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## Chapter 8: Close to Home

The operation went wrong at 11:47 PM.

Mai had calculated a 94% success probability. The ley line node in the textile district was supposed to be unguarded, her analysis showed the Accelerants didn't have the resources to protect every target simultaneously. The window was eighteen minutes. The approach was clear.

But when Ace dropped from the ventilation shaft onto the catwalk, three people were waiting.

Not guards. Not random operatives. People in Foundation tactical gear, their faces hidden behind standard-issue masks, their weapons trained on her position before she'd finished landing.

"Ace, get out!" Mai's voice in her ear, crackling with interference. "They knew exactly where you'd—"

The comms died.

Ace moved. Shadow pooled at her feet, wrong, too fast, responding to something deeper than command. One of the armed figures fired, a concussive blast, not lethal, designed to incapacitate. Her shadow swallowed it. The blast vanished into darkness that shouldn't have been able to hold it.

The figure who'd fired lowered their weapon. A voice, distorted through the mask: "The Foundation's pet shadow. We've been waiting to see what you can do."

Ace's hand found her blade. "Who are you?"

"People who understand." The figure stepped forward. Behind their mask, she couldn't see their face. But she could see their stance, the training, the discipline. Foundation-trained. "The Accelerants aren't the enemy, Ace. We're the future."

Her blade cleared its sheath.

The figure laughed. "You can't fight all of us. And your team, your analyst, your storm, they're already compromised."

Ace's shadow surged. Darkness spread across the catwalk, swallowing light, swallowing sound. But the three figures didn't move. They stood in her shadow like it was nothing. Like they'd expected it.

"We know what you can do," the leader said. "We've known for months. Every move you've made, every technique you've tried, we've been watching."

Ace's blade caught the emergency light. Emerald edges, humming at a frequency no one could hear.

"Tell Mai her friend says hello."

Then they were gone. Not running. Folding. The air around them bending, the way the woman in the old headquarters had escaped. Space itself opening like a door.

Ace stood alone on the catwalk, her shadow pooling at her feet, her blade useless against enemies who weren't there anymore.

Her hand shook.

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The van was silent on the drive back.

Mai sat in the passenger seat, her tablet dark in her lap. Shammy drove. Ace stayed in the back, her blade across her knees, her shadow contained but wrong.

"Three people," Mai said finally. Her voice came out slow. Not her usual processing-speed. "Foundation tactical gear. Foundation training. They knew our approach. They knew the timeline. They knew about my analysis."

"Someone told them," Ace said.

Mai's pen was moving. Even with her tablet dark, her hand kept making notes on nothing. "The intelligence came from inside. Not just inside the Foundation, inside our circle."

"The mole," Shammy said. Her hands tightened on the wheel. "We knew there was one. But if they knew the approach route, the timeline, the specifics of my analysis—"

"They have access to operational details." Mai's words were coming faster now. "Not just strategic intelligence. Real-time operational data. That means someone close to—"

She stopped. Her hand stopped. Her pen hovered over nothing.

Ace watched her.

"Someone close to us," Mai finished. The words were barely audible.

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The safehouse was a Foundation apartment. Three rooms, reinforced windows, warded against magical surveillance. The kind of place you brought people when you couldn't trust the regular channels.

They sat in the main room. Mai at the table, her tablet finally lit, her fingers flying across files. Ace by the window, watching the street. Shammy by the door, her presence filling the space with something warm despite the circumstances.

"Access logs for the last three months," Mai said. Her voice was clinical. Professional. But her eyes were doing something Ace had rarely seen, flickering, not settling. "I'm cross-referencing everyone who had visibility on the textile district operation."

"How many?" Shammy asked.

"Fourteen Foundation personnel had access to the operational details. Seven of those had access to the timeline. Three had access to my analysis files." Mai's pen tapped the screen. "Three."

"Who?" Ace's voice came from the window.

"Director Velasco. Agent Chen." Mai's pen stopped. "And Martin Reyes."

Ace turned from the window. "Reyes?"

"He's been providing intelligence support since the investigation started. He had access to all of it." Mai's voice cracked on the last word. "He was the one who confirmed the textile district node. He was the one who said the timeline was viable."

Ace's shadow moved. A ripple at her feet. Not commanded. Just present.

"You trusted him."

