

[← Chapter 13](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 15 →](#)

Chapter 14: "The Convergence"

The van was doing eighty through streets that weren't designed for it.

Mai's hands were steady on the wheel. Her voice wasn't.

"Based on the energy readings, the nexus is already active, which means they started early, which means someone tipped them off, which means our intel is compromised or someone inside the Foundation—" She caught herself. Breathed. "The convergence point is the old transformer station on Millbrook. Industrial sector. They're using the power grid as a channel."

Shammy gripped the overhead handle as the van took a corner too fast. The air outside was wrong. She could feel it even through the sealed windows, pressure building toward something. The sky itself seemed to hold its breath.

"The storm's coming." Her voice came out fragmented. "Not weather. Something else. It's like, like the air is waiting for—"

"Mai, how many?" Ace's voice cut through. Flat. Short. Her hand rested on her blade.

"Thermal shows at least twenty at the perimeter. More inside. They've been preparing for this. The whole building's been converted—" Mai's words tumbled faster. "Ritual arrays in the sublevels, power lines rerouted, they've essentially turned the city's electrical grid into a massive magical circuit and I should have predicted this, the pattern was there, if I'd run the full analysis on infrastructure modifications instead of focusing on the ley lines—"

"Mai."

Mai stopped. Her knuckles whitened on the steering wheel.

Ace didn't say anything else. She didn't need to. Her shadow pooled at her feet in the back of the van, spreading wrong, responding to something she hadn't consciously summoned.

The city lights flickered past. Magic crawled along the power lines now, visible as faint blue traces. More intense than before. The Return was accelerating. Or being accelerated.

"Five minutes." Mai's voice steadied. "Whatever they're doing, they're not done yet. We still have time to—"

"They know we're coming."

Everyone looked at Ace.

"The faction leader," she said. "From before. She escaped. She knows our faces, our methods." Her hand tightened on her blade. "She's been waiting for this."

Shammy felt the air shift. Not outside this time. Inside. The van's cramped space suddenly felt

smaller. Ace's shadow had crept across the floor, reaching toward Mai's feet.

"Love, your—" Shammy started.

Ace didn't look down. Her eyes were fixed on something ahead. Something only she could see.

"It's already starting."

The transformer station rose from the industrial district like a concrete temple.

It had been built in the 1950s, when the city's power needs had required massive infrastructure. Now, half the building was abandoned, the equipment inside obsolete. The other half, the half the faction had chosen, hummed with something that wasn't electricity.

Ace stood at the edge of the lot. Behind her, Mai and Shammy took positions.

Twenty figures at the perimeter. Armed. Waiting. And inside the building, magic built toward something massive.

"They're not attacking," Mai said. Her voice was clipped, analytical even now. "That's not standard defensive positioning. They're not trying to stop us from entering."

"Trap," Ace said.

"Obviously a trap. The question is what kind and—"

"No." Ace's voice was flat. "Not trying to stop us. They want us to enter."

Shammy stepped forward. The air here was thick. Dense. Like trying to breathe through water. Every breath took effort.

"The pressure's building toward the center." Her words came out in fragments, thoughts not quite completing. "Whatever they're doing in there, the air is, it's being pulled toward, like a drain, almost, the whole atmosphere is being—"

"Shammy."

She stopped. Ace's voice. Quiet. Grounding.

Shammy breathed. The air answered. Not much. But enough. The pressure eased slightly around her.

"Better," Ace said.

"Better." Shammy's laugh was wrong-timed. "The storm's still there, love. It's just... waiting."

Mai was already processing. "If they want us inside, then entering is exactly what they expect. Which means we have two options: play their game or find another angle." Her pen moved across her tablet, diagrams forming. "The building has four access points. Main entrance, obviously trapped. Service entrance, likely trapped. Roof access—" She stopped. "Actually, the roof. If we can get to the roof, we can—"

"Too slow." Ace was already moving. "They've been preparing for days. We have minutes."

"Then what do you sug—"

"Front door."

Mai stared. "You just said it was a trap."

"It is."

"And you want to walk through the front door?"

Ace's hand found her blade. Her shadow pooled wrong at her feet.

