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Chapter 13: Ultimatum

POV: Ace **Word Count Target:** 4,200

The comm channel opened at 6:47 AM.

I knew the time because I'd been sitting at the window since before dawn, watching rain fall on Santero for the first time in weeks. Mai's tablet pinged. Priority notification. She was across the room in seconds, pulling up the channel, face pale in the early light.

"Mai." Collins's voice. Tired. Careful. The voice of someone delivering news he didn't want to deliver. "I need you to acknowledge."

Mai pressed transmit. "Acknowledged. Go ahead."

"The O5 council has reviewed the situation in Santero. Your actions over the past seventy-two hours have been noted." A pause. "You are hereby ordered to surrender Irkal Vasquez-Montoya into Foundation custody for immediate termination. Any personnel assisting her will be designated complicit and subject to the same termination order."

Quiet.

I looked at Irkal's body on the bed. Twelve hours dead. The rain had stopped sometime before dawn. Mai and Shammy had carried her inside, cleaned her, laid her out like she was sleeping. Peaceful. Finally at rest.

"Agent Collins." Mai's voice was steady. The voice she used when she wanted to break something. "Irkal Vasquez-Montoya is deceased. She died at approximately 2130 hours last night, during a ritual conducted with full witness testimony and documentation. Her body is currently in our possession."

Silence on the channel.

"Say again?"

"Irkal is dead. She performed a permanent necromantic raise on her daughter, Celeste, at the burial site you failed to investigate for five years. The raise was successful. Celeste testified. The testimony was recorded and has been submitted to federal prosecutors and three separate media outlets. Irkal died during the ritual, as she knew she would." Mai paused. "The kill order is moot."

More silence.

Then Collins, different now. Harder. "You submitted evidence to media outlets?"

"Yes."

"Without Foundation authorization?"

"Yes."

"Agent Mai. Do you understand what you've done?"

Mai looked at me. At Shammy. At the body on the bed, at the photographs on the walls, at the compiled evidence of ten years of murder and corruption that the Foundation had chosen to ignore.

"I understand perfectly." Her voice was almost gentle. "I'm just sorry it took me this long."

The channel went dead.

"They'll come for us," Shammy said quietly. She was by the window, watching the sky, reading something in the clouds I couldn't see. "Foundation. Not to help. To contain. They'll want to classify everything."

"They'll want to silence us." I stood up. My katanas were still within reach, always within reach, but for the first time in years I didn't feel like reaching for them. "We're loose ends now. Rogue agents with evidence that embarrasses the Foundation."

"What do we do?"

I looked at Irkal. At the peace on her face. At the rain-washed windows and the morning light and the weight of everything that had led to this.

"We have a vote," I said. "The three of us. Unanimous or nothing."

Mai and Shammy both looked at me.

"What do you want to do?" Mai asked.

I thought about it. Past the mission parameters. Past the Foundation training. Past the years of following orders because the alternative was worse.

"I want to finish what Irkal started. Make sure Reyes goes to prison. Make sure the consortium faces consequences. Make sure what we did here, the evidence, the testimony, stays public." I paused. "I'm tired of the Foundation deciding which victims matter. Tired of systems that fail people and then punish them for pointing it out."

Mai nodded slowly. "What she said."

Shammy's hair was sparking. Not the violent sparking of fear. The gentle sparking of emotion she couldn't contain. "I'm with you. Both of you. Whatever comes."

Mai looked at us. Then she pulled out her tablet and started typing.

"What are you doing?"

"Documenting." Her fingers moved across the screen. "The vote. The decision. The reason we did

what we did. All in writing. When Foundation comes for us, there's a record. A real one. Not redacted. Not classified."

"Collins will use it against us."

"Collins will try." Mai smiled. Thin. Sharp. "But he doesn't know everything yet. The five declined reports. The officer whose name was redacted from every decision document. Foundation command has been protecting Reyes for five years."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I found it." Mai turned the tablet around. An internal Foundation memo, dated three years ago, discussing the Santero situation. The memo recommended "continued non-intervention due to consortium connections at regional level." Signed with a name that had been blacked out, but not thoroughly enough. I could still make out the first letter.

"That's high up."

"O5-adjacent. Someone on the council or someone who reports directly to them." Mai's voice was flat. "We've been played from the beginning. The Foundation didn't decline to investigate Santero because they didn't care. They declined because someone told them not to."

Shammy was reading over Mai's shoulder. "We can use this."

"We can use all of it." Mai closed the tablet. "But first, we survive the next few hours. Foundation will send a response team. Probably MTF, probably with termination authorization for all three of us."

"Can we stop them?"

