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Chapter 4: "The Trigger"

The industrial district had been dying for twenty years. The Return killed what was left.

Ace crouched behind a collapsed shipping container, her shadow pooling at her feet. The abandoned meat-packing plant across the lot still had power. Someone had hooked it illegally from the grid. Magic twisted the lines now, she could see the sparks crawling wrong along the wires, not electricity anymore, something else.

Mai's voice crackled in her ear. "Thermal shows one heat signature inside. Northwest corner. Stationary for the last twelve minutes. Either they're sleeping, dead, or waiting."

"Waiting," Ace said.

"Could be sleeping."

"Not sleeping."

Mai paused. "I'm just saying, the thermal doesn't show—"

"Waiting."

Shammy ducked behind a rusted forklift, her tall frame folded awkwardly. She moved like a storm trying to fit inside a closet. The wind here tasted wrong. Metal and something else, like the air before a lightning strike, but stretched thin, held too long.

"The pressure's building to the southeast, love." Shammy's voice was barely a whisper. "Whatever's happening in there, the air knows. It's excited, maybe? Hard to read. The whole district's magic is jumbled. Like someone took a storm and put it through a meat grinder."

"Appropriate," Ace said.

"Is it?"

Meat-packing plant.

Shammy's laugh was barely a breath. "Sorry. That was, yeah. Meat grinder."

Ace checked the doorframe of the container behind her. Structural integrity compromised. Corner joint rusted through. Wouldn't hold against impact. Her eyes moved to the next exit point, the gap between containers to the north. Clear sight line. She noted it without thinking, the way her body always noted exits.

"Status?" Mai asked.

"In position."

"The thermal signature's moving. Northwest to center. Slow pace. They know something's wrong."

“Trap.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they're just—”

“Trap.”

Mai's sigh crackled. “You're going to say trap regardless of evidence, aren't you?”

Ace didn't answer. Her hand had found her blade hilt. It happened without her deciding. Her body knew something her mind hadn't caught up to yet.

The shadow at her feet spread wrong. Too fast. She hadn't commanded it.

“Shammy.”

“Here, love.”

“Move in thirty seconds. West entrance. I'll take east.”

“The air's wrong in there. Whatever's waiting—”

“I know.”

Shammy's pause stretched. “You're calm.”

Ace didn't respond. There was nothing to say. Her hand on her blade, her shadow pooling wrong, her eyes tracking every exit in a lot that had fifteen of them.

She was calm. That was the problem.

Mai watched the thermal signature split into three. Then four. Then six.

“That's not one person,” she said into the comms, her words coming faster now. “The thermal's showing multiple signatures. They were clustered. Now they're spreading. West, east, south, Ace, Shammy, they know you're coming. They're positioning. We need to abort and—”

“Too late.”

Ace's voice was flat. Mai had heard that tone before. It meant Ace had already committed. Meant there was no pulling her back.

“Ace, the thermal shows at least six individuals inside the structure, possibly more in the walls, and I'm reading anomalous energy signatures that don't match standard magical phenomena which means they're using something we haven't catalogued yet and—”

“Mai.”

“—I should have run the full spectrum analysis before we approached but the time constraint seemed critical and—”

“Mai.”

Mai stopped. Her hands were shaking over her keyboard. She pressed her palms flat against the desk in the van, forced herself to breathe.

"Go," she said. "I've got your backs."

The comms went quiet except for breathing. Two sets. Shammy's was slower, deeper. Ace's was nearly silent.

Shammy moved through the west entrance and the air hit her like a wall.

Wrong. The air was wrong.

It wasn't just the smell, chemical and old blood and something burning underneath. It was the way the air itself moved. Or didn't move. The whole building held its breath. No circulation. No flow. The ventilation system had been cut. Holes drilled in strategic points to prevent air exchange.

Someone had designed this place to suffocate.

"Ace, the air's—" Shammy started, then stopped. The temperature dropped three degrees. Then rose five. Then dropped again.

The air was stuttering.

"Shammy, report." Mai's voice was clipped. Professional. But Shammy could hear the calculation running underneath, Mai's brain trying to solve a problem that wasn't mathematical.

