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## Chapter 11: "The Shadow War"

The Foundation building didn't feel like home anymore.

Mai sat at her workstation on the seventh floor, the glow of three monitors painting her face silver-blue. The rest of the analysis wing had emptied hours ago. Just her and the hum of servers and the distant vibration of the building's HVAC system cycling through its programmed rhythms.

Her pen moved across a notepad. Old habit. Digital records were searchable, but her hand remembered things her keyboard forgot.

Ace was somewhere across the city. A surveillance job Shammy had tagged along for, something about an apartment building that had started breathing. The reports had been sparse. Standard check-in schedule. Mai had stopped worrying about standard check-ins around month three of working with them. Worrying didn't help. Trusting did.

She reached for her coffee. Cold. She'd forgotten it again.

The building's lights flickered.

Just a flicker. The kind that happened sometimes since the Return. Magic crawled through the city's power grid now, and even the Foundation's warded systems weren't immune to interference.

Mai's pen stopped.

The flicker had a pattern. On. Off. On. Off. Like someone signaling.

She looked up at the ceiling lights. They stabilized. Steady. Normal.

Her hand found her keyboard. Pulled up the building's electrical grid. Ran a diagnostic.

Everything looked fine.

"The pattern's showing normal distribution across all circuits," she murmured to herself, processing out loud. "No anomalous signatures. No—"

The lights went out.

All of them. Every floor. The emergency lighting didn't engage.

Darkness. Total.

Mai's hand was already reaching for her comm unit. Her fingers brushed plastic and the unit sparked. Cold. Dead.

Her hand was shaking. That was wrong. Her hands didn't shake. She pressed her palm flat against the desk, the way she had in the van during the Hallway operation, and forced herself to breathe.

"System malfunction." She said it into the dark. Her voice was steady. Good. "Probably localized. The backup generators should—"

The computer screens flickered back on. All three.

But the display was wrong.

Her analysis programs had been replaced. Instead of anomaly tracking, instead of ley line mapping, the screens showed security feeds. Every camera in the building.

And on every camera, something was moving.

Mai leaned closer. The feeds showed corridors. Stairwells. The lobby. And in each one, shadows pooled along the walls. Not natural shadows. They moved wrong. They crawled up the sides of filing cabinets. They slid under doors.

The shadows were alive.

"Okay." Her voice came out faster now. "Okay. The building's been compromised. Some kind of shadow anomaly. Maybe triggered externally. Maybe someone accessed the—no. Focus. Classification later. Survival first."

She grabbed her disruptor pistol from the desk drawer. Checked the charge. Full.

The door to the analysis wing clicked.

Locked.

She hadn't locked it.

Mai tried the manual override. Nothing. The electronic lock had deadbolted. She pulled harder. The door didn't budge.

"Okay." The word was becoming a tic. "Alternate exit. Fire door. North side of the—"

The lights snapped back on.

Every light in the wing. Overhead fluorescents. Desk lamps. The glow from her monitors. All of it at once, blinding.

Mai blinked. Spots in her vision.

When they cleared, the shadows were still there.

They'd spread. Along the walls. Across the ceiling. Pooling around the legs of her desk. Not touching her. Not yet. But close. Close enough that she could feel them. Cold. Wrong. The temperature in the room had dropped. The building's HVAC system was still cycling, but the air itself had changed.

Her building. Her workspace. Her tools.

All of it turning against her.

She reached for her keyboard again. Maybe she could access the system remotely. Override the lockdown. Alert security.

The keyboard sparked under her fingers. Not electricity. Something else. Something that felt like ice.

Mai pulled her hand back. Her fingers were trembling. She pressed them together. Steadied them. Started calculating.

"If the shadow's spreading from multiple points, there's a central controller. Someone feeding it instructions. Probably not in the building, they wouldn't risk it. Remote activation. Which means there's a signal I can—"

The monitors flickered.

All three screens went black.

Then text appeared. White on black. Simple. Clean.

**MAI TANAKA.**

**YOU ARE KNOWN.**

Mai stared.

The text continued.

**YOUR TEAM IS SCATTERED. YOUR BUILDING IS OURS. YOUR PROTOCOLS ARE OBSOLETE.**

**THIS IS NOT A NEGOTIATION.**

**THIS IS A STATEMENT.**

The shadows on the walls surged forward.

