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Chapter 6: Infiltration

The warehouse looked like any other abandoned building in the industrial district. Broken windows. Graffiti that hadn't been touched in years. A chain-link fence that someone had cut through weeks ago, the gap hidden behind a dumpster that smelled like dead raccoon and something worse.

Ace stood across the street, watching. Shammy shifted beside her, her hair moving wrong for the still air. Mai's voice crackled in her ear.

"Perimeter's clear. Two guards inside, east entrance. Rotation every—" Static. "—minutes. I'm losing signal strength near the structure."

"Copy," Ace said.

Shammy leaned down. "Ready?"

No. Ace's hand found her blade hilt. The emerald glow was faint, barely visible under her jacket. She let go. Her hand came back shaking.

"Ready."

Three hours earlier, they'd been in the van, parked four blocks from the target.

Mai had the blueprints spread across her lap, her pen moving in small precise marks. "The faction calls themselves the Accelerants. They believe magic returning is good, actually. Necessary. And they think they're helping it along."

"By triggering anomalies," Ace said.

"By accelerating the process. They think Earth should be more magical. They think the Return is just the beginning." Mai's pen tapped a point on the blueprint. "Their local cell meets here. Warehouse. Former textile plant. We don't know who runs it, but we know they've got ties to at least three anomaly events in the past month."

Shammy stretched, her back cracking. "So we go in, find out who's in charge, and get out?"

"We go in posing as sympathizers. Ace, you're a survivor of an anomaly event. Shammy, you're her protector? Partner? We haven't worked that out yet."

"I can do protector." Shammy grinned. "I'm very protect-y."

Mai ignored this. "I'll monitor from here. Comms stay open. The building might have interference, we saw that at the last site. If you lose contact, fall back to the rendezvous point."

Ace studied the blueprints. The warehouse was big, open, with a second-floor office overlooking the

main floor. Catwalks. Exposed beams. Lots of places to watch from. Lots of places to be watched from.

“What's the ideology?” Ace asked.

“The Return is natural. The pre-Return world was unnatural, magic suppressed, held back by forces that shouldn't have existed. They think they're healing something that was wounded.”

“Sounds like cult talk.”

“Most ideologies do, when you strip away the aesthetics.” Mai's pen stopped moving. “There's something else. The Accelerants aren't random actors. They have resources. Funding. And they seem to know things they shouldn't.”

“Like what?”

“Foundation protocols. Movement schedules. We think they have an informant.”

Ace's hand had gone still on her blade. The blade she wasn't touching. “Inside the Foundation?”

“Unknown. But the pattern suggests access.” Mai looked up, her silver-blue eyes meeting Ace's violet. “That's why we're doing this intel-gathering instead of a direct assault. We need to know how deep this goes before we move.”

Shammy's hair shifted. The van's interior pressure had changed. “When do we move?”

“Now.”

The warehouse door opened onto darkness.

Ace stepped through first. Shammy followed, her presence a warm pressure at Ace's back. The air inside tasted like dust and old machine oil and something underneath that. Ozone. Magic. Faint but present, threading through the space like veins through marble.

The main floor had been cleared. Folding chairs arranged in rough rows. A platform at the far end, a wooden crate serving as a podium. Twenty people, maybe twenty-five, scattered through the seats. Some in work clothes. Some in suits. All watching Ace and Shammy enter.

A man approached. Mid-forties. Receding hairline, the kind of face that forgot what smiling looked like. “New faces.”

“Survivors,” Ace said. Her voice came out flat, controlled. Good. “From the north side. The thing at the power station.”

His eyes sharpened. “That was one of ours.”

“I know.” Ace held his gaze. “That's why we're here.”

He studied her for a long moment. Then Shammy. Then back to Ace. “Name?”

“Vera.” Ace didn't blink. “This is Sam.”

"Sam" nodded. The man's attention shifted to her, Shammy's height, her presence, the way the air seemed to bend around her. "You're Awakened."

"I feel things," Shammy said. Her voice was warm, easy. "The air's different now. Better."

He bought it. Or he didn't and didn't care. Either way, he gestured toward the seats. "We're starting soon. Find a spot. Listen. If you're serious, there's a process."

They sat in the back row. Ace's shadow pooled at her feet, darker than the lighting should allow.

The meeting began.

A woman took the crate-podium. Younger than Ace expected, late twenties, early thirties. Dark hair pulled back, practical clothes, the kind of presence that filled a room without trying. Her voice was clear, projected, trained.

"The Return is not an accident. The Return is not a catastrophe. The Return is correction."

Ace's pen didn't move. She wasn't taking notes. She was watching. Exits. Positions. The man who'd greeted them stood by the door. Another guard by a side entrance. The woman on the platform had two people flanking her, both built like they'd seen combat.

