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Chapter 1: Notification

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

The encrypted burst hit Mai's comm unit at 3:07 AM.

She knew the exact time because she was already awake, running spectral diagnostics on the Flagstaff containment breach samples, and the notification made her jump hard enough to knock a pen into the stabilization chamber.

"Shit," she said, to no one.

The pen was ruined. The samples were probably contaminated. And the burst was Priority Alpha, which meant someone on the fourteenth floor had stayed up late enough to care about whatever fresh hell was unfolding in New Mexico.

Mai pulled up the dispatch with one hand and reached for a backup pen with the other. She was not losing another night's data because Foundation comms couldn't respect business hours.

SCP FOUNDATION — MTF THETA-9 DEPLOYMENT ORDER PRIORITY: ALPHA TIMESTAMP: 0307 MOUNTAIN STANDARD DESTINATION: SANTERO, NEW MEXICO CLASSIFICATION: KETER — ACTIVE NECROMANTIC SIGNATURE MISSION PARAMETERS: CONTAIN, EVALUATE, ELIMINATE IF NECESSARY DEPLOYMENT WINDOW: SIX (6) HOURS FROM ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Mai read it twice. A third time.

Necromantic signature. Active. In a town called Santero, population roughly eight hundred, located in a part of New Mexico that maps marked with the gentle label UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY. Foundation-speak for "we don't have a station here and we don't want to talk about why."

She closed the Flagstaff file. It could wait. Flagstaff couldn't compete with active necromancy, not in the same way that active necromancy probably shouldn't have been arriving on her personal comm unit at 3 AM instead of through proper Foundation channels.

Unless. Unless someone on the fourteenth floor specifically wanted Theta-9.

Specifically wanted Ace.

Mai looked at the door to the room she shared with Ace. The katanas were visible through the gap. Ace slept with them within arm's reach, had since before they'd become whatever they were to each other. The blades caught the blue light of Mai's equipment and glowed faintly. Impossible, because they were supposed to be dormant. But nothing about Ace's katanas ever did what it was supposed to.

“New Mexico,” Mai murmured. “Of course it's New Mexico.”

She pulled up the Santero briefing packet attached to the deployment order. Thin. Suspiciously thin for a Keter event. One page of background, one page of recent incident reports, one page of initial Foundation observations.

The background page said: *Santero, NM. County seat of Santero County. Population 847 (2020 census). Primary industries: ranching, small-scale tourism, light manufacturing. Notable history: site of multiple unsolved missing persons cases over past decade. No Foundation presence prior to current deployment.*

Mai stared at the “unsolved missing persons” line.

“Multiple.” Three? Ten? Fifty? “Multiple” was the kind of word you used when you didn't want to admit you'd been tracking something for years and had done nothing about it.

She clicked to the incident reports.

INCIDENT LOG — SANTERO ANOMALOUS ACTIVITY (SUMMARY) *Year 1: One (1) reported sighting of deceased individual (Dolores Vega, deceased 1987) walking county roads. Sheriff's department investigation inconclusive. No Foundation action taken. Year 2: Two (2) reports of deceased individuals encountered in local businesses. Witnesses cooperative. Statements consistent with partial necromantic manifestation. Foundation declined deployment (priority queue). Year 3: Three (3) additional missing persons. Connection to prior incidents unclear. Foundation received anomaly report Form 23-B. Declined (resource constraints). Year 4: Two (2) confirmed raised witness events. Individuals (Daniel Acosta, Rosa Sanchez) demonstrated conscious communication and testified to specific criminal acts prior to return to deceased state. Testimonies provided to local law enforcement. Foundation received elevated anomaly report. Declined (Keter queue overflow). Year 5 (Current): Pattern escalation. Raised witness events now averaging one per week. Local coroner (Dr. Hector Vega) has filed formal request for Foundation assistance. Recommendation: MTF deployment for containment and evaluation.*

Five years.

Five years of someone raising the dead in a town small enough that everyone knew everyone, and the Foundation had declined deployment five separate times. Queue overflow. Resource constraints. Whatever comfortable bureaucratic language they'd used to decide that seven, ten, however many missing people weren't worth a priority flag.

Mai's hand was shaking. She put the comm unit down.

She thought about Ace, who had spent years not knowing why she sometimes felt the presence of things that weren't alive. She thought about Shammy, who could read the emotional weight of spaces the way other people read faces. She thought about what it would feel like to be dead and called back, asked questions you didn't want to answer, then released. Left to lie in the ground again knowing someone had reached into your rest and pulled you out for purposes you hadn't agreed to.