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Ace was four blocks from the Foundation building when her comm unit died.

She and Shammy had been walking back from the breathing-apartment job. Unremarkable. A localized anomaly caused by faulty wiring interacting with new ley line patterns. Fixed in twenty minutes. Shammy had made a joke about landlords and magic. Ace hadn't laughed, but she'd almost smiled.

Then her comm crackled once. Static. Silence.

She stopped walking.

Shammy stopped beside her. The tall woman's head tilted. "The air just changed."

Ace didn't answer. She was already moving. Her shadow spread at her feet. Not commanded. Not controlled. It was responding to something. Her body knew before she did.

"Ace?" Shammy's voice came from behind. Fragmented. Worried. "What's—"

"Mai's comm is dead."

Shammy caught up. "Maybe it's just—"

“Dead.”

Ace started running. Shammy followed.

Four blocks. Downtown traffic. People on the sidewalks who didn't know anything was wrong. Ace cut through an alley. Shorter. Faster. Her shadow pooled ahead of her, clearing obstacles before she reached them.

“Foundation building.” Shammy's sentences were coming faster. Fragmented. “If something's—Mai's there alone—she's—”

“I know.”

Ace didn't slow down.

Her hand found her blade. She hadn't decided to draw it. Her body had decided. The blade hummed at its edge frequency, the emerald glow faint in the afternoon light.

Shammy's hair started lifting. Static charge. The air around her was changing. Responding to her panic.

“Ace, if they're targeting us, targeting her, we need backup. We need—”

“No time.”

Ace was right. Four blocks. They could make it in three minutes. Backup would take ten.

Her comm crackled. Not dead. Not completely.

Mai's voice. Faint. Static-wrapped.

“—building's compromised—shadows—can't reach the exits—”

Then silence.

Ace ran faster.

---

Mai's back was against the wall.

Not by choice. The shadows had pushed her there. Not touching. Not yet. But surrounding. Boxing her in.

Her disruptor pistol was in her hand. She'd fired twice. The shots passed through the darkness like it wasn't there. Solid matter. Energy discharge. Neither affected it.

“Okay.” The word was a reflex now. “Okay. Traditional containment protocols don't apply. The shadow isn't a physical phenomenon. It's responding to something. A signal. A controller. Which means—”

The shadows pulsed.

The temperature dropped again. Frost forming on her monitors. Her coffee cup cracking from thermal stress.

“—which means I need to find the signal and—”

Her hand was shaking over her keyboard. Her tool. Her weapon. The thing she'd built her career around.

And it was useless.

The shadows crawled up the legs of her desk. Touched the edge of her keyboard. The plastic blackened. Curled.

Mai pulled her hand back.

Think. Calculate. Process.

Nothing came.

Her mind, usually so organized, so structured, was fragmenting. Thoughts piling on thoughts. No clear path forward.

“They're using the building's infrastructure.” Her voice was too fast. “The electrical system. The HVAC. Every channel's been—no. Not every channel. Some systems are isolated. The emergency network is on a separate—”

The shadows reached her desk.

Mai stood. Backed away. Her shoulder blades hit the wall.

“—the emergency network. If I can reach the server room. Physical access. The shadows can't—”

The shadows rose.

In front of her, blocking the door. Behind her, sealing the wall. Above her, crawling across the ceiling.

She was surrounded.

Her hand pressed flat against the wall. Cold concrete. No escape.

“Okay.” She said it one more time. And then, quieter: “Okay.”

Her comm crackled.

Static. Then Ace's voice. Faint. Distant.

“Mai. Hold on.”

And Mai, for the first time in her career, for the first time since Tokyo, for the first time since she'd learned to stand on her own—

She said the words she never said.

“I need you. Now.”

The line crackled. Went silent.

Mai stood in the dark. Surrounded by shadows that weren't hers. Waiting.

Her hand was shaking.

She pressed it flat against the wall and didn't let herself stop breathing.

---

Ace heard the words.

Four words. Mai's voice. Strained. Controlled. But underneath it—

Fear.