"For six thousand years, magic slept. Suppressed by forces that feared what humanity could become. The old institutions, governments, corporations, foundations—" The word landed like a slap. "They built their power on magic's absence. They made themselves necessary in a world that should have outgrown them."

Mai's voice in Ace's ear. "She's good. Classic recruitment structure. Identify grievance, assign blame, offer solution."

Ace didn't respond. Her shadow was spreading.

"Now magic wakes. The earth remembers what it was. And some of us—" The woman's eyes swept the room. "Some of us have chosen to help it remember faster."

Shammy's hand found Ace's wrist. A small gesture. Barely visible. The air pressure in the room shifted.

"The anomalies you've heard about? Not disasters. Growing pains. The earth stretching muscles it forgot it had. Every anomaly is a step toward what we should have been all along."

Ace's shadow crept outward. Under her chair. Toward the chair in front of her. The darkness pooling wrong, responding to something she hadn't commanded.

Shammy's grip tightened. Her lips moved, barely. "Breathe."

Ace breathed.

The meeting continued.

Question and answer. A man in front asked about safety, his voice scared, eager, both at once. The woman answered with practiced calm. "The transformation has risks. We don't deny that. But compare: six thousand years of war, famine, disease. Magic's return has killed how many? Hundreds? Meanwhile, how many died in car accidents last month?"

The crowd murmured. Some nodded. The logic was bad, false equivalence, apples to engines, but it landed.

Mai's voice: "Their ideology is self-reinforcing. Any evidence against them is evidence of suppression. Classic."

Ace shifted. Her shadow followed, too slow, then too fast. A ripple of darkness that someone noticed.

A woman two rows up turned. Her eyes found Ace's shadow, then Ace's face. Her expression changed.

Ace's hand moved to her blade. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt, and they were shaking. Shaking so hard she felt the vibration through the grip.

Shammy's other hand rose. The air temperature dropped three degrees. The humidity shifted. The woman who'd noticed glanced up at the ceiling, at the rafters, like checking for a draft.

"That's them," Shammy whispered. "The faction's mages. They think that's faction magic."

It wasn't. It was Shammy covering for Ace's uncontrolled shadow. But the woman bought it, or didn't care, or both. She turned back to the speaker.

Ace's hand didn't leave her blade. Her shadow stayed pooled, wrong, waiting.

After the speech came the mingling.

Ace moved through the crowd like smoke. Shammy stayed close, her presence a buffer. They listened. Nodded at the right moments. Asked questions that sounded curious without revealing anything.

"Where do you get your information?" Shammy asked a man near the refreshment table. The refreshment table was a folding table with a coffee urn and some cookies that looked like they'd been purchased at a gas station.

"We have sources." He smiled. "People who understand what's happening. People on the inside."

"Inside where?"

His smile didn't change. "Places that matter."

Ace drifted. The warehouse felt bigger now, the catwalks above casting shadows that her shadow wanted to answer. She forced herself still.

"—hear about the next activation?" A voice behind a stack of crates. Ace moved closer. Not hiding. Just near.

"Wednesday. The ley line node in the old textile district."

"That's Foundation territory now. They've got it locked down."

"Locked down doesn't mean what it used to." A laugh. "We've got people inside. Real inside. When the time comes—"

Ace stopped breathing.

"—when the time comes, we'll have access. Channels. The kind of thing that takes years to build."

A high-level informant. Foundation. Years of access.

Ace needed to get out. Needed to tell Mai. Needed to—

Her shadow surged.

It happened without warning. The darkness at her feet spreading, rising, reaching toward the voices behind the crates. Not an attack. Not deliberate. Her body responding to stress, her shadow answering something deeper than command.

The voices stopped.

"What the—"

Ace moved. Around the crates. Two people, a man and a woman, both staring at the shadow pooling wrong.

"Who are you?" The woman's hand went to her pocket.

Shammy's voice cut through. "Hey! There you are."

The air shifted. Temperature drop. Pressure change. The two faction members turned to look at Shammy, who was walking toward them with her arms spread, her expression confused, her hair moving in a wind that wasn't there.

"I've been looking everywhere." Shammy laughed. "Vera, you can't just wander off. These people don't know you like I do."

Ace's shadow receded. Slowly. Like a tide pulling back. She forced her face into blankness. "Got turned around."

"The meeting's wrapping up." Shammy's hand found Ace's arm. "We should go. Thank our hosts."

The man and woman exchanged looks. But Shammy's presence was disarming, her height offset by warmth, her smile genuine in a way that made people want to trust her.

"If you're not serious," the woman said, "you shouldn't come back."

"We're serious," Ace said. "Dead serious."

They left.

Outside, the air was cold. February cold. The kind of cold that makes your lungs hurt.

Ace didn't feel it. She walked. Fast. Away from the warehouse, away from the lights, toward the van.

