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Chapter 5: "Faction"

The folder sat on the table like something dead.

Ace stared at it. The Foundation's classification stamp marked it RESTRICTED, Level 4 clearance. Inside: photographs, financial records, communication logs. A name, written in ballpoint pen on the cover by someone who'd gotten tired of typing.

THE AWAKENING CIRCUIT.

"They have a name," Mai said. Her voice was wrong. Not processing-wrong. Something deeper. "They have structure. They have funding."

Ace's hand found her blade. Not consciously. Her body was still in the warehouse district, still tracking exits, still counting threats that weren't in the room.

"Martin Reyes compiled this." Director Velasco stood at the head of the briefing table. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. "He's been cross-referencing Foundation anomaly reports with independent data sources. Power grid fluctuations. Infrastructure purchase records. Employment patterns."

"Reyes." Mai's pen stopped moving. "The analyst from Seattle operations?"

"He's been running a parallel investigation for three weeks." Velasco's voice was clipped. Administrative. "We didn't know. He didn't tell us. He thought, correctly, as it turns out, that the faction had eyes inside the Foundation."

Ace's shadow pooled at her feet. Wrong. Slow. Responding to something she hadn't consciously felt.

"Inside?"

"Someone's been suppressing anomaly reports. Redirecting containment calls. Making sure the pattern wasn't obvious." Velasco set another folder on the table. "We don't know who. Yet."

Shammy, wedged into a chair built for someone six inches shorter, let out a breath. The air in the room shifted slightly. Responding to her. Or maybe just acknowledging her.

"So we know the name," Shammy said. "The Awakening Circuit. Sounds like a bad rock band."

"They're organized," Velasco continued. "Cells in twelve cities. Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, Chicago, Houston, Miami, Atlanta, New York, Boston. Each cell operates independently but follows the same methodology."

"Infrastructure manipulation." Mai's pen started moving again. Faster. "Halloway mentioned that. Using the grid as channels."

"Yes. But there's more." Velasco opened the folder. Photographs spread across the table. Faces. Men

and women. Young and old. "They're not just accelerating magic return. They're preparing for something."

"For what?"

"That's what you're going to find out."

Six hours earlier.

The warehouse smelled like concrete dust and burnt coffee.

Ace crouched behind a collapsed shelving unit, her shadow pooled tight against her boots. Shammy stood beside her, or tried to. At 195 centimeters, she couldn't actually stand behind anything. She folded herself into a crouch, knees cracking, her storm-gradient hair brushing the ceiling.

"Not built for espionage, love," Shammy whispered. "Too tall. Too much... presence."

"You're fine." Ace's voice was barely audible. "They're expecting outsiders."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

Ace didn't answer. Her eyes were on the doorframe across the room. Structural integrity intact. Metal frame, reinforced hinges. The door opened inward, which meant anyone entering would be silhouetted for a half-second before they could see into the room.

Good sight lines from their position. Bad sight lines from the entrance.

She'd counted four exits. Main door, loading bay, fire escape, service corridor. The building had been a distribution center before the Return. Now it was something else.

"The Awakening Circuit," Shammy whispered. "That's what Mai called them."

"Mai heard it from Reyes."

"And we're trusting Reyes because...?"

Ace's hand found her blade. "We're not trusting anyone yet."

The meeting was happening on the second floor. They'd gotten in through a service entrance Mai had identified, security bypassed, cameras looped, a ghost path through the building's infrastructure. Mai was monitoring from the van outside, her voice a quiet hum in Ace's earpiece.

"Thermal shows fourteen signatures on the second floor," Mai said. "Movement pattern suggests a seated arrangement. Meeting's already started."

"What's the topic?"

"Unknown. Audio's being blocked. Something in the building's interfering with, wait. I'm getting fragments."

Ace shifted. Her shadow rippled. Not her command.

"They're talking about... acceleration? No, that's not right. Terra, something about terra—"

"Terraforming," Ace said.

"How did you—"

"The word Holloway used. 'Awakening.' He said they're waking something up."

Static crackled. Mai's voice faded, then returned.

