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Chapter 10: Race

The van smelled like burnt coffee and old leather. Mai's laptop hummed on her knees, screen casting pale light across her face as equations scrolled past. Ace watched the road through the windshield, one hand resting on her blade. Shammy had her window cracked open despite the rain, fingers pressed against the glass.

"Seventeen minutes," Mai said. "Maybe fifteen if the ley line surge stays consistent. The site's in a research park outside the city limits. Foundation-owned, nominal containment protocol designation."

"Nominal?" Ace didn't turn from the window.

"Meaning they're still figuring out what they're containing. It's a study site, not a containment cell. They've been documenting magic's return for six months." Mai's fingers flew across keys. "Reyes gave them coordinates, timing, entry protocols. Everything they need to get there first if they move fast enough."

Shammy's laugh caught them both off guard. "They won't."

"What?"

"They won't get there first." Shammy pressed her palm flat against the window. "Can't you feel it? The pressure's building wrong behind us. They're rushing."

Ace glanced back. "How far?"

"Three cars. Maybe four. They're pushing through traffic like—" Shammy's voice had that faraway quality it got when she was reading atmosphere. "Like the storm's chasing them. Which is funny, because the storm isn't chasing anyone. It's waiting."

In a black sedan two miles back, a man named Voss checked his watch for the third time in thirty seconds.

"The window's closing." He didn't look up from the watch. "If Foundation protocol holds, they'll have the site sealed within twenty minutes of arrival."

His driver didn't answer. Too busy weaving between lanes, cutting off a delivery truck that blared its horn at them. The rain made everything slicker, harder to predict. Voss didn't care about the driving. He cared about the mission.

Their employer had been clear: the Foundation research site contained documentation of something important. Something about how magic worked now. Something the faction needed before the Foundation could lock it away behind another layer of bureaucracy and protocol.

The team in the van ahead. They were the ones who'd been disrupting operations. Voss knew their

names now. The short one with the shadow. The analytical one with the silver hair. The tall one who made the air feel wrong.

He'd read their files.

Files that had come from inside the Foundation itself.

"How much further?"

"Eight minutes."

"Make it six."

"Eight minutes." Mai's fingers were a blur on the keyboard. "The ley line surge is—" She stopped. "Wait. The pattern just shifted."

Ace felt it before Mai said anything. A tightening in the air, a wrongness that had nothing to do with threat detection. Her shadow pooled at her feet without her asking it to, spreading slow and dark across the van's floor mat.

"They're accelerating." Shammy's voice came out half-laugh. "They're scared."

"Good," Ace said.

"No, not scared of us. Scared of—" Shammy pressed her face closer to the window. "They're scared of what happens if they're late. There's something in that site. Something the storm knows about."

Mai's typing grew faster. "The site designation is FRS-7. Research sector, anomaly classification pending. They've been studying Return-origin magic patterns for six months. The files Reyes gave them included the access codes to the primary server."

"Can you lock it remotely?"

"Already trying. But whoever set up their security was paranoid. There's a physical kill switch inside the building. If they hit it before we get there, everything wipes."

Ace's shadow rippled. "Then we get there first."

The research park sat at the edge of the city like an afterthought. Low buildings spread across manicured grass, parking lots half-empty despite the hour. The kind of place where nothing interesting ever happened. On purpose.

Ace saw the anomaly before they reached the gate. A shimmer above the main building, like heat distortion but wrong. The air pressure dropped as their van turned into the entrance, and Shammy made a sound halfway between a gasp and a laugh.

"It's awake. Whatever they've been studying, it woke up."

"Define 'woke up,'" Mai said.

"Like it was sleeping and now it isn't." Shammy's head tilted. "The atmosphere's responding to it. Responding to—" Another tilt. "To us. The storm knows we're here."

Ace was already scanning exits. The gate stood open. The parking lot offered three clear paths to the building's entrance. She counted doors, windows, sight lines. Her shadow pooled wrong, spreading toward the building like it wanted to get there first.

