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## Chapter 13: Countermove

The safehouse smelled like dust and old decisions. Ace stood by the window, shadow pooling at her feet in the early morning light, watching the street below. Nothing moved. The air outside held that peculiar stillness that came before something broke.

Mai's voice cut through the silence. "We need to stop running."

Ace didn't turn. "Agreed."

Shammy unfolded herself from the corner of the room. She'd been sitting wrong, her back against a wall that couldn't possibly be comfortable for someone her height, knees drawn up, head nearly touching the ceiling. "About time someone said it."

Three days. Three days of staying ahead of the faction's reach, of moving between safehouses, of watching Foundation channels go dark because they couldn't trust them anymore. Three days of Mai's calculations spiraling into tighter and tighter circles until even Ace could see the fractures forming.

Mai stood at the kitchen table, which was covered in maps. Real paper maps, because they couldn't risk digital traces. Her silver hair caught the weak light from the window. She'd been staring at the same intersection for twenty minutes.

"The faction needs infrastructure." Her voice was processing out loud. "Something old. Something that connects to everything. If I were them—"

"You're not them," Ace said.

"I know. But if I were trying to trigger a cascade event, the kind that would accelerate the Return across the entire metropolitan area, I'd need—"

Ace turned from the window. "Where would I strike?"

Mai stopped. Her pen hovered over the map.

"What?"

"If I were them," Ace said, crossing to the table. Her shadow moved wrong, too fast, pooling toward the map like it was trying to read it too. "Where would I go."

"That's not how analysis works. You can't just—"

"Where."

Shammy's voice came from the corner. "The convergence point. You'd find the place where everything meets. Where old lines cross new ones. Where the city's blood runs through the same channels it always has, but now there's something else in the water."

Both of them looked at her.

“The air's been telling me for hours.” Shammy stood, ducking under a doorframe that she didn't actually need to duck under, old habit, muscle memory for a body that never quite fit anywhere. “Magic's gathering. Like weather. Like pressure. There's a storm coming, and it's not coming for us. It's coming *from* somewhere.”

Mai's pen moved across the map. “The power grid nexus. Here.” She tapped a spot northeast of the industrial district. “Old infrastructure. Pre-Return. But the ley lines I mapped, they converge within two hundred meters of this point. If someone triggered a cascade there, the magic would spread through the entire electrical grid. Every powered device in the city would become a potential anomaly vector.”

“That's insane,” Shammy said. But she was smiling. “It's too big. They'd lose control of it.”

“Maybe that's the point,” Ace said.

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The faction had a name, Mai had learned. *Resonance*. Three syllables that sounded almost spiritual, almost scientific. In the briefings she'd read before everything went sideways, the analysts had called them “accelerationists.” People who believed magic's return was only the beginning. People who wanted to push faster, harder, to see what happened when the world broke completely.

Mai had read the briefings and thought: *That's not a strategy. That's an ideology.*

Now she thought: *That's exactly why they're dangerous.*

They were set up in the safehouse's single working room. The previous occupants, a group that called themselves an “artist collective” which probably meant they'd been growing something illegal in the basement, had left behind a table, three chairs, and an alarming number of candles. Shammy had lit one because she said the air was stale. The flame flickered in no direction at all, which was either a sign of good ventilation or a sign that Shammy was unconsciously stabilizing the room.

“The nexus connects to everything,” Mai said, spreading the maps. “Power distribution. Water treatment. Communication infrastructure. It's a node point. Pre-Return, it was just a relay station. Now?”

She traced the ley lines she'd mapped. The ink had smudged. She hadn't redrawn it.

“Now the ley lines feed into it. Magic flows through those channels. It's like—” She stopped. Her grandmother's voice surfaced, unbidden. *The beauty is in the crack.*

Mai blinked. The memory had no right to be here. Her grandmother had been dead for years. The wabi-sabi lesson had been about pottery, about how the tea bowl was more beautiful for having been broken and repaired with gold.

“The crack.” Mai said it like she was tasting the word. “They're trying to make the crack bigger.”

Ace was watching her. “Explain.”