"—can't get clean audio but there's a name being repeated. Something about the Return's origin. They're asking questions about why it happened. What caused it."

Ace's jaw tightened. The cause was the space rock. The thing that had passed through the solar system and left magic in its wake. That much was documented.

Unless it wasn't.

Unless there was more to the story.

Mai sat in the van with seventeen screens glowing and a headache building behind her eyes.

The audio interference was maddening. Something in the building was actively blocking transmission, not magic exactly, but something adjacent. A technology that shouldn't exist. Or a technique that predated the Return and had been waiting for the right conditions.

She could hear fragments. Words without context. "Awakening" and "terraform" and something about a "central node." But the pieces wouldn't coalesce.

Her pen scratched across her notebook. Calculations. Probability matrices. The pattern of the cells, twelve cities, each one positioned along a ley line that had grown since the Return.

Not random. Geometric.

She pulled up the geological survey. Overlaid the cell locations. Her breath caught.

"They're forming a grid," she whispered.

"What?" Ace's voice in her ear.

"The cell locations. They're not random distribution. They're positioned along the new ley lines. Like..." Mai's pen moved faster. "Like they're building something. A network. The cells are nodes."

"Mai—"

"If you connect all twelve positions, it forms a pattern that matches the ley line growth trajectory. They're not just accelerating the Return. They're directing it. Shaping where it goes."

"For what purpose?"

Mai stared at her screen. The grid glowed red against the blue of the old survey. Twelve points. Twelve cells.

"Terraforming," she said. "They're terraforming the Earth. Making it more magical. More responsive to their techniques."

"That's insane."

"Is it?" Mai's voice was getting faster now. Processing aloud. "If magic is infrastructure now, and they control the channels, they control the flow. They're not just accelerating the Return, they're steering it. Deciding which areas wake up first. Which areas get more magic. Which areas stay dormant."

A pause. Then Ace's voice, flat and calm:

"We need to know what they're steering toward."

The meeting room was on the second floor.

Ace and Shammy moved through the corridors like shadows, Ace literally, her darkness pooling ahead of her, scouting corners and doorways. Shammy's presence was different. The air moved around her, carrying sound away, muffling footsteps.

They found a ventilation shaft. Ace's blade made short work of the grate.

"You first or me?" Shammy asked.

"You. I'll cover the exit."

Shammy folded herself into the shaft. Her height should have made it impossible. But she moved like something that had once been wind and was now learning to wear skin. The tight spaces didn't bother her the way they should have.

Ace followed. Her shadow clung to her, wrong and close, responding to the threat assessment running constantly in the back of her mind.

The shaft led to a vent overlooking the meeting room.

Below them, fourteen people sat in folding chairs arranged in a semicircle. At the front, a man stood before a whiteboard covered in diagrams, ley line maps, infrastructure schematics, something that looked like a ritual diagram.

The man was speaking. Ace could see his lips moving. But the interference made it impossible to hear clearly.

Shammy leaned close to the vent. Her breathing slowed. The air in the shaft went still, carrying sound upward.

"...acceleration has exceeded projections," the man was saying. "Seattle cell reports a forty percent increase in magical density. Portland is following. By next month, the western corridor will be fully activated."

Fully activated. Ace's hand tightened on her blade.

A woman in the front row raised her hand. "And the Foundation?"

"Contained. Their response teams are still treating anomalies as isolated events. They haven't connected the cells." The man smiled. "We have friends in place. Friends who understand what we're doing."

Friends in place.

Ace felt her shadow ripple. Someone inside the Foundation. Halloway had said it. Velasco had confirmed it. Now they were hearing it from the source.

"Sir?" Another voice. Younger. Nervous. "The node in Denver reported a... complication."

"Define complication."

"Something responded. During the last trigger, something in the grid pushed back. They said it felt like the magic was... arguing with them."

The room went quiet.

The man at the front frowned. "Arguing?"

"I know it sounds strange, sir. But the Denver cell leader, he's been doing this since before the Return, he said the magic didn't want to go where they were pushing it. Said it felt like..."

"Like what?"

"Like the Earth was saying no."

