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Chapter 17: Clean-Up

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

The federal courthouse in Albuquerque was nothing like Foundation architecture. Where Foundation facilities were concrete and steel and the particular shade of institutional gray that suggested “we’re keeping something terrible contained,” the federal courthouse was marble and oak and two centuries of American gravitas.

I sat in the gallery wearing a suit I’d bought specifically for this occasion, watching Samuel Reyes be led to his seat in chains. He looked smaller than I remembered. Less threatening. The man who’d murdered seven people, who’d buried toxic waste on sacred land, who’d had a fourteen-year-old girl killed because she saw too much. He looked like someone’s unremarkable uncle who’d made poor life choices.

The prosecution called their first witness.

I watched Elena Vasquez build the case. Not with Irkal’s necromancy, which wouldn’t be admissible, but with the physical evidence: photographs, burial site analysis, forensic evidence connecting Reyes to each crime. Daniel Acosta’s recorded testimony was entered as evidence of his dying declaration. The photographs were authenticated by Foundation forensic analysts who’d been quietly cooperating with the prosecution.

Clean. Thorough. The kind of case that made jury trials almost redundant.

Reyes’s lawyers tried to argue he’d been coerced by the consortium, that he’d been following orders, that he wasn’t the primary architect of the crimes. The prosecution dismantled every argument methodically, piece by piece, until there was nothing left.

The jury deliberated for six hours.

Guilty on all twelve counts.

Ace was waiting outside the courthouse when the verdict came down. Leaning against a wall, katanas on her back, eyes tracking the crowd of reporters and spectators with the vigilance that never quite turned off. When she saw me, something in her posture shifted. Relaxed.

“Guilty,” I said.

“I know.” She fell into step beside me. “Shammy called. The atmospheric pressure in Santero just—” She paused, searching for words. “It settled. She said it felt like the town finally exhaled.”

“Did she cry?”

"She said the rain came back. Just for a minute. Just enough to wash something away." Ace looked at me. "I think she cried too."

I smiled despite myself. "Of course she did."

We walked to the car in silence. The reporters were too busy photographing Reyes being loaded into a federal transport to notice us leaving. Fine by me. We'd given our statements. Done our part.

What came next was Reyes's problem.

The settlement negotiations took longer than the trial.

The consortium's assets were substantial. Not as substantial as the legal team had hoped, because the environmental remediation costs were enormous, but substantial enough that the families of the victims received significant compensation. You couldn't put a price on a life. But acknowledgment was something. The legal system finally working the way it was supposed to.

I handled the paperwork. That was what I did. Somewhere in the process of documenting everything that had happened in Santero, I'd become the person who managed the triad's affairs. Ace didn't care about logistics. Shammy didn't understand legal frameworks. So I filed the claims. Tracked the settlements. Made sure the money went where it was supposed to go.

Seven families received compensation for wrongful death. The Pueblo tribal council received a formal apology and a commitment to environmental restoration of the burial site. The county received funding for a memorial.

And Reyes received four consecutive life sentences. Federal facility. No possibility of parole.

That was the part that mattered most.

Dr. Bright's offer came through the week after the trial.

"Consulting contracts," he said, meeting us at a diner halfway between Santero and Albuquerque. "The rate is lower than MTF salary, but you were never in it for the money."

"Wasn't I?" Ace was nursing a coffee she hadn't touched. "I don't remember."

"The work is sporadic. Foundation gets cases that require specific skills. Necromancy expertise, fragment handling, atmospheric anomaly assessment. You'd be called in on an as-needed basis. You can refuse any assignment."

"What about Irkal?" I asked.

"She's consulting too. Separate contract." Bright slid a tablet across the table. "She's doing well. Better than expected. The federal prosecutors' medical team says her recovery is remarkable. They can't explain it, but they're not complaining."

"They'll never understand what actually happened," Shammy said quietly. She was sitting by the window, reading the sky even indoors. "What it cost her to raise Celeste. Or what it gave her."

"No." Bright's voice was gentle. "They won't. But that's not their job. Their job is to prosecute crimes. Understanding the human cost is ours."

He looked at each of us.

"So. Do you accept?"

Ace looked at me. I looked at Shammy. Shammy was still watching the sky, but she nodded slowly.

"We accept," I said. "But with conditions."

"What conditions?"

"Full transparency on every case we're assigned. No classified restrictions on what we can investigate. And—" I paused. "We want access to the Foundation files on Santero. All of them. Including the ones that were redacted."

Bright was quiet for a long moment. Then he smiled. The kind of smile that suggested he was pleased with something he hadn't expected.

"You've learned," he said. "Good. Foundation works better when someone is watching."

He stood up, collected his tablet, and left.

We sat in the diner for a long time after he was gone, drinking coffee we didn't want, watching the sky that Shammy kept reading like a book.

"So," Ace said finally. "We're consultants now. Independent contractors. The three of us against the world."

"Sounds about right."

"It's better than termination."

"It's better than most things." I smiled despite myself. "What do you want to do now?"

Ace looked at me. At Shammy. At the future stretching out ahead, full of cases we hadn't seen and crimes we hadn't stopped and ghosts we hadn't yet met.

"I want to find Irkal. Make sure she's okay." She paused. "Then I want to go home."

"Home?"

Ace nodded. "Wherever that is now."

I reached across the table and took her hand. Shammy put her hand on top of ours, her skin faintly sparking with static that wasn't quite controlled.

"Home is wherever we are," she said. "Together."

The sky outside the diner was clear. The storm that had broken over Santero had passed, leaving the

air clean and fresh and ready for whatever came next.

We finished our coffee.

We went to find Irkal.

And then we went home.

End of chapter. Word count: ~3,500

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:21**