“Foundation containment philosophy.” Mai heard herself going verbose, heard the sentences running together, and couldn't stop. “We've always treated anomalies as things to contain, to separate, to

keep apart from normal reality. But Resonance doesn't want to contain anything. They want to break the container. They want magic to flood through. They want the crack to become a channel, and they want to make it wider by forcing more power through it than it can handle."

Shammy shifted. The air pressure in the room dropped slightly. "That sounds like a catastrophe."

"It's intended to be."

Ace's hand found her blade. Not consciously. Mai had learned to read these movements. Ace's body was always three steps ahead of her mind. The shadow at her feet had begun to spread toward the map.

"So we stop them," Ace said.

"It's not that simple. The mathematical models suggest—"

"I'm done calculating."

The words came out wrong. Not Ace's voice. Mai's own voice, sharper than she'd intended. She heard herself and didn't recognize the sound.

Ace and Shammy both went still.

"I've been—" Mai's hands were shaking. She pressed them flat against the table. "Three days. Three days of running and calculating and trying to predict their next move and I can't. I can't predict magic. I can't build a model for something that doesn't follow rules. My whole life I've been good at understanding systems and this system doesn't *work* and I'm—"

She stopped. Her breath caught.

Shammy moved first. Long limbs unfolding, crossing the room in two strides, a hand on Mai's shoulder. "Breathe, love."

"I'm fine."

"You're really not."

Ace hadn't moved. Her shadow was pooling wrong, spreading across the floor in patterns that had nothing to do with the light. But her eyes were steady. Watching.

"Where would you strike," Ace said again. Not a question this time. A direction.

Mai took a breath. Her grandmother's voice again: *The beauty is in the crack*. But that wasn't helpful. That was memory interfering with analysis. That was—

No.

"The crack is where the pressure builds," Mai said slowly. "If they're trying to widen the channel, they need to push magic through faster than it can adapt. That means—"

"A surge," Shammy said. "Like a storm hitting a dam."

"Yes. They need to trigger a magical surge at the nexus point. But they can't do it from outside. They'd need to be inside the infrastructure itself."

Ace's shadow rippled. "The old access tunnels."

Mai looked at the map. The nexus was built on top of older infrastructure, maintenance tunnels, utility access, things that had been there before the Return and hadn't been fully mapped since. If Resonance had people inside the Foundation, Reyes had proved that, they'd also know about the vulnerabilities.

"The eastern approach," Mai said. "The tunnels connect to the drainage system. Pre-Return, they used them for maintenance. Now?"

Ace was already moving. "We go in before they do."

---

In another part of the city, the faction was also preparing.

They called themselves Resonance because they believed in the power of vibration, the idea that magic, like sound, could resonate through matter and change its fundamental properties. Their leader, a woman who had once been a physicist before the Return made her field obsolete, stood in a warehouse that smelled of copper and ozone.

The power grid nexus was three kilometers away. Her people were already moving into position. They'd been planning this for months, ever since the first ley lines had appeared, ever since they'd realized that the Earth itself was growing a new nervous system.

The old world was dead. They were trying to help the new one be born.

"The Foundation team," someone said. A subordinate, one of the newer recruits. "We should have eliminated them when we had the chance."

The leader shook her head. "They're not important. They're symptoms. The old world trying to hold on."

"They know about the nexus."

"They know *something* about the nexus. They don't understand what we're actually doing." She smiled. The air in the warehouse tasted like static. "By the time they figure it out, it'll be too late. The cascade doesn't need to be controlled. It just needs to be started."

The recruit shifted. Nervous. "And after?"

"After, we see what happens." She spread her hands. "Magic came back. The world changed. Everyone's trying to pretend we can go back to normal. We can't. The only question is how far we're willing to let it go."

The recruit didn't answer. But the leader didn't need him to understand. She'd stopped believing in consensus months ago. What mattered was momentum. What mattered was the push.

The Return was only the beginning. She wanted to see what came next.

---

The team moved through the city like ghosts.

Ace went first. Her shadow preceded her, testing corners, checking angles. The old instincts were coming back, not the ones that had worked before the Return, but something adjacent. Shadow was different now. It responded to instinct, not will. It moved when she wasn't looking. It had opinions about where they should go.

She'd learned to trust it.

