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## Chapter 7: The Mole

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Who can you trust when the people who know your secrets might be the ones selling them?

Ace stood in the doorway of the debriefing room, checking the frame. Metal. Reinforced. Standard Foundation installation. The door opened inward, which meant anyone coming through would be visible for a full second before they could see inside. Good for them. Bad for her if they needed to leave fast.

She moved to the corner with the best sight lines.

“Ace.” Mai's voice was carefully neutral. “We've been over this. Three times.”

Ace didn't respond. She was counting the exits. Main door. Emergency exit on the east wall, alarmed but functional. Windows on the north side, three meters up, too narrow for a person. If something went wrong, they had two viable exits.

If something went wrong.

“You're doing it again,” Shammy said. She'd folded herself into a chair, her long frame somehow graceful despite the furniture's obvious design for smaller humans. The air pressure in the room shifted slightly toward her. The HVAC system didn't do that, but Shammy's presence did. “The doorframe thing.”

“Force of habit.”

“It's been three hours since we got back. You've checked the doorframe sixteen times.” Mai's tablet showed a count. Of course it did. “I've been tracking.”

Ace's shadow pooled at her feet. Not because she told it to. Because her attention was on the door, and it noticed.

“Someone accessed our files.” Mai's voice was clipped now, the precision that meant she'd been running calculations all night and didn't like what she'd found. “Not just our case files. Personnel records. Movement schedules. The pattern suggests—” She stopped.

“Pattern suggests what?” Shammy leaned forward.

“Someone inside the Foundation. Someone with clearance.” Mai's pen moved across the tablet, diagrams appearing. “Access pattern analysis. Seventeen files pulled between 0200 and 0345 last night. The user account has been inactive since. The access credentials matched Agent Davies, but Davies was on overnight patrol in Sector 4. Couldn't have accessed the system from there.”

“Stolen credentials.”

“Or willingly given.” Mai's eyes didn't leave the screen. “Davies has been with the Foundation for

eight years. Clean record. No flags. But someone used his access, which means either someone stole it or—”

“Or he's the mole.” Ace's voice was flat.

“Or he's the mole. But that's the obvious answer, and obvious answers are suspicious in cases like this.” Mai's pen tapped the screen. “I ran a secondary analysis. User access behavior over the past six months. The credentials used last night matched Davies' login patterns, the same typing rhythm, the same navigation shortcuts. That's not something you can steal. That's muscle memory.”

“You're saying it was him.”

“I'm saying the data suggests him. I'm also saying the data is too perfect.” Mai set the tablet down. “If I were trying to frame someone, I'd make the access pattern match perfectly. If I were trying to hide, I'd make it imperfect enough to suggest a frame. The question is which one we're looking at.”

Shammy's laugh was warm and wrong-timed. “So either he's guilty, or someone wants us to think he's guilty, or someone wants us to think someone wants us to think he's guilty.” She shook her head. “I miss when anomalies were just things that happened. You know? Before they got political.”

“This has always been political.” Ace hadn't moved from her corner. “The Foundation contains anomalies. Containment requires information. Information is power. Power attracts people who want it.”

“You're very cynical for someone who works for the people who have it.”

“I work for the people who try to contain it. Different thing.”

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The Foundation building felt wrong.

Shammy had been trying to name the feeling all morning. The air pressure was normal, she'd checked. The temperature was within acceptable parameters. The airflow was standard. But something underneath all of that was off. Like the building itself knew something was wrong and was holding its breath.

“Talk to me,” Mai said, not looking up from her screen. They'd set up in a secondary conference room, one without the team's usual equipment, in case that equipment was compromised.

“Air feels wrong.” Shammy shifted in her chair. “Not wrong-wrong. Just off. Like when you walk into a room and know someone was just crying, even though they're smiling now.”

“That's remarkably unhelpful.”

“I know. I'm sorry.” Shammy's hair moved, though there was no breeze. “The building's nervous. That's the best I can do.”