"I did." Mai's voice went flat. Not the flatness of control. Something else. Something Ace couldn't read. "He's been helpful. Consistent. He's been—"

"He's been feeding us information." Ace's words came out sharp. "Information the Accelerants wanted us to have."

Mai's head came up. "I know that now."

"Do you?"

The question hung in the air. Ace's shadow spread wrong. Her hand found her blade.

"Ace." Shabby's voice cut through. Warm, steady. "This isn't helping."

"Neither was trusting him."

Mai flinched. The movement was small, barely a twitch, but Ace saw it. Mai, who never flinched. Mai, whose composure was her armor.

Ace's hand tightened on her blade.

"You told me he was reliable." The words came out wrong. Sharper than they should have been. "You said we could trust his analysis. You said—"

"I know." Mai's voice was barely a whisper. "I know. I was wrong."

Ace stopped.

Mai never said that. Mai, whose entire identity was built on being right, on seeing patterns no one else could see, on understanding when others didn't. Mai never admitted fault like this. Not in words. Not out loud.

The room held its breath.

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The spiral began.

Mai pulled files. Access logs, communication records, movement schedules. Everything she could get her hands on. Her voice came back in fragments, processing speed resuming, her analytical mind doing what it did best.

"Reyes joined the Foundation four years ago. Transferred from corporate intelligence. Clean record, good performance reviews, no flags." Her pen moved. "But if we look at the timing..."

She pulled up a timeline. Ace watched from across the room, her blade sheathed now, her shadow contained.

"His transfer was six months before the Return. Four months before the first Accelerant activity we've identified." Mai's finger traced the line. "That's either coincidence or very long-term planning."

"Accelerants don't do short-term," Shammy said. She was pacing, her hair moving in currents no one else felt. "They've been building this for months. Years, maybe. They wouldn't plant someone for a quick extraction."

"So Reyes is either very patient or very lucky." Mai's voice was clinical. "I don't believe in that kind of luck."

Ace moved from the window to the doorframe. Her hand touched the wood. Structural integrity intact. Good sight lines. Clear exit.

She didn't know why she did it. Her body just did.

"His behavior," Ace said. "Has it changed?"

Mai looked up. "How do you mean?"

"Recently. The last few weeks. Has he been different?"

Mai's pen stopped. Her brow furrowed, processing, cross-referencing, building models.

"He's been more present. More available. He volunteered for additional analysis work on the ley line project." Her voice slowed. "He was in the operations room more often. He asked questions about our techniques. About our approaches."

"What kind of questions?"

"Tactical questions. How we responded to anomalies. How we adapted to magic's return." Mai's face went pale. "He was gathering data. On us."

Ace's shadow rippled.

"He was evaluating us," she said. "For Wednesday."

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They went through it again.

The textile district operation. The intelligence that had seemed solid. The timeline that had looked viable. Mai's analysis, confirmed by Reyes, double-checked against Foundation databases.

All of it. Every piece. Tainted.

"He shaped the narrative," Mai said. Her voice was clinical again. Professional. But underneath, Ace could hear something else, something that wasn't anger. Something worse. "He gave us information that led us to the conclusion he wanted. We thought we were making decisions. We were following his

path.”

“The operation was a setup from the beginning,” Shammy said. Her pacing had stopped. She stood by the window now, her back to the city lights. “They wanted us there. They wanted to show us they knew.”

“They wanted to show us we can't trust anyone.” Mai's pen moved again. “Including each other.”

The words landed wrong.

Ace's hand went to her blade. Not deliberately. Her body responded to something before her mind caught up.

“Who else knew?” Ace asked. Her voice came out flat. Controlled. But her shadow was spreading, slow, dark, responding to stress she wasn't acknowledging.

“About the operation? The three I mentioned. Velasco, Chen, Reyes.” Mai's pen didn't stop moving. “But only Reyes had access to my analysis files. Only Reyes knew the specific approach route.”

“Then it's him.”

“Probably. But—”

“Probably?”

Mai's pen stopped. Her eyes met Ace's across the room.

“I need to be certain. The evidence is strong, but certainty requires—”

“Evidence can be faked.” Ace's voice cut through. “You know that. Patterns can be manipulated. You taught me that.”

Mai flinched again. This time Ace saw it clearly, the small movement, the barely-visible tension in her jaw.