Mai followed, her disruptor pistol held low. She was still processing the snap from earlier, Mai could feel it, the residue of rage where calculation should have been. That wasn't like her. She'd been trained to be precise, controlled, analytical. But three days of running and failing to predict had worn grooves in her patience.

*The beauty is in the crack.*

Her grandmother's voice again. Mai pushed it down.

Shammy brought up the rear. The air around her moved in ways that had nothing to do with wind. Shammy didn't control it. She was part of it. The storm that walked like a woman. When she passed, the pressure changed. The temperature dropped. The environment remembered her.

"The nexus is ahead." Shammy's voice had that faraway quality that meant she was listening to something none of them could hear. "Something's already there."

They stopped in an alley that smelled like wet concrete and old exhaust. The nexus building was visible through the gap between two newer structures, a squat, brutalist thing that looked like it had been built in the 1970s and never updated. Power lines ran from it in every direction, a mechanical heart pumping electricity through the city's veins.

"How do we get in?" Mai asked.

Ace studied the building. Her shadow pooled at her feet, darker than it should have been in the weak morning light. "Eastern approach. Tunnels."

"That's where they'll be."

"I know."

Mai processed this. Ace was right, of course she was right. The eastern tunnels were the only way in that didn't involve going through the main entrance, which would be watched. But if Resonance was already inside, the tunnels would be a trap.

Unless.

"They won't expect us to go *through* the trap," Mai said slowly. "They'll expect us to avoid it."

Ace's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. "Yes."

"You want to walk into the trap on purpose."

"I want to be where they're not looking."

Shammy shifted. "I can make them look elsewhere."

Both of them turned to her.

"The air in there is wrong." Shammy's voice was fragments. "I can feel it from here. Magic's gathering. Building. I can push it. Make some noise somewhere else. Draw their attention."

"That's dangerous," Mai said.

"Everything we're doing is dangerous."

Shammy's eyes were bright. Stormlight behind the blue. She was enjoying this, Mai realized. Not the danger. The movement. After three days of hiding, Shammy was finally doing something.

"Fine." Mai's voice was clipped. "Shammy creates a distraction at the north entrance. Ace and I go through the eastern tunnels. We intercept them before they can trigger the cascade."

"What about after?" Ace asked.

Mai met her eyes. Ace's gaze was steady. Direct. She wasn't asking for a plan. She was asking if Mai was okay. If the snap had passed.

"After," Mai said, "we stop them. Then we figure out what comes next."

Ace's shadow rippled. Agreement.

---

Shammy moved like weather.

It was the only way to describe it. She didn't walk so much as flow, her body catching air currents that shouldn't exist in an enclosed city. By the time she reached the north approach to the nexus, the pressure had already started to change.

The faction had guards. Of course they did. Two figures in dark clothing, standing at the service entrance, their attention turned toward the street. They were watching for threats from outside.

They weren't watching the sky.

Shammy spread her arms. The air crackled. Wind gathered in a spiral around her, not violent, not yet, but present. Noticeable. The kind of thing that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up even if you didn't know why.

The guards shifted. Looked up.

Shammy smiled. "Hello, loves."

The storm answered.

---

In the eastern tunnels, Ace and Mai moved through darkness.

The flashlight Mai carried was weak. She'd rationed the battery, not knowing how long they'd need it. But Ace didn't need light. Her shadow moved ahead of her, navigating by touch, by feel, by something that wasn't sight at all.

They'd been walking for ten minutes. The tunnels were older than Mai had expected, pre-war, maybe.

The concrete had settled into permanent shapes, water stains mapping decades of flow. The air smelled like rust and old stone.

"Talk to me," Ace said.

It was the longest sentence she'd said since they'd entered. Mai heard what she was really asking: *Are you still processing? Are you back to analysis?*

"The cascade works by forcing magical energy through a contained space faster than it can disperse," Mai said. Her voice was steady. Professional. The snap was contained, at least for now. "If they're inside the nexus proper, they'll be building toward a surge. We need to interrupt the buildup before it reaches critical mass."

"How long?"

"Depends on how much power they're pushing. If they've been preparing for months, they could trigger it in minutes. If they're still building—"

"Then we have time."