Mai's voice crackled. "What happened? I lost you for almost ten minutes. The interference got worse and then it—"

"Foundation informant." Ace's words came out clipped. "High-level. Years of access. They're planning something Wednesday. Ley line node in the textile district."

Static. Then Mai's voice, different now. "That's, that's the node we flagged in the pattern analysis, that's the one I identified as a potential target, which means they knew we knew, or they knew we would know, or—"

Mai's words ran together. Ace heard them but didn't process. Her shadow was still wrong. Still responding to something she wasn't commanding.

"—which means if they have access to our analysis, they have access to our internal communications, which would explain how they knew about the north side operation, and I should have seen this, I should have—"

"Mai." Ace stopped walking. "Breathe."

Silence. Then: "I'm breathing. I'm fine. I'm just, this is significant. This changes everything. We need to get back, we need to report, we need to—"

Shammy caught up. Her hand found Ace's shoulder. "Breathe, love. Both of you."

Ace breathed. Her shadow settled. The darkness pulled back into her, becoming just shadow again. Normal. Or what passed for normal.

They reached the van. Mai had the door open before they got there, her face tight, her pen still moving across a notepad she'd probably been filling since they lost contact.

"What else?" Mai's voice was controlled now. Verbosity suppressed. Almost. "What else did you see?"

Ace opened her mouth. Closed it.

Her hand was still shaking.

The van smelled like coffee and old paper and Mai's particular blend of anxiety. Ace sat in the back, her blade across her knees, her shadow behaving now, pooling normally at her feet.

Mai drove. Shammy rode shotgun, her hair still moving wrong, her attention on the side mirror.

"They have someone inside," Mai said. The words came fast. "Someone with years of access. Someone who can feed them Foundation intelligence, movement schedules, analysis results. That's how they've been staying ahead of us. That's why they knew about the north side, the textile district, the ley line pattern. We've been playing chess against someone who can see our board."

"Do we know who?" Shammy asked.

"No. But I can start cross-referencing. Access logs, communication records, anyone who's been in a position to—" Mai's voice caught. "This is my fault."

Ace's head turned. "No."

"I should have seen it. The pattern was there. The information leaks. The timing. I was so focused on the anomaly data that I didn't look at the human element, I didn't—"

"Mai." Ace's voice cut through. "Stop."

Mai stopped. Her hands tightened on the wheel. The van turned a corner, heading toward Foundation territory.

"You're not responsible for someone else's betrayal." Ace's words were short. "They made a choice. Not you."

"But—"

"No." Ace's hand found Mai's arm. Not shaking now. Steady. "You find the pattern. You find the mole. We handle it. Together."

Mai didn't respond. But her breathing slowed. Her grip on the wheel loosened.

Shammy turned in her seat. "That was good work in there. The shadow thing—"

"I couldn't control it." Ace's voice was flat. "It almost gave us away."

"But it didn't." Shammy's smile was warm. "And my atmospheric stuff? Passed as faction magic. They bought it."

"You saved us."

"We saved each other." Shammy's hand reached back, found Ace's knee, squeezed briefly. "That's what we do."

Ace looked at her blade. The emerald edges were dark, dormant. Her shadow was just shadow. Her hand was steady now, the shaking gone like it had never been there.

But she remembered it. The tremor when she'd reached for the grip. The way her body had betrayed her composure when her mind was screaming stay calm.

She remembered, and she filed it away.

The van pulled into a Foundation parking garage. Underground. Secure. Or what passed for secure in a world where magic had come back and nothing worked the way it used to.

Mai parked. The engine died. The three of them sat in silence for a long moment.

"We report to Velasco," Mai said finally. "We tell them about the informant. We start the internal investigation."

"And hope the informant isn't Velasco," Ace said.

Mai's pen stopped moving. "That's..."

“Unlikely. But not impossible.”

Shammy made a sound. Not quite a laugh. “We trust anyone?”

“We trust each other.” Ace's voice was certain. “Everyone else earns it.”

They got out of the van. The garage was fluorescent-lit, humming with that particular sound that made Ace's teeth ache. Mai fell into step beside her, their shoulders almost touching. Shammy walked behind, her presence a warm pressure at their backs.

The elevator doors opened. They stepped inside. Mai pressed the button for the operations floor.

“We should have gotten more,” Mai said. The words came fast again. “We should have stayed longer, found out who the informant is, identified—”

“We got what we could.” Ace's voice cut through. “We got out alive. That's enough for tonight.”

Mai's mouth opened. Closed. “You're right. Of course you're right. I'm just—”

“Processing. I know.”

The elevator rose. Ace's shadow pooled at her feet, normal, contained. Her hand rested at her side, not shaking, not reaching for her blade.

But the memory was there. Her fingers trembling around the grip. Her body betraying everything her training said should be steady.

The doors opened.

They walked into the light.

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