"They want us inside." Her voice was flat. "Let's disappoint them about what they find."

The first three went down before they could raise their weapons.

Ace moved through them like a blade through silk. Not flashy. Not fast. Just precise. Each strike disabling without killing. Her shadow moved with her, not commanded, not controlled. It spread across the ground, up the walls, filling spaces before she reached them.

The fourth guard managed to fire something. A projectile of compressed magic. It passed through Ace's shadow and came out wrong. Slower. Weaker. By the time it reached her, she'd already stepped aside.

She ended it with a hilt to the temple.

"Clear," she said into comms.

Behind her, Shammy and Mai moved up.

Shammy's presence changed the air. The thick, suffocating pressure lightened. Windows that had been sealed cracked open. The atmosphere responded to her, not perfectly, not yet, but enough.

"The building's been modified." Mai's tablet showed structural diagrams overlaying reality. "They've cut holes in the walls, rerouted power lines, created channels for—" She stopped. "This isn't a ritual space. This is a circuit board. They've turned the entire building into a magical circuit."

"And the power source?" Ace asked.

"That's what I'm trying to—" Mai's fingers flew across her tablet. "The city grid. They're using the city's electrical system as a power source. But that's not enough for what they're building. They'd need something else, something—"

"Inside," Ace finished.

Shammy's hand found Mai's shoulder. A brief touch. Grounding.

"We find it," Shammy said. "Whatever it is. Together."

They moved deeper into the building.

The faction leader was waiting for them.

Elara Vance stood at the center of the transformer station's main chamber. She'd been beautiful once, maybe. The kind of beautiful that came from certainty. From knowing exactly what you wanted and how to get it.

Now, she looked like someone who had burned everything else to get here.

"You came." Elara's voice carried across the chamber. "I hoped you would. The Foundation's little triad. The ones who think they can contain what's coming."

Ace didn't speak. Her hand rested on her blade. Her shadow spread at her feet, wrong, responding to something deeper than will.

"Let me guess." Mai's voice was measured, but Shammy could hear the processing underneath. The calculations running faster than Mai could speak. "You're going to tell us this is inevitable. That magic's return can't be stopped. That you're doing the world a favor."

Elara smiled. It didn't reach her eyes.

"Stop it? Why would we stop it?" She gestured around the chamber. The walls glowed with traced channels, lines of power that crawled through concrete and steel. "We're not stopping anything. We're accelerating it. The Return has been too slow. Too cautious. Magic wants to come back fully, and we're simply... opening the door."

"At the cost of how many lives?" Mai asked. "The convergence point you're creating, if it destabilizes—"

"It won't destabilize."

"You can't know that. The variables alone—"

"I can." Elara's certainty was absolute. "Because we understand magic. Not like the Foundation, trying to cage it. Not like you, trying to calculate it." Her eyes found Ace. "Not like her, carrying a fragment of something she doesn't even comprehend."

Ace's shadow rippled. A sound like distant thunder.

Elara's smile widened. "Yes. We know what you are. The Silent Vessel. The fragment-bearer. We've been watching you for months."

Shammy felt the air shift. The pressure in the room was building toward something. Not the storm outside. Something deeper.

"The grid's at capacity," Elara said. "In seven minutes, the convergence will be complete. A channel fully open. Magic will flood through, not the slow trickle you've been experiencing. A flood. Everything changes." Her eyes found Shammy. "Even you, storm-child. You must feel it. The air responding to something older than—"

"It's responding to me." Shammy's voice came out strange. Fragmented. "Not, not your ritual. Not your channels. Me."

Elara's smile flickered.

"The air has always been mine," Shammy continued. "And it doesn't—" She stopped. Started again. "It doesn't serve. It answers. And it's not answering you."

The fight began without a signal.

Ace moved first. Not because she decided to. Because her body had already decided. Her shadow surged forward, filling the space between her and the nearest guards. They fired into darkness. The projectiles went wrong. Slower. Weaker.

She was among them before they could adjust.

Not killing. Disabling. The faction guards went down with precise strikes, knees, throats, temples. Ace's blade stayed in its sheath. She didn't need it. Her shadow was the weapon now.