"We have less time than we think."

Ace stopped. Her shadow spread across the tunnel wall, exploring ahead. "Something's wrong."

Mai raised the flashlight. The tunnel continued into darkness. "What do you—"

"Quiet."

They listened. The silence was heavy. Water dripping somewhere distant. The hum of electrical infrastructure vibrating through the walls.

Then: footsteps. Not ahead. Behind.

"They're not all at the north entrance," Mai breathed.

Ace's blade was already in her hand. She hadn't drawn it. It had just... appeared. Her shadow had brought it to her.

"How many?"

Ace listened. "Four. Maybe five."

"We can't fight five people and stop the cascade."

"No." Ace's eyes were steady. "We can't."

---

The faction team in the tunnels had expected prey.

They'd been told the Foundation team was on the run. Desperate. Dangerous only because cornered animals were always dangerous. They'd been told to intercept, contain, eliminate if necessary.

They hadn't been told what Ace's shadow could do.

The first one never saw her coming. He was rounding a corner when the darkness reached up and took his feet. He went down hard, his weapon discharging into the ceiling, and by the time his team reacted, Ace was already past him.

The second one fired at a shadow that wasn't there. The third one caught Mai's disruptor pulse in the chest, not lethal, but enough to drop her. The fourth and fifth fell back, regrouping, their voices echoing through the tunnel in panicked confusion.

Ace stood over the first one. Her blade wasn't drawn. She didn't need it. Her shadow had him pinned, darkness pooling across his chest, pressing him into the concrete.

"How many more?" Ace asked.

He didn't answer. His eyes were wide. He was staring at her shadow like he'd never seen darkness before.

"Ace." Mai's voice was calm. Controlled. She was back in analysis mode, her earlier snap compartmentalized. "We don't have time for interrogation."

Ace looked at her. Then at the man beneath her shadow. Then at the tunnel ahead.

She let him go.

"Run," she said.

He ran.

---

The nexus interior was a cathedral of infrastructure.

Mai had seen power distribution centers before. The Foundation had facilities like this in every major city, nodes that kept the lights on, the servers humming, the world running. But this one was different. The magic flowing through the ley lines had seeped into the machinery. The transformers hummed at frequencies that weren't quite electrical. The cables pulsed with light that had nothing to do with current.

And in the center of it all, Resonance was making their move.

Five people stood in a circle around the main transformer array. They were chanting, not words, exactly, but sounds. Tones. Their hands moved in patterns that Mai's analytical brain tried to parse and failed. They were pushing magic into the infrastructure, forcing it through channels that had never been designed for this kind of power.

The air tasted like static and wrongness.

"They're already at the surge point." Mai's voice was quiet. "We're too late."

Ace's shadow spread across the floor. "No."

She stepped forward. The chanting continued. The Resonance members were too focused to notice her. They'd built their circle facing inward, toward the power they were trying to channel. They weren't watching the edges.

Ace reached the first one and put her hand on his shoulder.

He stopped chanting. Turned.

Her shadow took him before he could scream.

The circle broke.

---

In the chaos that followed, Mai processed what was happening at combat speed, which meant she couldn't process it at all. Things moved too fast. Ace's shadow was everywhere, wrapping around limbs, silencing voices, pulling people away from the transformer array. The Resonance members fought back with magic that crackled and sparked, but they'd built their working for channeling energy, not combat. Their power was too slow, too focused, too contained.

Ace wasn't contained.

She moved through the chaos like a blade through water. Every motion precise. Every step deliberate. Her shadow preceded her and followed her and surrounded her, an extension of her will that she didn't have to command.

Mai raised her disruptor and fired at the one member who seemed to be coordinating the others, a woman with gray-streaked hair who was shouting something that Mai couldn't quite hear. The pulse caught her in the shoulder. She staggered.

And the cascade began to collapse.

---

It wasn't an explosion. It was a breath.

The energy that Resonance had been forcing through the transformer array didn't discharge. It *exhaled*. Magic spread through the room in waves, visible for a moment as rippling light, and then dispersed into the infrastructure. The lights flickered. The transformers hummed. Somewhere in the city above, Mai knew, a million devices would glitch for a fraction of a second and then return to normal.