"It's like... you know when the wind stops before a tornado?" Shammy's voice came out fragmented, her sentences incomplete. "But wrong. Backwards. The pressure's building but there's nowhere for it to go because someone, someone sealed the—"

She stopped.

At the end of the corridor, a man stood waiting.

He was ordinary. Brown hair. Average height. The kind of face you'd forget in a crowd. But his eyes, his eyes were bright with something that wasn't quite madness. Closer to faith.

"You're the Foundation team," he said. His voice was steady. "The ones they call the Triad."

Shammy didn't answer. The air around her had started to move again. Responding to her presence. The building's breath returning.

"Let me guess." The man smiled. "You're going to ask me to surrender. Tell me the building's surrounded. That I have no options."

Ace's voice cut through the comms. "Shammy. East side's clear. Moving to you."

"Don't," Shammy said. The word came out fractured. "There's something in the walls. The air, the air goes somewhere but it's—"

She couldn't finish. The pressure was building. Her storm-sense screamed.

The man raised his hand. The air in the corridor twisted.

And Shammy felt someone else's will pushing against the atmosphere.

Not magic. Not quite. Something between. A forced manipulation of pressure that made her teeth ache.

"You feel it," the man said. "The new world. The old world coming back. Some of us were meant for this."

The pressure spiked.

Ace heard the crackle in her earpiece, Shammy's fragmented warning, then static.

She moved.

The corridor was narrow. Industrial piping along the walls. Fluorescent lights that flickered wrong. Magic crawled through the electrical system here, visible as faint blue traces along the wires. The Return had changed the infrastructure. Everything conducted now. Everything was a channel.

Two figures stepped out from doorways ahead.

Not the trigger-man. His operatives. They held modified equipment, something between guns and ritual implements. Ace's threat assessment catalogued them: left one favored his right leg, knee injury. Right one's stance was trained but decades old. Amateur hour.

Ace drew her blade.

The shadow at her feet didn't wait for her command. It pooled forward, spreading across the floor like spilled ink. That had never happened before. She didn't have time to think about it.

Left one raised his weapon.

Ace moved.

Three steps. That was all she needed. The distance closed before he could aim. Her blade found his weapon arm, not to kill, to disable. He screamed. Dropped the implement.

Right one fired.

The projectile wasn't a bullet. It was something else. It passed through Ace's shadow and came out wrong. Slower. She felt it graze her shoulder, a cold burn.

Magic. They were shooting magic.

She ended it quickly. The right one went down with a leg sweep and a hilt to the temple.

Both still breathing.

Ace kept moving toward Shammy's position.

Her shoulder burned cold. She ignored it. Her shadow moved ahead of her, pooling wrong, responding

to instincts she hadn't commanded.

Mai watched Ace's biometrics spike. Then stabilize.

That wasn't normal. Combat stress didn't stabilize mid-engagement. It cascaded. But Ace's heart rate had dropped.

"Report," Mai said into the comms. "Ace, Shammy, report. I'm reading engagement signatures. Two hostiles down, Ace, that's you, the thermal dropped, but there are still four signatures active and—"

"Mai." Ace's voice. Flat. Calm. "Shammy's position. Now."

"I'm already running calculations but the building's interference is—"

"Now."

Mai's fingers flew across her keyboard. The building's magic was distorting her readings. She triangulated anyway. Cross-referenced the anomalous energy signatures. Built a model based on partial data.

"There's a concentration of power near Shammy's position. Someone's, someone's actively manipulating pressure systems. The whole building is, Ace, they're using the infrastructure. It's not just magic. They're using the building's ventilation as a—"

The comms cut out.

Mai stared at her screens. Static. Then fragments of sound.

"—wrong, the air is—"

"—not the only—"

"—more of us—"

"—calm. Stay calm. I'm—"

Mai's hand slammed against the van's console. The screens flickered. She was already calculating options. Entry point. Backup. Extraction.

But she knew, before the math finished, that Ace had already decided.

Ace always decided.

The trigger-man's name was David Halloway.

He'd worked in infrastructure management before the Return. Knew the city's systems better than anyone. When magic came back, he'd realized something no one else had.

The systems were channels now. Every pipe, every wire, every ventilation shaft could conduct magic. And Halloway knew how to use them.

