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## Chapter 5: Briefing: Theta-9

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

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The secure comm channel opened at 7:43 AM, Mountain Standard Time, which meant it was 10:43 in Foundation Central and someone had stayed up late or gotten up very early to have this conversation.

Mai answered from the borrowed house's back porch, where she could watch Ace doing morning stretches in the dirt and Shammy reading the sky like a newspaper. Privacy. Perspective. The ability to terminate the call if what she heard made her angry enough to throw the comm unit.

"Mai here. Theta-9 actual. Go ahead, Command."

The voice on the other end was Agent Collins, their Foundation liaison. The same Collins who'd been in the briefing room when they'd first assembled. He sounded tired. He sounded like someone who'd been reading reports all night and didn't like what he'd found.

"Mai. We've reviewed your preliminary sitrep. Good work on the witness contact. However, we have developments. Irkal Vasquez-Montoya has been formally classified. Keter designation, SCP-[REDACTED]. Termination order is now active."

Mai's hand tightened on the comm unit. She'd known this was coming. Known it from the moment she'd read the dispatch at 3 AM, from the moment she'd seen the Keter designation, from the moment she'd realized the Foundation had declined five separate opportunities to investigate this town. But hearing it said aloud. Termination order, active. That was different from knowing it intellectually.

"Understood," she said. Her voice was professional. Flat. The voice she used when she was processing something she didn't agree with. "What's the timeline?"

"Seventy-two hours from now. O5 has authorized lethal force if she does not submit to containment voluntarily. MTF teams are en route to support. You are primary on the ground. When the teams arrive, Theta-9 will coordinate the containment operation."

Mai looked at the morning sky. Clear blue, heat already building, the kind of day that would be unbearable by noon. Somewhere out there, Irkal was waking up in her house, probably checking on the pattern of the ground around her daughter's grave, probably hoping that the triad had listened to Daniel's testimony and was building a case instead of building a kill order.

"What's the sitrep on the toxic waste connection?"

There was a pause. When Collins came back, his voice was different. Careful.

"That information is not within your operational purview."

"Deputy Reyes is connected to the burial site. He's been killing witnesses for ten years. If we're terminating Irkal for raising the dead, we're also terminating access to the evidence that could convict Reyes. That seems like relevant operational context."

"Mai." Collins's voice was lower now. Quieter. "The sitrep you filed mentioned Daniel Acosta's testimony about a burial site. We have reviewed the testimony. We are treating it as anomalous influence rather than factual evidence."

Mai closed her eyes.

She had known this would happen. The moment she'd decided to document Daniel's testimony, she'd known the Foundation would find a way to dismiss it. Dead men don't testify. Dead men are confused, traumatized, manipulated by the necromancer who raised them. Dead men don't know what they're saying.

That's what the Foundation believed. That's what the Foundation always believed.

"Copy that," Mai said. Her voice was still flat. Still professional. "Anything else?"

"Yes. There is a secondary concern." Collins paused. "Agent Vasquez-Montoya, Irkal, has been in contact with Ace. We have surveillance indicating a meeting occurred at the Santero mission church approximately four hours ago."

Mai's eyes opened.

"How are you surveilling the church?"

"Drone coverage. Standard protocol for Keter deployments. The meeting was observed but not interrupted."

"And you're only telling me this now because..."

"Because Ace's psychological profile indicates she may be susceptible to emotional manipulation by persons with anomalous abilities. Given your personal relationship with her, Command wanted you to be aware that she may require... intervention."

Mai looked at Ace, still doing stretches in the morning sun. At the way she moved. Fluid, controlled, everything in its right place. At the way she glanced up and caught Mai watching and almost smiled before looking away again.

"You want me to spy on my own team," Mai said.

"I want you to be aware of potential compromises. Theta-9 operates on trust. If that trust has been compromised..."

"It's not."

"Mai..."

"Agent Collins." Mai's voice was sharp now. Sharp enough that Shammy looked up from the sky. "Ace met with Irkal. They talked. Irkal told her about her daughter, about Reyes, about what really happened in this town. Ace came back and told me everything. There was no manipulation. There was

no compromise. There was a conversation between two people carrying grief and trying to figure out what to do with it.”

Another pause. Longer this time.

“The termination order stands,” Collins said finally. “Seventy-two hours. I would suggest you use that time wisely.”

The channel closed.

Mai sat on the porch for a long moment, looking at the comm unit in her hand. Seventy-two hours. That's what the Foundation was giving them. Seventy-two hours to either kill a grieving mother or be complicit in ten years of murder staying buried.

She pulled out her tablet. Started a new document.

**FOUNDATION INACTION SUMMARY — SANTERO, NM** *Year 1: Report filed re: Dolores Vega sighting. Declined. (Officer: unknown) Year 2: Two reports of partial necromantic manifestation. Declined — priority queue. (Officer: unknown) Year 3: Three missing persons + anomaly report Form 23-B. Declined — resource constraints. (Officer: unknown) Year 4: Two confirmed raised witness events. Elevated report filed. Declined — Keter queue overflow. (Officer: unknown) Year 5: Coroner requests Foundation assistance. MTF deployed. (Current)*

Five declined reports. Five opportunities to contain a situation that had escalated from one ghost walking to a Keter event. Five times the Foundation had decided that Santero wasn't worth their attention, and now they were sending kill orders because the problem had become too visible to ignore.