Mai didn't do fear. Mai did calculations. Did frameworks. Did systems that could predict outcomes and plans that accounted for variables.

But Mai didn't do fear.

And that meant Ace didn't have time for planning.

She was two blocks away. The Foundation building rose against the skyline. Every window dark. Even the lobby. Even the emergency lights.

“Shammy.”

“Here.” Shammy was beside her. Her hair lifted in a wind that wasn't there. The air pressure dropped around her. Static charge crackled.

“Get her out.”

Shammy's eyes widened. “Ace—”

“I'll draw the shadows.”

“Ace, you can't—”

Ace was already moving. Not toward the main entrance. Toward the service entrance on the east side. The one maintenance used. The one that didn't have security cameras.

Her shadow spread at her feet. Not controlled. Not commanded.

It had been moving wrong for weeks. Pooling when it shouldn't. Responding to instincts she hadn't consciously sent. Ace had ignored it. Tried to control it. Failed.

Now she let it move.

The service door was locked. Electronic. Warded.

Ace's shadow touched the lock.

The metal screamed. The plastic housing cracked. The electronic components sparked once and died.

The door opened.

Inside, the corridor was dark. Not the absence-of-light dark. Something else. A darkness that had

weight. That pressed against her skin.

Ace walked forward.

Her shadow spread ahead of her. Not fighting the other shadows. Not exactly. More like acknowledging them. Recognizing them.

They recognized her too.

The darkness in the corridor pulsed. Slowed. Watched.

Ace didn't stop walking.

---

Shammy felt the air shift the moment Ace entered the building.

Wrong. The whole building's atmosphere was wrong. Like someone had taken a storm and locked it in a box. Pressure building. Nowhere to go.

The air inside was screaming.

She pressed her palms against the building's exterior wall. Concrete and wards. She could feel the magic inside. Not Foundation magic. Something else. Something that had been invited in.

"Okay." She whispered it to herself. "Okay, love. You can do this."

The wind answered.

Not a storm. Not yet. But the air around her started to move. To circulate. She pulled at the building's atmosphere through every crack. Every gap. Every imperfection in the seals.

Inside, the pressure would be shifting. The shadows would feel it. Would have to adjust.

It wouldn't be enough to stop them.

But it might be enough to buy time.

Shammy closed her eyes. Felt the building. Felt Mai somewhere inside. Felt Ace moving through corridors that no one else could navigate.

The storm inside was building.

She would need to answer it.

---

Mai heard the shadows shift before she saw them move.

A sound like fabric whispering. Like something large and dark adjusting itself.

Then—

The wall behind her cracked.

---

Not from pressure. From impact. Something hitting the concrete from the outside. Once. Twice.

The third hit broke through.

Shammy's arm reached through the hole. Her hand found Mai's wrist.

"Grab on, love."

Mai grabbed.

Shammy pulled.

The wall wasn't big enough for a person. But Shammy's pull wasn't just strength. It was the wind. A sudden pressure differential that yanked Mai sideways through a gap that shouldn't have been big enough.

Mai tumbled out into daylight.

Shammy stood over her, tall and wind-wracked, her hair lifting in a localized storm that seemed to center on her. Behind her, the hole in the Foundation building's wall was already darkening. Shadows pouring through the gap.

"Get up." Shammy's voice was fragmented. "We need to—Ace is still—"

"I know."

Mai was on her feet. Her hand was still shaking. She pressed it flat against her thigh.

Her comm crackled. Ace's voice.

"Out?"

"Out," Mai said.

"Good."

"Ace—wait—"

But the comm crackled again. Silence.

Inside the building, something screamed.

Not human. Not animal. Something else. Something made of darkness and pressure and wrong.

Then Ace's voice. Faint. But clear.

"Shammy. Clear the building's air."

Shammy's head snapped toward the structure. Her eyes widened. "Love, if I do that—"

"Do it."

Shammy closed her eyes. Drew a breath. Let the wind answer.

---

Inside, Ace stood in a corridor of shadows.

They pressed against her. Around her. Through her.

But they didn't touch.

Her shadow spread at her feet. Darker than the rest. Wrong, in a way that felt right.

The other shadows recognized it. Recognized her.

She didn't understand why. Didn't try to. Understanding was Mai's domain.