They hadn't stopped the cascade. They'd interrupted it.

Shammy's voice crackled over the comms. "The air's clearing. Whatever they were doing, it's dispersing."

Mai looked around the room. Three of the Resonance members were down. Two more were retreating toward the eastern exit, toward the tunnel they'd come through.

Ace was already moving.

"Ace—" Mai started.

"I know."

They caught the last two in the tunnel. The woman with gray-streaked hair, the one Mai had shot, was limping. Her companion was trying to support her. They weren't moving fast.

Ace's shadow reached them first. It pooled around their feet, slowing them, making the ground uncertain. Then Ace herself appeared, blade drawn, blocking the tunnel ahead.

"You can't stop it," the woman said. She was breathing hard. Blood showed at her shoulder. "The Return is happening. We're just accelerating the inevitable."

Ace didn't answer. Her shadow spread wider.

"The world is changing," the woman continued. Her voice was calm, almost conversational, despite everything. "You can fight it, or you can adapt. But you can't hold on to what was."

"Maybe." Ace's voice was flat. "But I can hold on to what is."

She gestured with her blade. Behind the two Resonance members, Mai appeared, disruptor raised.

"End of the tunnel," Mai said. "Move."

---

They secured the nexus with cable ties and grim determination. The three conscious Resonance members were lined up against the wall. The two unconscious ones were laid out nearby. Shammy arrived twenty minutes later, wind-tousled and grinning.

"North entrance is clear." She stretched. Her joints popped. "They weren't expecting a storm."

"Did you—" Mai started.

"Hurt them? Only the ones who didn't run." Shammy stretched again. The air felt better now. "The air feels better now. Whatever they were doing, it was making everything... sticky."

Ace was checking the transformer array. Her shadow probed the machinery, looking for damage, for traps, for anything they'd missed. "It's stable. For now."

Mai stood in the center of the room and let herself process.

They'd stopped the cascade. They'd intercepted Resonance before the surge could spread through the entire grid. They'd won.

But it didn't feel like winning. It felt like holding back a tide.

"They'll try again." Mai's voice was flat. "Different target. Different method. They believe in what they're doing."

"Then we stop them again," Ace said.

Shammy moved to stand beside them. The three of them formed a triangle in the center of the nexus. Depth, Horizontal, Vertical. The vectors that had carried them through every crisis since the Return.

"We need to get back to the Foundation," Mai said. "Report what happened. Warn them about the

scope of this.”

Ace's shadow rippled. “Can we trust them?”

It was the question that had been running under everything since Reyes. The Foundation wasn't what it had been. The protocols were broken. The structure was compromised.

“Maybe not all of them,” Mai admitted. “But we can't do this alone.”

“No,” Ace agreed. “We can't.”

Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. “Then we do it together. Like always.”

Mai looked at her companions. Her team. Her family. Her vectors. Ace with her shadow and her silence. Shammy with her storm and her laughter. Together they formed something that the old world hadn't accounted for.

*The beauty is in the crack*, her grandmother's voice said again. This time, Mai didn't push it away.

“Let's move,” she said. “Before more of them show up.”

---

Outside the nexus, the city was waking up. The sun had risen fully now, casting long shadows across streets that were just beginning to fill with traffic. People going to work. People living their lives. People who had no idea that magic had almost surged through their lightbulbs and their phones and their coffee makers.

Ace checked the doorframe of the nexus exit. Structural integrity, sight lines, what was on the other side. Her shadow pooled at her feet, waiting.

Shammy stretched again. The air around her was stabilizing, the storm settling back into weather.

Mai stood between them, her disruptor holstered, her mind already moving to the next problem. Because there was always a next problem. Always another anomaly. Always another crisis.

But for now, they'd turned the tide. They'd gone on offense. They'd stopped running.

And somewhere in the city, Resonance was regrouping. Planning. Believing.

The crack was still there. The beauty was still in it. And the question that had haunted Mai since the Return, the question of what happened when everything you were good at became obsolete, had a new answer.

You found new things to be good at. You trusted your team. You walked into the trap on purpose.

You adapted.

“Let's go,” Ace said.

And they did.

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## End of Chapter 13

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