Shammy's hand found Ace's arm. A silent message: *This is important.*

The man considered this. Then shrugged.

"The Earth doesn't get a vote. Continue as planned."

Mai heard it through the crackling audio. The magic was arguing. The Earth was saying no.

Her pen froze over her notebook.

That shouldn't be possible. Magic wasn't sentient. It was a force, a phenomenon, a system of energy transfer. It didn't have opinions. It didn't argue.

But she thought about the coffee shop. The espresso machine that had preferences. The building that had woken up scared and confused. The anomalies that responded to intention, not stimulus.

What if magic was more than infrastructure?

What if it was learning?

She pulled up the anomaly reports from Denver. Three weeks ago, a trigger event had failed to propagate. The ley line had flickered and then stabilized. Resisted. The Foundation had logged it as "anomaly decay," but the readings didn't match decay patterns.

They matched feedback.

Something had pushed back.

Ace's threat detection screamed.

She didn't know why. The meeting below was continuing. The man was talking about activation schedules. No one was looking at the ventilation shaft. No one had noticed their presence.

But her body knew something her mind hadn't caught up to yet.

She scanned the room through the vent slats. Fourteen people. Folding chairs. Whiteboard. Water cooler in the corner. Exit signs over two doors.

Her eyes went to the water cooler.

It was glowing. Faintly. A pale blue light that pulsed in rhythm with the man's voice.

Not a water cooler.

A node. Part of the building's infrastructure. Part of the grid they were building.

And it was looking at her.

Not physically. Not with eyes. But something in the apparatus was aware. Something in the magical network they'd woven through the building had noticed their presence.

Ace's shadow spread. Wrong. Fast. Not her command.

The water cooler flickered.

"Sir." A voice from below. "We have a breach."

"Move," Ace said. Not a suggestion.

Shammy moved. They scrambled backward through the ventilation shaft, metal groaning under Shammy's weight, Ace's shadow pooling behind them like something trying to hold the darkness in place.

"South exit," Mai's voice crackled. "Service corridor. I've got a clear path to the van."

"Running." Ace's voice was flat. Calm. The way it always got when things went wrong.

Behind them, shouting. The meeting room was mobilizing. Fourteen people who now knew someone had been listening.

They dropped from the shaft into a maintenance corridor. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead. The building's magic was responding to the alarm, Ace could feel it in her shadow, the way the darkness wanted to spread, wanted to fight, wanted to—

"Ace." Shammy's hand on her arm. "Focus, love. We need to move."

Ace blinked. Her shadow was halfway up the wall. She pulled it back.

"Right. Moving."

They ran.

The service corridor was three hundred meters of concrete and desperation.

Shammy's presence pushed the air ahead of them, clearing obstacles, muffling footsteps. Ace's shadow trailed behind, catching fragments of light, making them harder to see.

Behind them, the building was waking up.

Not the building. Something in the building. The network they'd built was responding to the intrusion. Doors locked as they approached. Lights flickered in patterns that spelled something in a language neither of them knew.

"It's trying to contain us," Shammy said. Her voice was fragmented, breath coming hard. "The magic, whatever they've woven through the building, it's trying to—"

"I know." Ace's blade was in her hand. She didn't remember drawing it.

A door slammed ahead. Metal. Reinforced. The service corridor's exit, sealed from outside.

"Ace." Mai's voice, urgent. "The door's locked from the security station. I can't override. You need another exit."

"Options?"

"Loading bay. West side. Two hundred meters back."

They turned.

The corridor behind them was filling with light. Not electric. Something else. The building's magic was converging, drawn to their presence like water to a drain.

Shammy stopped. Stood still. Her eyes closed.

"Shammy?"

"The air," she said. Her voice was strange. Distant. "The air in this building... it doesn't want to be here."

"What?"

"Whoever built this network, they forced it. Wove magic through the infrastructure without asking. The building didn't choose this. The air is—" She laughed. Wrong time. Wrong place. "The air is angry, love."

"Can you use that?"

Shammy's eyes opened. They were bright. Charged.

“Watch me.”