"Park near the east entrance. Two exits visible from there."

Mai nodded, pulling the van into a spot near the side of the building. "Security inside is minimal. They weren't expecting a siege. The physical kill switch is in the server room, central location. We get there, we secure it, we wait for backup."

"No backup." Ace unbuckled. "Too far out. They'd take an hour to mobilize."

"Then we hold until—"

Headlights swept across the parking lot. Two cars, then three, pulling in through the gate. Moving fast.

"They're here," Ace said.

Voss stepped out of the sedan before it fully stopped moving. Rain hit his face, cold and indifferent. His team spread behind him. Four operatives, all of them carrying the kind of modified equipment that shouldn't exist outside a Foundation armory.

The research site loomed ahead, that shimmer above it pulsing faintly. He'd felt the pressure change the moment they entered the parking lot. Magic. Real magic. Not the controlled stuff they'd been experimenting with. Something older.

The van had parked near the east entrance. Through the rain, he could see three figures moving. The short one was already at the door, checking the frame. The analytical one had her laptop out, probably trying to access their systems. The tall one—

The tall one was looking straight at him.

Her hair moved wrong in the wind. Like the storm was listening to her.

"Team one, east entrance," Voss said. "Team two, main entrance. We need to get to the server room before they lock us out."

His operatives moved. They were good. Trained, disciplined, carrying weapons that would work on both physical and anomalous targets. They'd been preparing for this kind of operation for months.

What they hadn't prepared for was the tall one laughing.

Shammy couldn't help it. The air was so full of pressure, so dense with the storm's attention, that it bubbled up in her chest and came out as a sound that was more joy than fear. The faction members moved through the rain like they thought they controlled this situation. They had no idea what they

were walking into.

“The storm's been waiting,” she said, half to Ace, half to herself. “It's been waiting six months for someone to show up and talk to it.”

Ace shot her a look. “Focus.”

“I am focused. I'm just—” Another laugh escaped. “They have no idea. The storm doesn't care about their plans.”

Gunfire cracked through the rain. Not aimed at them. A warning shot, meant to make them freeze. Mai's typing speed doubled, her fingers almost a blur. Ace's shadow spread wider, pooling across the wet asphalt.

“Server room.” Ace was already moving. “Now.”

They ran.

The building's interior felt like a tomb that hadn't finished dying. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead, half of them dead. The air tasted stale. Too many filters, not enough windows. Ace moved through the hallway with her blade half-drawn, shadow pooling wrong behind her.

Mai was talking fast, processing out loud. “Server room is central, past the main lab, through the security checkpoint. The kill switch is supposed to be—there!”

A door ahead. Metal and glass, card reader blinking red. Mai was already typing on her laptop, codes spilling across the screen.

“Ace, hold position. Shammy, the atmosphere in here is—”

“Dead.” Shammy's voice had gone quiet. “The air's been processed too many times. It's not listening to anything.”

“That's not—” Mai started.

The glass door shattered inward. Faction operatives poured through, weapons raised. Two of them, then three. Voss came last, his face calm in a way that suggested he'd done this before.

“Nobody moves.” Voss. “The server room. Step away from it.”

Ace didn't step away. Her blade cleared the sheath. “No.”

The first operative raised his weapon. Ace's shadow moved first. Not under her command, under something else's. It rippled forward like a living thing, dark and hungry, swallowing the light.

The operative screamed.

Voss had read the files. He knew what Ace could do. But reading about shadow-pressure and seeing it were different things. The darkness that spread from her wasn't natural. It moved with intent. With hunger. It swallowed the operative's arm up to the elbow before he even had time to aim.

“Fire!” someone shouted.

But Shammy was already moving. Her hands came up, and the air in the building shifted. The stale, processed atmosphere suddenly tasted like ozone. Like rain. Like a storm was coming, walls or no walls.