Across the chamber, Mai processed in real-time. The room's dimensions. The guard positions. The timing of each strike. Her mind built a model faster than she could speak, and her body moved through it.

A guard came at her from the left. She sidestepped. His swing went wide. Her disruptor pistol came up, not to kill, to disable. One shot. The guard dropped, nerves fried.

"Seven minutes," she said into comms. "But the power build is accelerating. Whatever they've got in the sublevels is feeding the circuit faster than—"

"Mai."

Ace's voice. Mai looked.

At the center of the chamber, Elara Vance stood in the middle of traced lines. Power crawled through them, visible as blue-white light. The convergence point.

And around Elara, three guards were forming a protective formation. Not attacking. Defending.

"They're not trying to stop us," Mai said. Her words tumbled faster. "They're stalling. They just need to hold us for seven—"

"Shammy."

Shammy was already moving.

The air in the building screamed.

Not literally. Not audibly. But Shammy felt it, the pressure that had been building, the storm that had been waiting. It all came rushing toward her.

She spread her arms.

The air answered.

It shouldn't have. The building was sealed. The faction had cut the ventilation, designed the space to channel power in one direction. But Shammy wasn't just moving air. She was speaking to it.

And the air remembered her.

Wind exploded through the chamber. Not the controlled atmospheric pressure the faction had engineered. Something older. Something that had been waiting in the spaces between atoms, in the gaps between breaths, for someone who knew how to call it.

Guards stumbled. Ritual arrays flickered. The traced lines on the walls wavered as the air pushed against them.

Elara's eyes widened. "That's not, you can't just—"

"I'm not doing anything," Shammy said. And it was true. She wasn't forcing. She wasn't commanding. She was standing in the middle of a storm that had always been hers, and letting it know where she was.

The air responded. Not because she ordered it. Because it recognized her.

And for the first time in her existence, Shammy understood.

Magic didn't obey. It answered.

Ace stood at the center of the chaos.

Her shadow spread across the floor, up the walls, through the ceiling. Not her command. Not her will. Something deeper had recognized the moment, and her body, the vessel that carried Violet, the fragment of something ancient, responded.

She didn't move.

Around her, everything moved. Guards fell. The ritual array flickered. Mai's calculations ran faster than sound. Shammy's storm filled the chamber with pressure and release.

But Ace stood still.

The eye of the storm.

Her hand rested on her blade. Her eyes tracked every movement. Her body catalogued every exit, every threat, every possibility.

But she didn't move.

She let the shadow move instead.

It spread through the traced lines on the floor, corrupting them. The faction's channels, so carefully designed to direct magic, filled with darkness. Not evil. Not violence. Just presence.

Ace's presence. The thing she carried. The fragment that had chosen her.

"You don't control it," Elara said. Her voice was shrill now. The certainty cracking. "You can't. Magic

can't be—”

“It doesn't control.” Ace's voice was barely audible. “It answers.”

And the shadow answered.

Mai's model was collapsing.

Not because it was wrong. Because the variables kept changing. Every calculation she ran, every probability she assessed, the reality shifted before she could finish.

The ritual array flickered. Shammy's storm disrupted the channels. Ace's shadow corrupted the lines. And something in the sublevels, something feeding power into the circuit, was destabilizing.

“Three minutes.” Mai's voice came out faster, words running together. “The convergence is destabilizing but if it collapses entirely we're looking at a backlash that could—”

“Mai.”

Ace's voice. Quiet. Grounding.

Mai's hands steadied over her tablet. The calculations continued, but her breathing slowed.

“Right.” She breathed. “Right. Focused. The convergence point is still active. We need to shut down the power source in the sublevels or—”

“Already on it,” Shammy said. Her voice came in fragments, words starting and not finishing. “The air goes down. I can feel, something below. The storm's pulling toward—”

“I'll go.” Mai started toward the stairs.

“No.”

Ace's voice stopped her.

“Ace, if someone doesn't shut down the—”

“I know.” Ace's shadow rippled. “The sublevels are where they'll be strongest. Magical defenses. Prepared for us.” Her eyes met Mai's. “You're better up here. Tracking. Calculating. Keeping us coordinated.”