Ace had positioned herself by the door again. She'd checked the frame four times since they'd entered. The number felt significant, though Shammy couldn't have said why.

“Who else knew about the infiltration?” Mai's question was directed at Ace.

"Davies. Chen. The overnight duty officer. Us." Ace's voice was flat. "And whoever Davies told, if Davies told anyone."

"That's a list of six people." Mai made a note. "Davies is in holding. Chen is in a meeting with Regional. The duty officer is on administrative leave pending investigation. Which leaves us."

"Us."

"If we assume the mole is one of the people who knew about the infiltration." Mai's pen moved. "Which we should, because the infiltration was compromised, and that means someone in that list either is the mole or told the mole."

Ace's hand found her blade hilt. Not because she expected to use it. Because her body had habits her mind didn't control.

"Chen scheduled the meeting," Ace said. "Regional doesn't know the details. Davies didn't have access to the operational specifics. The duty officer processed the paperwork but didn't have the need-to-know for field details."

"Which leaves us." Mai's voice was careful. "Again."

"You're investigating us."

"I'm investigating everyone. Including us." Mai's eyes finally left the screen, meeting Ace's. "If the mole is close to this team, they know how we operate. They know our patterns. They might even know we'd suspect each other first, which makes this a very good time to not be the mole if you are one."

"Because we're looking at each other."

"Because we're looking at each other, and whoever the mole is, they're probably counting on that." Mai's voice was still careful. Still measured. "I'm not accusing anyone. I'm following the data. The data says someone with Foundation access pulled files last night. The data says that someone had Davies' credentials and typing patterns. The data also says the access was too clean, like someone wanted it to be obvious."

"Or someone's bad at covering their tracks."

"Also possible." Mai went back to her tablet. "I need to cross-reference the duty officer's schedule. Give me thirty minutes."

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The canteen was empty at this hour. Mid-morning, between breakfast and lunch, the space echoed with the particular silence of a room designed for noise.

Ace sat in the corner. Her back to the wall. Eyes on both exits.

Shammy dropped into the chair across from her. "You know Mai's not actually suspicious of us."

"I know."

"You're acting like she is."

"I'm acting like someone is." Ace's coffee sat untouched. The cup was standard Foundation issue, white ceramic, the logo faded from too many washes. "The building's security footage was pulled. Someone wanted to see our entry points. Our patrol routes."

"Or wanted to make us think they did." Shammy's tea steamed between her hands. Something herbal. The smell was wrong for the canteen, too warm, too organic. "This is what they want. Us looking at each other. Us not trusting."

"I know."

"But?"

Ace's shadow stretched toward the emergency exit. Not because she'd told it to. Because part of her attention was on the door, and it had noticed.

"But I've checked this room four times since we sat down. Exits. Sight lines. Structural weak points. The furniture's bolted down, which means it can't be thrown but also means it can't be moved for cover. The lighting's fluorescent, which means no shadows that aren't supposed to be there." She stopped. "I can't stop."

"That's not a but. That's just you."

"Same thing."

Shammy's laugh was soft. "You know what I miss? I miss when you trusted people."

"I trust people."

"You trust Mai. You trust me. You trust the team." Shammy's voice wasn't accusing. Just warm. Just true. "Everyone else is a variable. Everyone else is a potential threat. You've been like this since I met you, but it's gotten worse since the Return. Since your shadow started doing its own thing."

Ace didn't answer. The coffee sat untouched. The doorframe was fine. The room was secure. None of that stopped her from checking.

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Mai found them an hour later.

Her stride was wrong. Too fast. The careful precision replaced by something that looked almost like urgency, which wasn't a Mai emotion. Mai calculated. Mai analyzed. Mai did not hurry.

"I need to show you something." She sat down without asking, tablet between them. "I've been running pattern analysis on all personnel with access to our files. Not just the infiltration details. Everything. Movement logs. Communication records. Expense reports. Everything."

"Did you find something?"