“You've been studying magic for six months,” she said, and her voice had that faraway quality again. “But you never asked it what it wanted.”

The lights flickered. All of them. The emergency backup didn't even try.

In the sudden darkness, three things happened at once.

Ace's shadow spread. Wide, hungry, touching everything. Mai's voice cut through, calm and fast: “Server room, thirty seconds, the kill switch is—”

And Shammy laughed.

Not nervous. Not scared. The kind of laugh that meant something had gone exactly right. The kind of laugh that meant the storm had answered.

Ace couldn't see in the dark, but her shadow could. It showed her shapes. Outlines of bodies, weapons, the door to the server room. Three operatives. Voss. All of them frozen, not understanding what they were dealing with.

Her blade moved on instinct. Not cutting. Pushing. Her shadow flowed forward and operatives stumbled backward, tripping over their own feet in the sudden black.

“Mai.”

“Here.” Mai's hand found her arm in the dark. “Twelve seconds. Shammy, can you—”

“I'm trying.” Shammy's voice came from somewhere above them. She must have moved, gotten height somehow. “The air's resisting. It's been too processed. But the storm outside—it wants in.”

“Let it.”

A sound like glass cracking. Then the roar of wind and rain pouring through broken windows.

The storm entered the building like it had been invited.

Which, Voss realized too late, it probably had been. The tall one, the elemental, stood with her arms spread, her hair whipping in winds that shouldn't exist indoors. The lights weren't coming back on. The air tasted like thunder.

“Move!” he shouted at his operatives. “The server room, now!”

But the shadow was faster. The short one moved through the dark like it was her natural element, blade flickering. Every time one of his people raised a weapon, the darkness swallowed it. Not their hands. Just the weapons. Gone, vanished into shadows that shouldn't be able to do that.

The analytical one had made it to the server room door. She was typing frantically, her laptop screen the only light in the corridor.

Voss pulled his own weapon. Not a gun. Something else. A device the faction's researchers had built, designed to disrupt anomalous fields. He pointed it at the elemental.

The storm answered before he could pull the trigger.

Shammy felt the device before she saw it. A wrongness in the air, a pressure meant to push back against her. It felt like the sterile rooms she'd always hated. Environments that didn't breathe, didn't flow, didn't listen.

The storm outside had listened. It had been waiting six months for someone to ask it inside.

When Voss raised the device, Shammy didn't dodge. She reached up. Not to block. To touch the ceiling. The wind screamed through broken windows. The pressure dropped so fast her ears popped.

And then she laughed.

Because the storm remembered her. It had been waiting for her specifically. The elemental who spoke its language, who knew how to ask instead of demand. The joy of that recognition bubbled up through the fear, the danger, everything.

"It remembers me." Her voice rose with the wind. "The storm—it chose us. Not them."

The device in Voss's hand sparked once and died.

Ace felt Shammy's power surge through the building like a second heartbeat. Her own shadow responded. Not to her will, but to Shammy's storm. It spread wider, darker, touching everything with hungry curiosity.

Voss stumbled back, his device dead. His operatives were retreating. Not fleeing, but falling back. Regrouping. Ace let them go. The server room was the objective.

"Mai. Status."

"Kill switch is—" Mai's voice broke off. "Wait. Someone already accessed it. The files—they're partially deleted. Not everything, but—"

"How much is left?"

"I don't know yet. I need five minutes."

Ace stepped between Mai and the door. Her shadow pooled across the threshold, a dark curtain. "Take them."

Behind her, she heard Voss rallying his people. "The server room! We need those files! Move!"

Three operatives. Voss. Four targets. Ace's blade hummed in the darkness.

The fight that followed wasn't clean. It wasn't cinematic. It was desperate and ugly and fast.

Voss's operatives had trained for this. They came at Ace in pairs, weapons modified to work in darkness. One of them clipped her shoulder. A burning line of pain that made her shadow ripple with fury. Another got close enough to grab her arm.