“I know,” Mai said. “I know what I taught you. I know what I believed about systems, about analysis, about...” She stopped. “I was wrong about Reyes. I might be wrong about this.”

Ace's shadow spread.

“You keep saying that.” The words came out wrong again. Hot where they should be cold. Sharp where they should be dull. “You keep saying you were wrong. But you're the one who trusted him. You're the one who said his analysis was solid. You're the one who—”

“Ace.” Shammy's voice cut through. Warm. Firm. “Breathe.”

“I'm breathing.”

“You're not. You're—”

Ace's shadow surged. The darkness spread across the floor, up the walls, filling corners with weight that pressed against the room's atmosphere. Not an attack. Not deliberate. Her body responding to something her mind hadn't named.

Shammy moved toward her. The air in the room shifted, temperature dropping, pressure changing, the storm's presence asserting itself against the shadow's weight.

"Ace. Look at me."

Ace looked. Shammy's face was calm. Open. The storm's edges softened.

"Breathe."

Ace breathed.

The shadow receded. Slowly. Like a tide pulling back. The room felt lighter, not physically, but in the way air feels after a storm passes.

Mai hadn't moved from her chair. Her pen was still. Her tablet was dark. Her face was unreadable.

Ace's hand found her blade. Steady now. Not shaking.

"Mai." Her voice came out quiet. "I—"

"I know." Mai's voice was barely audible. "You have every right to be angry."

"I shouldn't have—"

"Yes. You should have." Mai's eyes met hers. Silver-blue, steady despite everything. "I trusted him. I brought him into our circle. I gave him access to analysis that endangered all of us. That's my responsibility."

Ace's blade stayed sheathed. Her shadow stayed contained.

"I'm angry," she said. "But not at you."

Mai's face changed. Something shifted behind her eyes. Relief, maybe. Or something deeper.

"Then who?"

"At him." Ace's hand tightened on her blade. "At whoever made you doubt yourself."

---

They went through it again.

The spiral structure of the investigation, each pass revealing more than the last. The textile district operation, viewed fresh. The intelligence that had seemed solid. The timeline that had looked viable.

"Look at the pattern," Mai said. Her voice was steady again. Clinical. But the flatness was different now, not defeat, but control. "Reyes provided intelligence on three previous operations. Each one led us to a conclusion that seemed logical. Each one moved us toward a position the Accelerants wanted."

"Why?" Shammy asked. She was sitting now, her presence grounding the room's atmosphere.

"What's the endgame?"

"Division. Mistrust." Mai's pen moved. "If we can't trust our intelligence, we can't operate effectively."

If we can't trust each other—”

“We can trust each other,” Ace said. The words came out certain. “That's the one thing they can't take.”

Mai's pen stopped. She looked up. Her face was pale, but her eyes were steady.

“You were right to be angry at me. I made a mistake. A significant one.”

“You made a call based on available information.” Ace's voice was flat. “That's not a mistake. That's being human.”

Mai's mouth opened. Closed.

“The mistake would be not learning from it,” Ace continued. “Are you learning?”

Mai's answer came without hesitation. “Yes.”

“Then we move forward.”

---

The final pass.

Mai pulled everything on Martin Reyes. Personnel file, communication logs, movement records. The picture that emerged was careful, methodical, damning.

“He joined the Foundation exactly when the Accelerants would have needed an inside source,” Mai said. “His transfer was approved by a committee that included someone we now know had Accelerant sympathies. His performance reviews are good, but they're too good. Like someone was making sure he stayed in position.”

“Where is he now?” Shammy asked.

“Foundation headquarters. Working late.” Mai's voice went cold. “He requested access to my latest analysis files. The request came in twenty minutes after we left the textile district.”

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

“He's covering his tracks,” she said.

“Or he's gathering more intelligence.” Mai's pen tapped the screen. “Either way, we need to move before he knows we're onto him.”

Ace stood. Her blade stayed sheathed, but her hand found the hilt. Her shadow pooled, contained but present.

“Then we move.”

---

The confrontation happened at 3:17 AM.

They found Martin Reyes in the Foundation's analysis wing. Small office, standard furniture, the kind

of space that said nothing about the person who worked there. He was at his desk, tablet in hand, files open.

He looked up when they entered. His face was calm. Unsurprised.

"Ace. Mai. Shammy." His voice was measured. Professional. "Late night."