"I found a discrepancy." Mai's finger traced a line on the screen. "Martin Reyes. Analyst. He's been on our support team for eight months. Access to field reports, but not operational details. Except—" She tapped. "Three days before the infiltration, he accessed a file he shouldn't have needed. Field rotation schedule. It was flagged as routine and cleared automatically."

"Routine?"

"It would have been routine. Analysts pull schedules all the time for planning purposes." Mai's voice had gone faster. "But Reyes wasn't assigned to anything that needed rotation schedules. He was working anomaly propagation analysis. Completely separate project."

"You think he's the mole."

"I think he accessed something he shouldn't have, three days before an operation that got compromised. I think he's been working with us for eight months, which means he knows our patterns, our tendencies, our blind spots." Mai's pen moved, diagrams appearing. "I think he's close to the team. Close enough to predict what we'd do. Close enough to know how to hurt us."

Ace's hand had gone to her blade again. "Where is he now?"

"His shift ended two hours ago. He's not scheduled back until tomorrow morning." Mai's eyes met Ace's. "We can bring him in. Quietly. See what he knows."

"We should tell Chen."

"We should." Mai's voice was careful again. The precision was back. "But if there's a mole in the Foundation, Chen's administration is one of the possible locations. I'm not saying Chen's involved. I'm saying we don't know who to trust yet."

Shammy's presence shifted. The air pressure changed. "So we don't trust anyone."

"We trust us." Mai's hand found Ace's arm. A brief touch. "We trust each other. That's the baseline. Everything else is a variable."

Ace's shadow pooled at her feet. The coffee was still untouched. The room was still secure.

And someone close to them had been working against them all along.

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The question hung in the air after Mai left.

Ace stood by the doorframe, checking it again. Not because she needed to. Because she couldn't not.

"What do you think?" Shammy's voice was warm. Always warm. Even when things were bad, Shammy's voice was the temperature of a room you wanted to be in.

"I think Mai's right." Ace didn't turn around. "Reyes has been helpful. Supportive. He's never asked for anything that would raise flags. He's never pushed for information."

"That's suspicious?"

"That's smart. If he's the mole, he's smart. If he's not, he's just good at his job." Ace finally turned. "Either way, we need to know."

"You want me to read the air around him?"

Ace shook her head. "If he's Awakened, he'll feel you doing it."

"If he's Awakened, he already knows I'm different." Shammy's smile was soft. "But fair point. I'll be subtle."

---

Martin Reyes' apartment was on the east side of the city. A reasonable building. Reasonable rent. The kind of place a Foundation analyst could afford.

They didn't go inside. Just stood across the street, watching.

"I don't feel anything wrong." Shammy's voice was quiet. "The air's normal. No magic. No disturbance. He's either clean or very good at hiding."

"Everyone's clean until they're not."

"That's very cynical."

"That's very accurate."

Ace checked the exits. Two doors. One window on the third floor, Reyes' unit. The fire escape was accessible. The alley behind the building was narrow but navigable.

"If he's the mole, he'll run." Ace's voice was flat. "If he's not, he'll cooperate. Either way, we need to be ready."

"We're just going to knock on his door and ask if he's a traitor?" Shammy's laugh was warm and wrong again. "That sounds like a great plan."

"It's not a great plan. It's the only plan we have."

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Reyes opened the door on the third knock.

He looked tired. The kind of tired that came from too many hours staring at screens, too many reports, too much information that never quite added up. His eyes were soft behind glasses that had been pushed down his nose at some point and never quite resettled.

"Agent." His voice was surprised. Not guilty. Just surprised. "Agent. And..." He looked at Shammy. "I'm sorry, I don't—"

"Shamaterazu. Shammy." She smiled. It was warm. It was always warm. "We need to ask you some questions."

"Of course." Reyes stepped back. "Come in."

The apartment was small. Clean. A desk in the corner with two monitors, papers stacked neatly beside them. A kitchen that had never been used for anything except reheating. A couch that looked like it had never been sat on.

Ace checked the exits. The window was locked. The fire escape was accessible.