She spread her arms. The air in the corridor screamed.

Not literally. Not with sound. But with pressure, a sudden drop that made Ace's ears pop, a wind that came from nowhere and pushed toward the loading bay.

The sealed door groaned.

Then exploded outward.

They made it to the van.

Mai was already driving. Shammy collapsed into the back seat. Ace sat in the passenger side, blade still in hand, shadow pooled at her feet.

The van screamed out of the parking lot.

“What happened in there?” Mai's voice was processing-fast. “The audio cut out. I heard fragments. Something about the Earth saying no—”

“Later.” Ace's voice was flat. “We need to debrief. Now.”

“Tell me something.”

Ace looked at the rearview mirror. At Shammy, catching her breath in the back. At her own shadow, wrong and slow, responding to something she hadn't consciously felt.

“They're terraforming,” Ace said. “Building a network. Twelve cities. Friends inside the Foundation.”

Mai's hands tightened on the wheel.

“Friends?”

“We need to know who.”

The debrief happened in Director Velasco's office.

Ace, Mai, Shammy, and a man none of them had seen before. Medium height. Brown hair. The kind of face that blended into crowds. He sat in the corner, tablet in hand, eyes on his notes.

“Martin Reyes,” Velasco said. “The analyst I mentioned.”

Mai's pen stopped moving. “You've been running a parallel investigation.”

“For three weeks.” Reyes' voice was calm. Professional. “When I noticed anomalies in the reporting patterns, I knew someone was suppressing data. I didn't know who. So I worked alone.”

“And you didn't think to tell anyone?”

"Tell the wrong person, and the mole knows. Tell the right person, you still can't be sure they're not compromised." Reyes looked up. "I told Director Velasco because she has Level 5 clearance and a personal grudge against anyone who lies on reports. Figured she'd want to know."

Velasco's expression didn't change. But something in her eyes flickered. Approval, maybe. Or recognition.

"What did you find?" Ace asked.

Reyes pulled up a file on his tablet. "Financial records. The Awakening Circuit is funded through shell companies. Industrial purchases. Equipment acquisition. They've been building infrastructure for three years, before the Return."

"Before?"

"Before the Return, they were preparing for something they thought might happen. When the space rock passed through the solar system, they accelerated. Started buying more. Building faster."

Mai's pen was moving again. "That implies foreknowledge. Someone knew magic would return."

"Or they were hoping it would. Betting on it." Reyes shrugged. "The point is, they're organized. Funded. And they have a clear goal."

"Terraforming," Mai said. "Accelerating magic return. Making the Earth more magical."

"More responsive to their methods." Reyes nodded. "They believe humanity needs to adapt to the new world. They're forcing that adaptation."

Shammy shifted in her chair. The air in the office moved slightly. "They're forcing it wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"The building. The network they built." Shammy's voice was distant. Atmospheric. "They didn't ask permission. They wove magic through infrastructure without consent. The air, the building, it didn't want to be part of their plan."

"Buildings don't have wants."

"This one did." Shammy's laugh was wrong-timed. Sharp. "It was angry. Terrified. Fighting back in the only way it knew how."

Ace's shadow rippled at her feet. She thought about the water cooler. The way it had looked at her. The way it had reported their presence.

"The magic is aware," Ace said. "At least partly. The anomalies. The buildings. They're learning."

Mai's pen froze.

"You're saying the Earth has an opinion about being terraformed?"

"I'm saying the building didn't want to help them." Ace's voice was flat. "The Denver cell reported the same thing. Magic pushing back. The Earth saying no."

Silence.

Then Mai laughed. Not from humor. From something else. Recognition, maybe. Or exhaustion.

“They want to remake the world.” Her voice trailed off. “They just forgot to ask the world what it wanted.”

Shammy shouldn't have laughed.

The debrief room was serious. Dire. Twelve cities. Funding before the Return. Friends inside the Foundation. Every fact was a weight, a problem, a reason to be afraid.

But when Mai said it, *forgot to ask the world what it wanted*, something cracked in Shammy's chest.

She laughed.