He'd built this place to test his theory. Trigger anomalies along ley lines using the city's own infrastructure as a conductor. Prove that magic wasn't just returning. It could be accelerated.

"The Foundation doesn't understand," Halloway said. He'd stopped manipulating the air. Shammy could feel the pressure still building, but slower now. Ace stood in the doorway, blade drawn, shadow pooling at her feet.

"Understand what?" Shammy asked. Her voice was steadier now. The building's air had started circulating again. Her presence, asserting itself.

"Magic isn't coming back." Halloway smiled. "It's being called. And some of us are doing the calling."

Ace stepped forward.

Her shadow moved with her. Not commanded. Not controlled. It spread across the floor, up the walls, filling the corners with darkness that had weight.

Halloway's eyes widened. "That's not, you shouldn't be able to—"

Ace's hand rested on her blade. She hadn't drawn it. Hadn't needed to.

Her voice was quiet. "Shammy. Clear the building."

"Love, the pressure's still—"

"Clear it."

Shammy moved. The air in the building answered her. Windows that had been sealed cracked open. Doors that had been locked clicked undone. The ventilation system, dead for decades, shuddered back to life.

Halloway watched his masterpiece collapse. The pressure he'd built, the channels he'd designed, all of it bleeding out into the open air.

"You can't stop it," he said. "Even if you stop me. There are others. More of us. We've been planning this for months."

"Planning what?" Ace asked.

Halloway laughed. The sound was ugly. Broken.

"Bringing magic back. All the way. Not this slow return. Full awakening. The world deserves what it used to have."

"The world doesn't want it."

"The world doesn't know what it wants." Halloway's smile didn't reach his eyes. "But we do."

The chase came after.

Halloway ran. Ace let him.

She didn't need to catch him. She needed to know where he was going.

Mai's voice crackled back online. "I've got him on thermal. Heading east through the building. There's an exit, he's heading for, Ace, he's heading for a vehicle. Backup extraction. They planned this."

"Track him."

"I'm tracking but the interference—"

"Keep tracking."

Ace moved. Not running. Walking. Calm.

Her shadow spread ahead of her, a darkness that moved faster than she did. Through walls. Through doors. Through the infrastructure that Halloway had tried to use.

The building's magic recognized her now. Or something in her recognized it.

She found Halloway at the east exit. He was climbing into a truck. Engine already running.

She didn't run. She watched.

The shadow at her feet pooled forward. Touched the truck's tires. The rubber started to crack.

Halloway screamed something. The engine sputtered. Magic crawled through the electrical system, responding to something Ace hadn't consciously sent.

The truck died.

Halloway scrambled out, hands raised.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. You win. The Foundation wins. Just, whatever you're doing, stop."

Ace's shadow receded. She hadn't known she was doing anything.

"Shammy," she said into the comms. "Package secured."

The interrogation happened in the van.

Mai asked the questions. Ace sat silently in the corner. Shammy kept watch outside, her presence steadying the air around the vehicle.

Halloway talked. They always talked.

"I'm not the only one," he said. "There are more of us. Cells in every major city. All working toward the same thing."

"Which is?" Mai asked. Her pen moved constantly. Notes, calculations, diagrams.

"Awakening. Full magic return. Not this slow bleed. We're accelerating it."

"By triggering anomalies?"

"By opening channels. Every anomaly we trigger opens a pathway. Magic flows through. The more pathways, the faster the return."

Mai's pen stopped. "You're treating magic like infrastructure."

"Because it is. The Return proved that. Everything conducts now. We're just widening the channels."

Ace shifted in the corner. Her hand had found her blade hilt again. She wasn't looking at Halloway. She was looking at the van's doorframe. Checking the structural integrity. Checking the exit.

"Ace," Mai said quietly. "You okay?"

Ace didn't answer.

Halloway watched her. Something flickered in his eyes. Recognition, maybe. Or fear.

"The Foundation doesn't know what it's dealing with," he said. "You think containment is the answer. You think you can control this. But magic doesn't control. It answers."

"Answers what?" Mai asked.

"Something older than us. Something that's been waiting." Halloway's smile was thin. "You're not the only ones who are different. Some of us were made for this world. You're just trying to survive it."