Her shadow ate his grip. Not his hand. Just the part of him that was touching her. He screamed and stumbled back.

Through it all, Ace moved. Short steps. Efficient turns. Her blade found gaps in their formation, pressed advantages, created openings. She didn't think about strategy. She let her body decide.

Behind her, Mai's voice counted down. "Three minutes. Shammy, the eastern window just—"

"I see it." Shammy's wind roared through the corridor, throwing debris at the operatives. One of them went down, tripped by flying glass.

Voss didn't go down. He was faster than his people, more experienced. When Ace's blade came for him, he was already moving. Dodging, retreating, pulling something from his belt.

A flashbang.

The detonation was too bright, too loud. Ace's shadow screamed, not literally, but it rippled and twisted, reacting to her sudden blindness. She heard Voss's footsteps. Running. Not attacking.

Escaping.

Her vision cleared in fragments. The corridor was empty except for the storm and her team. Two operatives down. One retreating through a side exit. And Voss—

Voss was gone.

"Files are partially intact." Mai's voice was steady now, the verbose panic gone. "They got maybe forty percent before I locked them out. We have the rest."

Shammy stood in the broken window, wind still whipping around her. Her eyes were bright. Too bright, charged with something that wasn't quite electricity. She was laughing again, soft and incredulous.

"We won." She turned. "Ace, we won."

Ace's shoulder burned. Her shadow had finally settled, no longer spreading without permission. She could feel Mai moving behind her, packing up the laptop, preparing to extract.

"We held the site," Ace said. "Voss got away."

"He knows our names now." Mai appeared at her side, one hand pressing a makeshift bandage to Ace's shoulder. "He's seen our faces. We're not anonymous after this."

Ace turned to look at her. Mai's face was pale in the emergency lights that had finally kicked on. Her

silver hair was disheveled, her clothes damp with rain. But her eyes were clear. Focused.

“Then we stop being anonymous,” Ace said. “We keep going.”

Shammy's laugh faded into something softer. “The storm will remember him too. It knows his face now. The air... it doesn't forget.”

They extracted twelve minutes later, when Foundation backup finally arrived. The research site was secure. The files were saved. And somewhere in the city, Voss was telling his employer about the team that had stopped him.

The shadow specialist. The analytical anchor. The storm-elemental who laughed when the wind answered.

Three names. Three targets.

The faction would be ready next time.

Ace sat in the back of the Foundation transport, shoulder wrapped properly now. Mai was beside her, laptop closed, finally still. Shammy had the window seat again, her fingers pressed against the glass.

The rain had stopped. The storm was moving on.

“The atmosphere's changing again.” Shammy's voice was quiet. “Like it's... settling. Like it knows we won.”

“Does that mean something?” Mai asked.

Shammy was quiet for a long moment. Then: “It means the storm likes us better. It means we asked instead of demanded.” A small smile. “It means we have an ally that they don't.”

Ace's shadow pooled at her feet. She hadn't commanded it. It just... was.

“Good.”

The transport rolled through the city, toward Foundation headquarters, toward debriefing and reports and questions about what came next. The files on Mai's laptop contained research about magic's return. Documentation of patterns, theories, data points.

But what mattered most wasn't on the laptop.

What mattered was that the storm had answered. That Shammy had laughed in the face of danger. That Ace's shadow had moved without her asking. That Mai had calculated through chaos and found the solution.

They'd adapted. The faction hadn't.

Next time would be different. The faction would be ready.

So would they.

Outside the transport window, the city lights flickered. Magic was everywhere now. In the infrastructure, the people, the very air they breathed. Six months ago, none of this would have been possible.

Ace checked the doorframe of the transport as it passed. Structural integrity: stable. Exits: two. She didn't know why she still did it. She didn't need to know.

Mai leaned against her shoulder, not saying anything. Her presence was enough.

Shammy watched the clouds move, still smiling.

The race wasn't over. But they'd won this leg.

End of Chapter 10

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