She thought about the person doing the reaching.

The necromancer. The one the Foundation had finally decided to care about, now that the situation had escalated beyond their comfortable declining thresholds.

And she thought: they're sending us to kill her, probably. Because that's what Keter designations meant, in the end. Contain or eliminate. The Foundation's favorite binary.

Mai stood up. Left the Flagstaff samples ruined on her desk. Walked to the bedroom door and leaned against the frame.

Watching Ace sleep.

Ace was curled on her side, both katanas within immediate reach, her breathing slow and even. In sleep, her face lost the focused intensity that made her look like a weapon even standing still. She looked young. She looked like someone who had been through things she didn't talk about and was still somehow intact.

"New Mexico," Mai said, quietly. "Something you need to know."

Ace's eyes opened. Not all the way. She slept lighter than anyone Mai had ever met, but she'd learned to wake incrementally, assessing threats without fully committing to consciousness.

"What."

"Necromancy signature. Active. We're being deployed."

Ace was fully awake in the space of a breath. The katanas hadn't moved, but her body had shifted from rest to ready with no transition Mai could identify.

"Where."

"Santero, New Mexico."

Ace sat up. Her eyes were doing the thing. The violet shimmer that meant Violet, the fragment she carries, was paying attention.

"I've heard that name."

Mai's chest tightened. "Heard it where?"

"I don't..." Ace's frown was the kind she made when she was reaching for something and it kept slipping. "I don't remember. But it means something. Felt like it meant something when I read it."

"Read it where? We just got the dispatch."

Ace looked at her. The violet shimmer was fading back to normal.

"I don't know, Mai. I don't know where I heard it."

They looked at each other in the blue equipment-light, and Mai felt the weight of something she couldn't name. A pattern she didn't like. A coincidence that was probably not a coincidence. A deployment to a town with an active necromancy signature that Ace somehow already knew.

"We should wake Shammy," Mai said.

"Yeah." Ace hadn't moved. She was still looking at Mai like she was trying to communicate something she didn't have words for. "Mai. If this is..."

"It's what?"

Ace shook her head. "Nothing. Get Shammy. We need to talk before we acknowledge."

Mai went to get Shammy.

When she came back, Ace was standing by the window in just her underclothes, both katanas now strapped to her back, watching the sky like she could see weather patterns that hadn't formed yet.

"She's awake," Mai said. "Barely. You know how she gets before deployments."

"She's nervous." Ace didn't turn around. "The air outside is different. I can feel it."

"You're feeling weather?"

"I'm feeling something." Ace's hand went to her chest, the gesture Mai had learned meant she was tracking Violet's presence. "It's not weather. It's... pressure. Like the sky is waiting for something to happen."

Shammy appeared in the doorway, 195 cm of sleep-disheveled storm elemental, her hair static-puffed from the pillow.

"Someone want to tell me why I woke up feeling like the atmospheric pressure just dropped six millibars?"

"Santero," Mai said. "New Mexico. Necromancy signature. Keter designation. We're being deployed."

Shammy's expression shifted from sleepy confusion to sharp attention.

"Keter. That's not... we don't usually get Keter. We get Euclid. We get the weird stuff that doesn't fit categories. Keter means..."

"Keter means someone's scared," Mai finished. "And someone on the fourteenth floor is scared enough about a dead woman walking in New Mexico to break protocol and send us a direct dispatch."

Ace finally turned from the window. Her eyes were fully violet now. Not the shimmer. The solid color. When Violet was fully present, Ace's irises became a deep, prismatic purple that caught light like something luminescent.

"She's calling," Ace said. "The woman raising the dead. She's calling and she wants us to hear."

Mai and Shammy looked at each other over Ace's head. Shammy shrugged. *Your guess is as good as mine.* Mai sighed.

"Great," she said. "So we have a necromancer who knows we're coming, a fragment carrier who's already psychically connected to her, and zero useful briefing documents beyond 'contain, evaluate, eliminate.' Let's move."

Ace's eyes faded back to their normal violet-with-shimmer. "You forgot 'eliminate if necessary.'"

"I didn't forget." Mai picked up her gear bag. "I just don't think it means what they think it means."

They had six hours before the deployment window closed. Mai planned to use every one of them.

The briefing packet sat on her desk, thin and inadequate. Somewhere in New Mexico, a woman was raising the dead and asking questions the Foundation had decided weren't worth answering five years ago.

Mai wasn't sure yet whether she was going to help her or stop her.

But she was sure, with the bone-deep certainty that came from years of working with Ace and Shammy, that the answer wasn't going to be simple.

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