Ace's domain was simpler. Move. Act. End the threat.

The shadows pulsed. Trying to overwhelm her. Trying to swallow her.

Her shadow answered.

Not with force. Not with resistance. With something else. Something that felt like acknowledgment. Like speaking to something that had forgotten it could speak.

The shadows slowed.

Ace walked forward.

Through them. Around them. Between them.

The corridor ended at a door. Server room. She could hear the hum of equipment inside. The buzz of systems that controlled the building's infrastructure.

Someone had used these systems to send a message.

Someone had turned Mai's tools against her.

Ace opened the door.

The server room was empty. No people. Just machines humming. Lights blinking.

And in the corner, a device she didn't recognize. Small. Black. Plugged into a server rack.

The shadows had come from somewhere. The faction. The same people who had triggered anomalies across the city. They'd found a way to weaponize darkness itself.

Ace's shadow touched the device.

It sparked. Died.

The shadows in the corridor behind her slowed. Stopped. Began to recede.

But not because of her.

Because of the wind.

The building's atmosphere changed.

Shammy stood with her arms spread. Eyes closed. The air around her was screaming. Not screaming at her. Screaming through her.

She pulled every current. Redirected every pressure differential. The building's HVAC system, compromised by the attack, had created pockets of dead air. Zones where the shadows could move freely.

Shammy fixed that.

Wind blasted through the corridors. Through the stairwells. Through every vent and crack and gap.

The shadows had nowhere to hide. No stillness to build on. They were scattered. Broken. Pushed back.

Shammy's nose bled. She could feel the strain. Her body wasn't meant for this kind of sustained manipulation.

But Mai was safe. Ace was inside.

She could bleed a little longer.

---

Ace felt the wind before she heard it.

The building's air, still and heavy moments ago, started to move. To circulate. The shadows that had been pressing against her retreated. Scattered. Lost cohesion.

Shammy.

Ace moved. Down the corridor. Through the lobby. Toward the entrance.

The darkness was still there. But broken. Fragmented. Retreating into corners and under furniture.

She found Mai outside. Shammy beside her. Both breathing hard.

The Foundation building's lobby windows had shattered. From the inside. The wind had blown them out.

Mai's hand was pressed flat against her thigh. Shammy had blood on her upper lip.

Ace stood in front of them. Her shadow pooled at her feet. Wrong. But hers.

"They know we're targets now." Mai's voice was steady. Controlled. But her hand was still pressed flat. Still shaking underneath. "The building. Our files. Our access protocols. They know everything."

"I know."

"We can't go back."

"I know."

Ace's eyes scanned the street. Exits. Sight lines. The people walking past who didn't know what had just happened inside.

"Ace." Mai's voice cracked. "They knew my name. They knew I'd be alone. They knew exactly where to hit."

"I know."

Mai's voice cracked again. "I asked for help."

Ace turned. Looked at Mai. Really looked.

"You called," she said. "I came."

Mai's hand stopped shaking. Just for a moment.

Shammy wiped the blood from her nose. "The building's atmosphere is clearing. Whatever they used, it's dissipating. But they'll know it failed."

"They'll try again," Mai said.

"Yes."

Ace's hand found Mai's arm. Not holding. Just touching.

"Then we don't let them find us."

---

They walked.

Not toward another Foundation site. Not toward home. Toward somewhere else. Somewhere the faction wouldn't know to look.

Shammy felt the air shift as they moved. The city's atmosphere, changed by the Return, carried traces of magic everywhere. But some places carried more than others.

"There's a pocket." She said it like she was reading a map. "Three blocks east. An old warehouse. The air's different there. Still. Quiet."

"Foundation-owned?" Mai asked.

"No. Abandoned. The kind of place the city forgot about."

"Good."

Mai's hand was steady now. Her pen moved across a small notebook she'd pulled from her pocket. Sketching. Calculating. Processing.

"They used the building's systems against me." Her voice was fast. Analytical. "Which means they have access to our infrastructure codes. Or they've cracked them. Either way, we can't trust any Foundation-controlled environment."

“So we go off-grid,” Ace said.

“For now. Until we understand how deep this goes.”

Ace didn't respond. Her shadow moved at her feet. Wrong. But controlled.