Not a soft laugh. Not a nervous laugh. A full, sudden, wrong-timed burst of sound that made everyone turn.

“Shammy?” Mai's voice was careful.

“Sorry. Sorry.” Shammy pressed her hand to her mouth. But the laughter kept coming. “It's just, they're so bad at this.”

“Bad at—”

“They've been planning for years. Building infrastructure. Weaving networks. And they don't understand what they're working with.” She shook her head. “The air told me, love. In that building. The magic they threaded through the walls, it was miserable. Fighting them every step. They think they're terraforming, but they're just annoying the Earth.”

Ace's hand had found her blade. Not from threat. From something else. Recognition.

“We're going to win,” Shammy said. Her voice was wet. Laughing and crying at once. “They're so bad at this. We're going to win.”

Mai stared at her.

Then, slowly, smiled.

“You're terrifying sometimes.”

“I know, love.” Shammy wiped her eyes. “I know.”

The question came from Velasco.

“Do we stop them, or do we try to understand them?”

The room was quiet. Outside, the city hummed with magic and electricity and things that used to be separate.

“Both,” Ace said.

Mai turned. "Both?"

"We stop them by understanding them. Infiltrate. Learn their methods. Disrupt their network." Ace's voice was flat. Final. "They have friends inside the Foundation. We find them. They have cells in twelve cities. We map them. They're forcing magic into infrastructure. We teach the infrastructure to say no."

"Teach the infrastructure to say no," Mai repeated. "That's..."

"Possible." Shammy's voice was steady now. The laughter had passed. "The building wanted to fight. We just helped it figure out how."

Velasco nodded slowly. "I'll authorize a joint operation. Foundation resources. Your team. Reyes' intel."

"Reyes." Ace looked at the analyst. "You've been working alone for three weeks."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because someone had to." Reyes' voice was steady. "And I couldn't trust anyone else."

"You trust us?"

"I trust Director Velasco. She trusts you." He shrugged. "It's not personal. It's practical."

Ace's shadow pooled at her feet. Wrong. Slow. Thinking.

"Welcome to the team."

Later, alone in the briefing room, Mai stared at her whiteboard.

The grid glowed. Twelve cities. Twelve cells. A network spreading across the country like veins.

They forgot to ask the world what it wanted.

She wrote it in the margin. A reminder. A question.

The Return had happened because something passed through the solar system. The Awakening Circuit had been preparing for years before that. How had they known?

Unless they hadn't known.

Unless they'd been hoping.

Mai's pen moved across the board. Calculations. Probability matrices. The pattern of the cells.

If they were steering the Return, they were steering it somewhere. Toward something. A destination she couldn't see yet.

And somewhere in the Foundation, someone was helping them.

“Hey.”

Ace's voice. Quiet. Mai hadn't heard her enter.

“Hey.”

Ace stood beside her. Not touching. Present. The shadow at her feet was calm now, pooled neatly, almost normal.

“You okay?”

Mai laughed. The sound was tired. “I'm processing. The pattern. The funding. The foreknowledge. It's a lot.”

“It is.”

“Shammy's right, though.” Mai turned from the board. “They don't understand what they're working with. Magic isn't just infrastructure. It's alive. Partially. Learning. And they're treating it like a tool.”

“That's why we'll win.”

“Is it?”

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

“We'll win because we're not fighting alone.” Ace's voice was quiet. “The Earth is fighting with us. The buildings. The air. The anomalies that don't want to be used.”

Mai covered Ace's hand with her own.

“The world is saying no.”

“Let's make sure it's heard.”

Outside the briefing room, the city lights flickered.

Magic crawled through the power lines. Ley lines pulsed beneath the streets. Somewhere in a warehouse, a building was learning to breathe. Somewhere in a coffee shop, an espresso machine was developing opinions.

And somewhere in twelve cities, people were trying to wake something up without asking if it wanted to wake.

The Earth remembered magic. Remembered what it was like before the sleep. And now that it was waking, it was deciding what it wanted to be.

Not what the Awakening Circuit wanted.

Something else.

Something that was learning to say no.

End of Chapter 5

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