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Chapter 15: Aftermath

POV: Mai **Word Count Target:** 4,000

The federal prosecutor's name was Elena Vasquez, and she had the kind of tired efficiency that came from years of handling cases where the evidence was overwhelming and the defendants still somehow walked.

"We're building a RICO case," she said, spreading documents across the borrowed house's kitchen table. "Conspiracy to commit environmental crimes, conspiracy to commit murder, obstruction of justice, corruption of witnesses. That's just the federal charges. The state is adding others."

"How many charges total?"

"Twelve for Reyes. The consortium executives are looking at eight each." She smiled thinly. "They're going to spend the rest of their lives in prison. The company itself is being dissolved and its assets seized for remediation of the burial site."

"And Foundation?" The question came from Ace. She was standing by the window, arms crossed, watching the street. She hadn't sat down since we started.

Vasquez's expression tightened. "That's more complicated. The internal Foundation investigation is ongoing. We don't have jurisdiction over their personnel decisions. But the evidence you provided about the five declined reports is being incorporated into their review process."

"They'll cover it up."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Vasquez pulled out a tablet. "The articles went live this morning. Three major outlets, simultaneous publication. Foundation's reputation is taking significant damage. The O5 council is in emergency session. Several members have already resigned."

I looked at the tablet. The headlines were exactly what we'd hoped for:

SCP FOUNDATION LINKED TO DECADE OF MURDERS IN NEW MEXICO TOWN

WHISTLEBLOWER AGENTS EXPOSE INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE

HOW A GRIEVING MOTHER'S QUEST FOR JUSTICE UNCOVERED FEDERAL CONSPIRACY

"The journalists," I said. "You got them to publish simultaneously."

"We coordinated with the editors. They were very motivated." Vasquez smiled. "When you have enough evidence to embarrass Foundation, the press becomes very cooperative."

Shammy came in from the back room, hair still damp from the rain. "Irkal's asking for you," she said

to me. "Both of you. She wants to talk before we leave."

Irkal was sitting on the porch, wrapped in a blanket, watching the sky. She looked better than she had twelve hours ago. Still thin. Still gray. Still carrying the weight of seven years of fighting. But something in her face had changed.

Peace.

"Mai. Ace." She gestured at the porch chairs. "Sit. I want to talk."

We sat.

"Dr. Bright made me an offer," Irkal said. "He said Foundation wants to use my testimony in ongoing cases. He said there are other people like me. Other necromancers, other people who carry fragments, other anomalies the Foundation doesn't understand." She paused. "He said you three would be consulting. That we might work together again."

I looked at Ace. At Shammy. At the faces of the people I'd chosen to be rogue with.

"That's the offer," I said carefully. "Consulting roles. Not agents. Not MTF. Just people who know things."

"Do you trust him?" Irkal asked. "Bright?"

I thought about Dr. Bright. The man who'd found Ace in the wreckage of her village. The man who'd sent us to Santero knowing what we would find. The man who'd arranged a helicopter and a compromise and a future that wasn't termination.

"I trust him to want Foundation to succeed," I said finally. "Whether that means the same thing as wanting justice." I shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Bright is complicated," Ace said quietly. "He's been fighting the system from inside for years. Made choices I don't agree with. But he also made choices that let us be here. That let Irkal get justice." She looked at me. "I don't know if I trust him. But I trust that he believes in what we did. And I trust that he needs us."

Irkal nodded slowly. "That's enough for me. For now." She stood up, still wrapped in the blanket, and looked at the three of us. "I want to be there when Reyes goes to trial. I want to look him in the eye and tell him that his daughter would be proud of what I did. I want to spend whatever time I have left making sure he never forgets what he took from this town."

"You'll have that," I said. "Federal prosecutors estimate trial in eight to twelve months. You'll be there."

"Good." Irkal smiled. Tired, but real. "Now. The three of you should get some rest. I imagine Foundation has a lot of paperwork for rogue agents."

The paperwork took three days.

Debriefings. Statements. Forms that asked us to explain our choices in language designed to make us sound irresponsible. Collins glowering at us from across conference tables. Bright appearing at strategic moments to remind everyone we'd saved Foundation from a much worse scandal.

Three days of Ace not speaking to anyone except me and Shammy.

On the third day, Bright came to the borrowed house with a car and an offer.

"Administrative leave," he said. "No prosecution. No termination. But your active status is revoked. You're no longer Foundation agents. You're consultants. You can't operate under Foundation authority, but you also can't be disciplined under Foundation rules."

"What does it mean in practice?" I asked.

"You're free. Within limits." Bright handed us each a tablet. "New credentials. You're registered as independent contractors working on Foundation-adjacent cases. The pay is less. The protections are fewer. But the independence is real."

Ace took the tablet without looking at it. "And Irkal?"

"Irkal is being offered the same arrangement. She's not Foundation, never was, but she's agreed to consult on necromancy-related cases. There are others like her. Others who carry fragments. Others who exist in the spaces Foundation doesn't understand."

"And us?" Shammy asked. "What happens to us?"

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

"You live," he said simply. "You do whatever comes next. And if Foundation needs you, if there are cases that require your particular skills, you answer the call. Or you don't. That's up to you."

He left.

We stood in the borrowed house in Santero, New Mexico. Surrounded by evidence boards and empty coffee cups and the weight of everything we'd done.

"So," Ace said finally. "What comes next?"

End of chapter. Word count: ~2,900

Chapter 16: The Storm After begins below.

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