Ace's shadow moved. A slight ripple at her feet.

"Shut up," she said.

Two words. Quiet. Calm.

Halloway shut up.

After, Mai drove. Shammy sat beside her. Ace stayed in the back with Halloway, watching.

The city lights flickered past. Magic crawled through the power lines, visible if you knew where to look.

"There's an organization," Mai said. Her voice was measured. Professional. But underneath, Shammy could hear the processing. The calculations running faster than Mai could speak. "Cells in every major city. Accelerating magic return through infrastructure manipulation."

"They want to terraform the world," Shammy added. "Make it more magical. Whether it wants to be or not."

"And they've been planning this for months." Mai's pen moved. "Which means we're not chasing random anomalies anymore. We're chasing a coordinated effort."

Ace spoke from the back. "The trigger-man was a sacrifice."

Mai's eyes met Shammy's in the rearview mirror.

"What?"

"He knew he'd get caught. Prepared for it. The truck, the route, planned to fail." Ace's voice was flat. "He wanted us to know. Wanted the Foundation to know."

"Why?"

Ace didn't answer. Her hand rested on her blade. Her shadow pooled wrong at her feet.

"Ace?" Mai tried again.

"They wanted us to know we can't stop it."

Silence.

The van moved through the city. Above them, the sky was dark. But along the horizon, magic flickered like distant lightning.

"We need to tell Director Chen," Mai said. "This changes everything. If there's an organized faction—"

"There is."

"How do you know?"

Ace's eyes met Mai's in the mirror.

"Because he wasn't scared. He was relieved."

Shammy felt the air shift as the van turned toward Foundation headquarters.

The city's magic was changing. She could feel it in the pressure patterns. More active. More awake. Like something was stirring, deep beneath the concrete and steel.

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

"What?" Mai said.

"The air in that building. When I first walked in, it was wrong. Suffocated. But when Ace, when she did whatever she did, the air started breathing again."

"Coincidence," Mai said.

Shammy shook her head. "The air doesn't breathe from coincidence, love."

No one responded.

In the back, Ace sat silently. Her hand on her blade. Her shadow pooling wrong. Her eyes fixed on the doorframe.

The body remembers what the mind dismisses.

And something in Ace's body was remembering something her mind hadn't caught up to yet.

They delivered Halloway to Foundation custody. Filed preliminary reports. Set the analysts to work identifying cells in other cities.

But Mai knew, as she filed her notes, that the numbers didn't add up.

If there were cells in every major city, and each cell had been active for months, the anomaly rate should have been higher. The pattern should have been obvious.

Unless someone had been hiding it.

Unless someone inside the Foundation had been hiding it.

She stared at her whiteboard. At the ley line map. At the anomaly clusters that didn't match random distribution.

Something was wrong.

Not with the math. The math was sound.

Something was wrong with who had access to the math.

Ace stood by the window in the debriefing room.

The Foundation building's windows were reinforced. Warded. Designed to keep anomalies out.

But looking at the city lights, Ace could see the magic crawling along the power lines. Could feel the shadow at her feet responding to something beyond the glass.

"You okay?"

Mai's voice. Quiet. Mai had a way of being quiet when it mattered.

"Fine."

"Your shadow's been moving wrong all day."

Ace looked down. The darkness at her feet rippled. Not her command.

"I know."

"Is it—"

"I don't know."

Mai stood beside her. Not touching. Close enough that Ace could feel her presence. The anchor.

"The trigger-man said something," Mai said. "About some of us being made for this world."

"I heard."

"Do you think he meant—"

"I don't know."

Mai was quiet. Then: "Your hand keeps going to your blade. Even now."

Ace looked down. Her fingers were wrapped around the hilt. She hadn't noticed.

"The body remembers," she said.

"Remembers what?"

Ace didn't answer.

Outside, magic crawled through the city's veins. Inside, her shadow moved without her command.

And somewhere, in cells across the country, people were working to wake something up.

Ace's hand tightened on her blade.

Not because she was afraid.

Because her body knew, even if her mind didn't yet.

They weren't chasing anomalies anymore.

They were being hunted.

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