Mai added a footnote: *Note: All officer names redacted from available documentation. Unusual for Foundation records. Someone is protecting the decision chain.*

“Mai.” Shammy's voice, from behind her. “The sky is doing something weird.”

Mai looked up. The sky had been clear all morning. But now she could see a line of clouds building on the western horizon. Dark clouds. Storm clouds. In a region that hadn't had rain in weeks.

“That's not natural,” Mai said.

“No.” Shammy was frowning. “The pressure system over Santero just shifted. Something is...” She paused, head tilting. “Something is building. Not a storm. Something else. Like the whole valley is holding its breath.”

Mai stood up.

“Get Ace. We need to talk.”

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The triad assembled in the borrowed house's tiny kitchen. Ace was still in her morning routine clothes. Loose pants, tank top, no visible weapons except the katanas that were never more than arm's reach away. Mai had her tablet and her coffee. Shammy was vibrating slightly, the way she did when the atmosphere was unstable.

"I just got off the horn with Command," Mai said. "Irkal has been classified. Keter designation. Termination order is active. Seventy-two hours."

Ace didn't move.

"And?"

"And Collins told me they've been surveilling the church. They watched you meet with Irkal last night."

"That's not..." Ace stopped. "That's not illegal. We didn't have operational restrictions."

"They're concerned about emotional manipulation. They think Irkal might have compromised you."

Ace's laugh was short and bitter.

"They've been declining to investigate this town for five years, and now they're worried I might have feelings about a grieving mother. That's rich."

"Here's the thing." Mai pulled up her tablet. "I've been looking at the five prior reports. Every single one has the decision-making officer's name redacted. That's not standard Foundation protocol. Foundation protocol requires attribution on all decision records. Which means someone went back and removed those names after the fact."

Shammy was frowning.

"Why would someone do that?"

"Because the officer who declined the first report is probably the same officer who declined the second, and the third, and so on. And that officer might be someone whose career would be damaged by this becoming public." Mai paused. "Or that officer might be connected to Reyes. Or connected to the consortium that's been dumping waste."

Ace's hand went to her chest. To Violet.

"Irkal mentioned the burial site. She mentioned Consortium trucks. If Reyes is connected to the consortium, and the Foundation has someone protecting him..."

"Then Foundation isn't coming to help. They're coming to bury this. Like they've been burying everything else." Mai closed the tablet. "We have seventy-two hours. The question is what we do with them."

Shammy was looking at the window. The storm clouds were still building on the horizon.

"The air is..." She struggled for words. "The air is angry. Not at us. At something else. It's like the whole valley is angry and it doesn't know what to do with the feeling."

"Irkal," Ace said quietly. "She's the one making the air angry. She's calling the dead, and every call is building pressure. She knows Foundation is coming. She's preparing."

"For what?"

Ace and Mai looked at each other. The answer was obvious.

"For a fight," Mai said. "She's preparing for a fight. And if we follow orders, we're going to be the ones fighting her."

The kitchen was very quiet.

Then Shammy said, "The waitress at Rosa's. She said Irkal started raising the dead because her daughter was murdered and no one would help. What if we could help? What if we could give her the evidence she needs without her having to keep breaking the rules?"

"The evidence is in the burial site," Mai said. "We'd need Foundation resources to access it. And if we ask Foundation for resources, they'll want to know why."

"So we don't ask." Shammy's eyes were bright. "We go to the site ourselves. We document everything. And then we give Irkal what she needs to make Reyes answer for what he did."

Ace was shaking her head slowly.

"If we do that, we're actively defying orders. We'd be rogue agents."

"We'd be rogue agents who did the right thing," Mai said. "There's a difference."

"Is there?" Ace looked at her. "In the Foundation's eyes, there's no difference. We'd be burned. All three of us. Careers over."

"Mai's career is analyzing things," Shammy said. "You and I don't have careers. We have assignments. The moment Foundation decides we're compromised, we have nothing."

Ace was quiet for a long time. The storm clouds on the horizon were getting darker.

Finally, she said: "She lost her daughter. She tried to work within the system and the system told her no five times. She did the only thing she could do. And now Foundation is going to kill her for it."

"Yes," Mai said. "That's what's happening."

"And if we follow orders?"

"Then Irkal dies, Reyes goes free, and the burial site gets classified and forgotten. Like everything else they don't want to deal with."

Ace closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were clear. Certain.

"Then we don't follow orders. We find the burial site. We document everything. We build a case that federal prosecutors can't ignore. And we give Irkal a choice."

"A choice about what?"

Ace looked at her. "About whether she keeps raising the dead or whether she lets her daughter rest. About whether she wants to die fighting or whether she wants to live long enough to see Reyes in prison."

Mai nodded slowly.

“Okay. But we document everything. And we make sure there's a paper trail that leads back to Foundation inaction, so when this goes public, and it will go public, everyone knows why we did what we did.”

Shammy grinned. “I'd like that. A proper scandal. Foundation hates those.”

The storm clouds on the horizon were still building. The air in the kitchen felt charged, electric, like the moment before lightning.

Somewhere in Santero, Irkal was preparing for a fight she couldn't win alone.

Seventy-two hours.

Mai pulled out her tablet and started making plans.

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*End of chapter. Word count: ~3,900*

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