Mai hesitated.

“I'll go,” Shammy said. Her laugh was wet. Wrong-timed. “I've always wanted to see what's at the bottom of a magical death trap.”

“Shammy—”

But Shammy was already moving. The air pulled her toward the stairs. The storm was hungry. And she was curious.

Mai watched her go. Turned back to her tablet. The model was still unstable. Still collapsing. But Mai

was good at collapsing models. Good at finding the one variable that made everything else make sense.

She just had to find it.

Before the three minutes ran out.

The sublevels were a tomb.

Not literally. No bodies. But the air here was dead. Stagnant. The faction had designed this place to channel power upward, and everything below the main chamber had been sealed. Suffocated.

Shammy moved through it like a ghost.

The storm in her blood remembered what it was like to breathe. To move. To exist in spaces that weren't designed for containment.

She spread her hands. The air answered. Not much. But enough. Stagnant atmosphere stirred. Pressure that had been building toward escape found another outlet.

She found the power source at the center of the lowest level.

It wasn't a machine.

It was a child.

A girl. Maybe ten years old. Suspended in a crystalline structure that pulsed with magic. Her eyes were open, but she wasn't seeing. Channels traced across her skin, the same lines that ran through the building, connecting her to the circuit.

Using her as a battery.

Shammy's breath caught.

"Oh." The word came out broken. "Oh, no."

The girl's eyes moved. Focused on Shammy. A voice, not quite audible, not quite silent, brushed against her mind.

Help.

Shammy moved forward. The air around her built pressure. The storm that had been waiting for this moment.

"I've got you." Her voice cracked. "I've got you, love. I've got you."

She placed her hands on the crystal.

And the storm answered.

Above, Mai watched her readings spike.

"Shammy's at the source," she said into comms. Her words tumbled faster. "The power output's fluctuating. She's doing something, but I can't tell if she's—"

"I trust her."

Ace's voice. Flat. Certain.

Mai's hands steadied. The model was still collapsing. But that voice, that absolute certainty, gave her something to hold onto.

"You're right," she said. "I trust her too."

Two minutes.

The ritual array was dying. Ace's shadow had corrupted half the traced lines. Shammy's storm was disrupting the power flow. But Elara Vance still stood at the center, her hands raised, channeling whatever was left.

"It's too late." Elara's voice was desperate now. "The convergence is already, you can't stop it. Magic is coming back fully. The world will be—"

"Wrong."

Ace's voice. Not loud. Not angry. Just certain.

"Magic isn't coming back," Ace said. "It's already here. It's been here for months. What you're trying to do, you're not opening a door. You're trying to force something that doesn't respond to force."

Elara's eyes found Ace. "You don't understand. The power, the return, it's meant to—"

"It answers." Ace's shadow rippled. "You said it yourself. You understand magic. But you don't. You've been trying to control it. Direct it. Make it serve your purpose." Her voice dropped. "Magic doesn't serve. It answers. And you haven't been asking the right questions."

One minute.

Below, Shammy's storm met the child.

Not violently. Not with force. The storm recognized something in the girl, a fragment, maybe. A piece of something ancient. The same thing that lived in Ace, that stirred in Shammy, that connected them all.

The crystal cracked.

Not from pressure. From recognition.

The storm recognized the child. And the child recognized the storm.

You're like me, the voice brushed against Shammy's mind. *Different. Made of something else.*

"Yes." Shammy's tears ran down her face. She wasn't sad. She wasn't happy. She was something else, something that had no word. "We're like you. And we're not going to leave you here."

The crystal shattered.

The girl fell forward. Shammy caught her. Held her.

The power source died.

Above, the ritual array collapsed.

Elara Vance screamed.

Not in triumph. In despair. The traced lines on the walls flickered. Died. The convergence point she'd spent months building dissolved into nothing.

"No," she said. "No, we were so close, the world was going to—"

"Change." Ace's voice. "The world already changed. Six months ago. You just didn't like how it happened."

Guards dropped their weapons. The faction's certainty had been built on inevitability. On the promise of a convergence that couldn't be stopped.