Shammy walked beside them. Her hair had settled. The wind had gone quiet.

“You know what's funny?” she asked.

“What?” Mai said.

“I called the storm. And it answered. But it didn't feel like fighting.” She trailed off.

“Like what?” Ace asked.

Shammy didn't answer for a moment. Then: “Like it remembered me.”

They walked in silence.

Above them, the city's lights flickered. Magic crawled through power lines. The world was still changing. Still waking up.

And somewhere, in cells across the country, people were watching.

They'd failed today. The shadows had been turned back.

But they knew now.

They knew the Triad's names.

---

The warehouse was old. Pre-Return. The kind of building that had been scheduled for demolition three times and somehow survived each one.

Shammy had been right. The air was different. Still. Quiet. Like the building itself was holding its breath.

Mai sat on a crate. Her laptop was open. Battery-powered. No network connection. Air-gapped.

“I can work with this.” Her voice was faster now. Processing. “If they've compromised Foundation systems, I need to rebuild from scratch. New access protocols. New encryption. New—”

“Mai.”

Ace's voice. Quiet.

Mai stopped. Looked up.

Ace stood by the doorframe. Checking it. The way she always checked doorframes.

“You almost died today.”

Mai's pen stopped moving. “I—”

"Your hand was shaking."

Mai looked down at her hand. It was steady now. But she remembered.

"The shadows. They took my tools. My building. Everything I use to—"

"I know."

Ace crossed the space between them. Sat on the crate beside Mai. Not touching. Close enough that Mai could feel her presence.

"You called for help."

"I had to."

"No." Ace's voice was flat. "You didn't have to. You could have calculated another way out. Built another framework. Solved it yourself."

Mai was quiet.

"But you called."

Ace's hand found Mai's. Not holding. Just touching.

"That's not weakness. That's trust."

Mai's fingers interlaced with Ace's.

"I've never asked before."

"I know."

"I didn't want to need anyone."

"I know."

Ace's shadow pooled at their feet. Still wrong. Still moving without command.

But Mai's hand wasn't shaking anymore.

---

Shammy stood by the window. Watching the street. The warehouse's glass was grimy. Cracked. Pre-Return architecture that hadn't been updated.

"The air's settling." She said it to the room. "Whatever they used to track us, it's fading. We're off their radar. For now."

"How long?" Mai asked.

"A few hours. Maybe a day. Depends on how sophisticated their tracing is."

Mai nodded. Her pen started moving again. Notes. Calculations. Plans.

"We need to understand the attack vector." The words were coming fast again. "The shadows. The

device Ace found. It was plugged into our servers. Which means someone physically installed it. Which means—”

“Inside job,” Ace said.

“Yes.”

“The mole.”

“Possibly. Or someone who accessed the building without us knowing.” Mai's sentences were running together. “If the faction has cells across the country, they could have someone in maintenance. Janitorial. Security. Anyone with physical—”

“Mai.”

Ace's voice again. Mai stopped.

“Breathe.”

Mai breathed.

Shammy turned from the window. Her tall frame cast a shadow in the dim light. “We can't stay here forever.”

“I know.”

“But we can't go back to the Foundation either.”

“I know.”

Mai's pen moved. A diagram. A plan forming.

“We need resources. Equipment. Access to systems they don't know about.”

“Where?” Shammy asked.

Mai's pen stopped.

“There's a secondary site. Old Foundation archive. Decommissioned before the Return. The systems there are air-gapped. Isolated. No one's accessed it in years.”

“Where?” Ace asked.

“Industrial district. Near the meat-packing plant.”

The plant from the Hallway operation. The trigger-man's base.

Ace's hand found her blade.

“That's not a coincidence.”

“No.”

Mai closed her notebook. Stood.

"The faction knows who we are. They've made us targets. They've compromised our tools." Her voice was steady now. Processing. "So we go somewhere they won't expect. We use systems they don't know about. And we start hitting back."

Ace stood beside her. Shammy joined them.

The Triad. Scattered. Hunted. But not broken.

"Let's move," Ace said.

They walked out of the warehouse.

Behind them, the city flickered with magic. Ahead of them, shadows waited.

But this time, they moved together.

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