"Martin." Mai's voice came out controlled. Clinical. Ace stood beside her, shadow contained. Shammy filled the doorway, her presence blocking any exit. "We need to talk about the textile district."

"Of course." He set down his tablet. His movements were precise. Calculated. "What about it?"

"The operation failed." Mai's pen moved across her own tablet, pulling up files. "Three hostiles, Foundation tactical gear, knew our approach route. They said they'd been waiting to see what we could do."

Reyes's expression didn't change. "That's concerning."

"They also said something else." Mai's voice stayed flat. "They said to tell Mai her friend says hello."

Reyes's eyes flickered. Just for a second. A micro-expression that Mai would have catalogued if she'd been analyzing.

"I'm not sure what that means."

"No." Mai's pen stopped. "I don't suppose you are."

Ace's shadow spread. Just slightly. Just enough.

"The textile district operation was based on your intelligence," Ace said. Her voice came out flat. Controlled. "You confirmed the timeline. You validated the approach. You said it was viable."

"It was, based on—"

"It was a setup." Ace's hand found her blade. Not drawing. Just present. "You set us up."

Reyes's face changed. The professional mask cracked, revealing something underneath. Not guilt, exactly. Something closer to conviction.

"The Accelerants aren't what you think they are."

"We know what they are." Shammy's voice was warm but firm. "We've seen their work. We've talked to their people. They're accelerating magic's return, consequences be damned."

"Consequences?" Reyes laughed. The sound was wrong. Sharp. "The Return is the consequence. Six thousand years of suppression, and you're worried about consequences?"

Mai's voice cut through. "Why?"

Reyes's attention shifted to her. His eyes were bright. Faithful.

"Because you of all people should understand." He leaned forward. "You've seen the patterns. You've mapped the ley lines. You know what's coming."

"Tell me."

"Earth is waking up. Magic is returning. The Accelerants are just helping it happen faster." His voice was earnest now. True believer. "You could join us. You have the analytical mind, the tactical skill. You could—"

"I trusted you." Mai's voice cracked. Not the controlled, clinical voice she'd been using. Something rawer. "I brought you into my analysis. I relied on your intelligence. I thought—"

"I know." Reyes's face softened. "I'm sorry about that part. You're good at what you do. If things were different..."

"But they're not." Mai's voice went flat again. Not control. Exhaustion. "You made your choice."

Reyes's hand moved toward his desk drawer.

Ace's shadow surged. Darkness spread across the floor, blocking the movement, swallowing the light around Reyes's hands.

"Don't," Ace said. Two words. Quiet.

Reyes's hand stopped.

"Martin Reyes." Mai's voice was clinical. Professional. "You're under arrest for providing classified intelligence to a hostile organization, conspiracy to commit acts of magical terrorism, and betrayal of Foundation trust. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to representation. You have the right to—"

"I know my rights." Reyes's voice was bitter. "I helped write some of them."

"Then you know how this goes."

Reyes looked at Mai. Something passed between them, something Ace couldn't read. Not friendship. Not anymore. But something that had been there, once.

"You're going to need to recalculate everything," he said. "Every analysis I touched. Every timeline I confirmed. None of it was real."

Mai's face stayed flat. "I know."

"I'm sorry about that part, at least." His eyes shifted to Ace. "Your shadow-pressure. That's not Foundation training. That's something older. Something that was waiting for the Return."

Ace didn't respond.

"Think about it," he continued. "Magic came back, and suddenly you could do things you never could before. Your shadow responds to instinct, not command. Your body knows things your mind doesn't." He leaned back. "You're exactly what the Accelerants are trying to create. You're proof it works."

Ace's shadow rippled. Not spreading. Not retreating. Just present.

"I'm proof of nothing," she said. "Except that you're wrong."

Reyes smiled. It was ugly. Broken.

"We'll see."

---

The Foundation security team arrived four minutes later.

Reyes went quietly. Handcuffs, standard procedure, the professional courtesy of someone who'd been on the other side of this process. Mai watched him go without expression.

Ace stood by the doorframe. Her hand touched the wood. Structural integrity intact. Clear sight lines. Good exit.

She didn't know why she still did it. Her body checking what her mind already knew.

Shammy's hand found her shoulder. Warm. Grounding.

"It's done," Shammy said. "It's over."

