had been waiting for something for a very long time and was finally beginning to see it arrive.

Ace stepped forward.

And the others followed.

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