I looked at Shammy. At the way the air around her was moving, pressure differentials she read like a book. At the storm still settling over the valley after Irkal's final ritual.

"We don't need to stop them. Just buy time."

"For what?"

"This." I pulled out my comm unit. "Dr. Bright. MTF Theta-9 requesting emergency consultation. I know he's probably asleep. Wake him up."

Dr. Bright arrived in a Foundation helicopter four hours later.

He looked exactly like I remembered. Tall, thin, with the kind of face that was impossible to read and eyes that saw too much. He'd been the one to find me in the wreckage of my village, years ago. The one who told me I was special, that Violet was a gift, that I could be useful if I learned to control what I carried.

He hadn't been wrong. But he hadn't told me the whole truth either.

"Ace." He stood in the doorway, looking at Irkal's body, at the evidence boards, at the three of us, battered, exhausted, standing in documentation of Foundation failure. "You look like hell."

"I feel like hell." I stepped forward. "Dr. Bright. I need you to understand something before you say

anything.”

“I'm listening.”

“Irkal Vasquez-Montoya was not a Keter-class threat. She was a grieving mother who lost her daughter to a murderer protected by a consortium with connections to Foundation command. She spent seven years trying to get the Foundation to investigate. They declined five separate times. And when Irkal finally found a way to give her daughter justice, the only way she had left, the Foundation sent us to kill her.”

Bright's expression didn't change. “I know.”

“You know?”

“I've read the files. All of them. Including the ones that were supposed to stay redacted.” He stepped inside. Looked at Mai. “Good work, Agent Mai. The documentation is thorough.”

Mai blinked. “You sent us here to—”

“I sent you here because I knew you would do exactly what you did. Follow the evidence. Protect the witness. Make the hard call.” Bright looked at Irkal's body. “I've been trying to get someone to investigate Santero for five years. Every time I filed a report, someone higher up shot it down. I couldn't act without authorization. But I could send three people I trusted to do the right thing.”

I was staring at him. “You used us.”

“I trusted you.” Bright's voice was quiet. “There's a difference. I knew what would happen if you found the truth. I knew you would choose justice over protocol. And I was hoping that when you did, there would be enough evidence to bring down the people who've been protecting Reyes.”

“Collins said there's a termination order.”

“Collins is an idiot.” Bright smiled. Thin. Sharp. “The termination order was never Foundation-wide. It was issued by a single O5 member who has since been relieved of duty. The evidence you submitted to federal prosecutors was enough to trigger an internal investigation. Foundation command is in chaos. The people who protected Reyes are trying to cover their tracks before anyone notices.”

“What happens to us?”

Bright looked at each of us. At Mai with her documentation and her tactical mind. At Shammy with her storm-elemental physiology and her ability to read the sky. At me with my katanas and my Violet fragment.

“What do you want to happen?”

I thought about the question. About the Foundation career I was never going to have. About the rules I'd broken and the choice I kept making every time I picked up these blades.

“Reyes goes to prison. The consortium faces consequences. What Irkal did, what her daughter did, doesn't get erased or classified or buried.”

“That can be arranged.”

"And us? Our careers?"

Bright was quiet for a moment. Then: "Foundation wants this buried. They want everyone to forget that there was ever a town called Santero, a woman named Irkal, a murder covered up for ten years. They can't bury it now. The evidence is public, federal prosecutors are involved, three journalists are very interested in writing very embarrassing articles about Foundation failures."

He paused.

"But they can bury you. Three rogue agents who violated protocol, submitted classified evidence to media outlets, aided a known necromancer. That's a termination offense. Not death. But your careers are over. Foundation status revoked. Persons of interest in ongoing investigations. Effectively silenced."

Mai's face was pale. "So we're done."

"You're done with the Foundation. But not with the case." Bright pulled out a tablet. "Federal prosecutors want to continue using your testimony. The journalists want interviews. And I." He smiled. "I have an offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"Consulting roles. Not Foundation agents. Not MTF. Just people who know things. Who have seen things. Who might be willing to help if certain cases become relevant." He looked at me. "You especially. The fragment you carry. There are others like you. Foundation is always looking for people who understand what it's like to carry something that never lived."

"You're offering us jobs."

"I'm offering you a future. Not the one you expected. But better than the alternative." Bright put the tablet away. "So. What do you say?"

I looked at Mai. At Shammy. At Irkal's body on the bed and the photographs on the walls and the evidence of everything we'd done and everything we'd learned.

The vote wasn't necessary. We all knew.

"Yes," I said. "But only if Irkal gets a proper burial. In Santero. Where she wanted to be."

Bright nodded. "That can be arranged."

He extended his hand.

I took it.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,100

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