Ace looked at Mai. The analyst stood in the middle of the office, surrounded by files that were now useless, analysis that was now suspect.

"No," Ace said. "It's not over. But it's a start."

Mai's hand found her tablet. Her pen. The tools of her trade, now compromised.

"I need to recalculate," she said. Her voice was clinical. Professional. But underneath, Ace could hear the weight. "Everything he touched. Everything he confirmed. Every decision we made based on his intelligence."

"We'll help," Shammy said. "We'll go through it together."

Mai's face changed. Something softened. Not much. But enough.

"Together," she repeated.

Ace's hand left the doorframe. Her shadow stayed contained. Her blade stayed sheathed.

The night was quiet. The Foundation building hummed around them, fluorescent lights, warded walls, the infrastructure of an organization that had just been breached from within.

They stood in the analysis office. Three people. One bond, tested and proven.

"Together," Ace said.

---

Later, in the safehouse, Mai sat alone at the table.

Ace found her there. 4:47 AM. The sky outside was beginning to shift, night gray easing toward something lighter. Not dawn. Not yet.

"You should sleep," Ace said.

Mai's pen moved across her tablet. Not notes. Erasing. Deleting. Removing everything Reyes had

touched.

"I trusted him," she said. Her voice was quiet. Not clinical. Not professional. Just honest. "I really thought he was one of the good ones."

"Everyone makes mistakes."

"Not like this." Mai's pen stopped. "Not when the stakes are this high."

Ace moved closer. Her hand found Mai's arm. Not the blade. Not the shadow. Just presence.

"You caught him," Ace said. "You figured it out. You're fixing it."

"After it was too late."

"It's never too late." Ace's voice was certain. "We're still here. We're still standing. We're still together."

Mai's hand covered Ace's. Warm. Steady.

"I keep thinking about what he said. About my analysis. About how he shaped every decision." Her voice cracked. "How do I trust my own judgment after that?"

Ace's shadow moved. A ripple at her feet. Not spreading. Just present.

"You trusted me," Ace said. "When your shadow-pressure went wrong. When you couldn't control it. You trusted Shammy to cover for you."

"That's different."

"It's not." Ace's hand tightened on Mai's arm. "You trusted your team. Your judgment about us was right. Your judgment about Reyes was wrong. That doesn't make you unreliable. It makes you human."

Mai's eyes met hers. Silver-blue in the half-light.

"Humans make mistakes."

"Humans also learn." Ace's voice was flat. Certain. "You're already recalculating. Already adjusting. That's what you do. That's who you are."

Mai's hand squeezed Ace's.

"I don't know what I'd do without you."

Ace's shadow settled. Contained. Calm.

"You won't have to find out."

---

Shammy found them at 5:23 AM.

Ace was sitting beside Mai at the table. Mai's tablet was dark now, everything deleted, everything

reset. A blank slate.

"The air's different," Shammy said. Her voice was soft. Atmospheric. "Like a storm passed through and took the worst of it with it."

Mai managed a small smile. "That's very poetic."

"I'm a very poetic person." Shammy settled into the chair across from them. Her hair moved in currents that didn't match the room. "Also very tired. And very hungry. And very ready to never do that again."

"We'll have to do it again." Mai's voice was quiet. "Reyes isn't the only one. The Accelerants have people everywhere. This isn't over."

"I know." Shammy stretched, her tall frame unfolding. "But tonight, it's done. Tonight, we won."

"Did we?" Mai's voice was bitter. "Reyes is in custody, but he gave them everything. Every operation, every technique, every approach. They know us now. They've been studying us for months."

"Then we change." Ace's voice cut through. Flat. Certain. "We adapt. That's what we do."

Shammy nodded. "The storm doesn't stop because the forecast changes. It just adjusts."

Mai's hand found Ace's. Squeezed.

"You're both ridiculous," she said. But her voice was warmer now. Not the clinical flatness of control. Something real. "Ridiculous, sentimental, impossible people."

"And you love us," Shammy said.

Mai's smile was small. But it was real.

"I do."

Ace's shadow stayed contained. Her blade stayed sheathed. Her hand stayed steady on Mai's arm.

Outside, the sky continued to shift. Gray light creeping across the horizon. Not quite dawn. But close enough.

The first light of a new day.

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*End of Chapter 8*

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