Now they were just people in a room that had stopped making sense.

Elara fell to her knees. Her hands pressed against the traced lines that no longer glowed.

"We were right," she said. Her voice was hollow. "Magic should have returned fully. The world was supposed to—"

"The world is." Ace's shadow receded. "Different than before. Different than you wanted. Still here."

Shammy emerged from the stairs. The girl in her arms was awake now, clinging to her. The child's eyes were wide. Seeing the world for the first time.

Shammy's face was wet.

"Shammy?" Mai's voice. Concerned.

"The storm—" Shammy started. Stopped. Started again. "It chose us. Not them."

Mai moved to her. Took the child. Held her.

"Chose us for what?"

Shammy's laugh was broken. Joyful. Grieving.

"For this," she said. "For asking the right questions."

Later, Foundation teams arrived. The faction members were contained. Elara Vance was taken into custody. The child, the power source, was transported to a medical facility.

Ace stood at the edge of the transformer station.

The city lights flickered. Magic crawled along the power lines, visible if you knew where to look. The Return continued. Slower now. More natural. Not forced through channels and rituals.

Just happening.

"The faction had cells in every major city," Mai said. She stood beside Ace, tablet in hand. "This was one node. There will be others."

"I know."

"We'll have to find them. Stop them."

"I know."

Mai was quiet. Then: "Your shadow. It moved differently tonight."

Ace looked down. The darkness at her feet was still. Normal. Whatever had happened in the chamber, the connection to something deeper, it had receded.

"The fragment," she said. "It answered."

"Answered what?"

Ace didn't respond. Her hand found Mai's. A brief touch. Grounding.

Shammy joined them. The child was gone, but Shammy's presence still carried echoes of the storm.

"The air's different now." Her voice was softer. Steadier. "The pressure that was building, it's gone. Released. But something else..." She trailed off.

"Something else what?" Mai asked.

"The storm remembered me." Shammy's laugh was quiet. "And I remembered it."

They stood together. Three vectors. Depth, horizontal, vertical. Shadow, calculation, storm.

The city breathed around them. Magic crawled through its veins. The Return continued.

And somewhere, in cells across the country, people were waking to find their certainties shattered.

They'd thought magic could be controlled.

They'd been wrong.

It didn't serve.

It answered.

And tonight, it had answered them.

The drive back was quiet.

Mai sat in the front, processing. Her tablet showed diagrams of the faction's network. Cells to track. Leads to follow. Work that would take months.

But her hands were steady now. The calculations had stopped collapsing.

Shammy sat in the back, staring out the window. Tears still traced her cheeks. Not sad. Not happy. Just present.

Ace drove. Her hand rested on the wheel. Her shadow stayed pooled at her feet, still and calm.

"You know what's funny?" Shammy asked.

"What?" Mai said.

"They spent months building that ritual. Months designing channels and circuits and power sources." Shammy's voice was soft. "And we stopped it by asking nicely."

Mai's laugh was short. Surprised. "That's not, that's not how it happened."

"Isn't it?" Shammy's eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. "The storm answered because I asked. Not demanded. Not commanded. Just... asked."

Ace's eyes stayed on the road.

"The fragment answered too," she said. "I didn't force it. I didn't even call it. It just..." She trailed off.

"Answered," Mai finished.

Silence.

The van moved through the city. Above them, the sky was clearing. The pressure that had been building was gone. The air breathed easier.

"They were wrong," Ace said. Her voice was quiet. "The faction. They thought magic was a tool. Something to control."

"And it's not?" Mai asked.

Ace's shadow rippled at her feet. Once. Gently.

"It's a question," she said. "And we're still learning how to answer."

Shammy's laugh was soft. Wet.

"The world's going to change more," she said. "This was just the beginning."

"I know."

"Are we ready?"

Ace's hand found Mai's. Brief. Grounding.

"No," she said. "But we're learning."

The city lights flickered past. Magic crawled along the power lines. And somewhere in the distance, another storm was building.

The Return continued.

And the triad continued with it.

End of Chapter 14

[← Chapter 13](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 15 →](#)

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