"Can I get you anything?" Reyes' voice was careful. "Water? Tea? I have tea somewhere—"

"We're fine." Mai's voice crackled through Ace's earpiece. She was monitoring from the van. "We need to ask about a file access. Three days ago."

Reyes' face changed. Subtle. A slight tightening around the eyes. "The rotation schedule."

"Yes."

"I can explain." His voice was still careful. "I was cross-referencing anomaly locations with personnel deployment. Trying to find a pattern. It was for the propagation analysis, I needed to see if certain agents were consistently near certain types of anomalies."

"Did you find anything?"

"No." The answer came too fast. "I mean, not yet. The data is inconclusive. I need more time."

Ace's shadow pooled at her feet. She hadn't told it to. It just noticed that her attention was on Reyes, and it responded.

"Your access to that file was flagged."

"I know. I got an automated notification." Reyes' hands were very still. "I cleared it. It was routine."

"Nothing about this is routine." Ace's voice was flat. "The infiltration was compromised. Someone with Foundation access pulled files they shouldn't have. Someone knew our entry points. Someone knew our timing."

"And you think it's me." Reyes' voice was quiet. Not defensive. Just quiet. "Because I accessed a schedule."

"Because you accessed a schedule three days before an operation that got compromised. Because you've been close to this team for eight months. Because you know our patterns." Ace's hand found her blade. Not because she expected to use it. Because it was there. "Because you're here, and someone is leaking information, and you're on the list."

Reyes' face didn't change. "I understand."

"That's it? No denial? No defense?"

"I'm an analyst." His voice was still quiet. "I know how this looks. I also know that defending myself won't change anything. The data says I accessed the file. The timing is suspicious. I'm close to the team. I have the means." He spread his hands. "If I were investigating this, I'd suspect me too."

Shammy shifted. The air pressure changed. "You're taking this very well."

"I've been taking things well for eight months. It's one of the things I'm good at."

Ace's shadow stretched toward Reyes. Not because she'd commanded it. Because something about him felt wrong. Not guilty-wrong. Just off. Like the air in the Foundation building.

"Where were you last night?" she asked.

"Here. Working. I have logs." Reyes gestured at his desk. "I was running analysis until about 0300. The timestamps are in the system."

“Logs can be faked.”

“They can.” His voice was still calm. “I’m not going to convince you. I know that. But I’ll tell you something, when you find whoever’s actually responsible, they’re going to look exactly like me. They’re going to be helpful, and precise, and close to the team, and have an explanation for everything. That’s how this works.”

“And if you’re them?”

“Then I just told you exactly what you want to hear.”

Ace stared at him. Her shadow was still moving wrong, still pooling toward him without her command.

“Come with us.” Her voice was flat. “We need to continue this conversation at the Foundation.”

“I know.” Reyes stood. He didn’t argue. He didn’t resist. He just stood, like he’d been waiting for this moment for a long time. “I’ll get my coat.”

---

Shammy’s laugh was soft, after they’d left Reyes with the duty officer and returned to the van.

“That wasn’t what I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“Defensive. Angry. Something.” Shammy’s presence shifted. “He was too calm. Too reasonable.”

“Some people are calm.”

“Some people are.” Shammy’s voice was warm. “People who have nothing to hide. People who’ve rehearsed exactly what they’d say when they got caught. People who know they’re innocent and don’t need to prove it.” She paused. “The air around him was wrong. Not guilty-wrong. Just off. Like he was holding something back.”

Ace didn’t answer. Her shadow pooled at her feet.

Mai’s voice came through the earpiece, careful and precise. “I’m pulling his logs. His communication records. His movement history. If he’s the mole, there’ll be a trail.”

“And if there isn’t?”

“Then we’re back to looking at each other.” Mai’s voice was flat. “And I really don’t want to do that.”

The van was quiet. The air was thick with things no one was saying.

Ace checked the doorframe. Structural integrity: intact. Exits: two. Sight lines: adequate.

Some habits were harder to break than others.

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