

Chapter 10: The Reservation

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

The air changed the moment we crossed the reservation boundary.

I'd felt sovereign territory before. There were places in the Southwest where the land itself had been designated as something other than American, and my body always registered the shift like stepping from one room into another. Different pressure. Different humidity. Different rules.

But this was different.

"Oh," I said, slowing down. "Oh, this is"

"What?" Ace was ahead of me, katanas drawn, moving through the desert like the rocks and sand were obstacles she simply refused to acknowledge. Mai was right behind her, tablet in one hand, disruptor in the other.

"The air tastes different here." I tried to explain it. Weather was my language, and I was trying to translate something that didn't have a direct equivalent. "Not bad-different. Sacred-different. Like someone has been praying here for so long that the prayers became part of the atmosphere."

"Or the ancestors," a voice said from behind a rock formation.

I spun. Ace's blades were up before I could blink.

And then I saw who had spoken, and I understood.

An elder. Pueblo. Old, weathered, her hair white and her eyes sharp. She was flanked by two younger men. Her grandsons, probably, based on the family resemblance. They were carrying rifles, and they were not happy to see us.

"We know who you are," the elder said. "Foundation. The woman who raised our dead sent word you might come. We told her we would not allow it."

Mai stepped forward carefully. "We're not here to cause trouble. We're here to protect a witness. Tala. She has testimony about what Reyes did to"

"We know what Reyes did." The elder's voice was flat. Hard. "We have always known. We also know that the woman who raises the dead is burning herself out, and when she dies, whatever she built will collapse. We do not want pieces of that collapse on our land."

"The storm" I started.

"The storm is already on our land." The elder looked at me. Really looked, in a way that made me feel

like she was seeing more than my body. "You are like her. The storm woman. You carry something that does not belong in human form."

"I'm human," I said.

"You are mostly human." The elder's expression shifted slightly. Something like respect entered her voice. "But there is something else in you. Something that came from the spaces between pressure systems. Something that should not exist."

I wanted to make a joke about it. I usually did when people said things like that to me. But the way she said it, like she was reading my weather report and finding a front I didn't know about, the joke died somewhere between my brain and my mouth.

Ace had not lowered her blades. "We need to talk to Tala. She has information that"

"Tala is under our protection. She came to us seven months ago, running from the same men who killed the girl. We took her in because we owed a debt to her grandmother. We do not give her to Foundation agents, no matter what story they tell."

Mai's voice was careful. Calm. The voice she used when she was trying not to make things worse. "We understand. We respect your sovereignty. But Reyes is attacking tonight. He has private security, six vehicles, and he is heading for the burial site. If he destroys that site"

"He will destroy evidence of crimes against us and against the earth." The elder nodded. "We know. We have been watching him for years. We cannot stop him. We are a sovereign people, not an army. But we can protect our own."

"Then let us help." I stepped forward. "I know what Reyes is carrying. I can feel it. He has a device. Something that disrupts atmospheric patterns. It was used against me once."

The elder looked at me for a long moment.

Then she said something in a language I didn't understand, and one of her grandsons lowered his rifle.

"Tala will speak to you," she said. "But only to the storm woman. Only to the one who carries something that should not exist." She looked at me. "You understand what it is to be caught between worlds. To be something that should not be but is. That is why she will talk to you."

Lucky me. The universe's least comfortable club, and I was the bouncer.

Tala was younger than I'd expected. Mid-twenties, maybe. She was sitting in a traditional adobe room with a wood stove and walls that had been painted with protective symbols. She looked tired. She looked like someone who had been running for a long time and had finally stopped.

"The storm woman," she said when I entered. "They told me about you. They said you are like me."

"Like me?"

"Caught between." She gestured at the air. "I can feel the weather in my bones. I know when storms

are coming before they form. I know when someone is lying by the way the pressure changes when they speak." She smiled sadly. "In my family, we call it the old sight. In Foundation terms, it's probably a Class-C anomalous sensitivity."

"I call it being the world's worst weather forecaster," I said. "I'm always right and nobody ever believes me."

That got a small laugh out of her. Small, but real.

I sat down across from her. "Tala. I need to know what happened. The night Celeste died. Everything you remember."

Tala was quiet for a moment.

Then she began to speak.

"We were together. Celeste and I. We were fourteen. Best friends since we were five. We did everything together. School, chores, sneaking out at night to watch the stars." She paused. "We knew something was wrong with the trucks. They came through town at night, always at night, and they went somewhere east of the reservation. We decided to follow one."

"You both followed the truck."

"Yes. Celeste had a camera. Her mother's old camera, a good one. She wanted to document everything. She said if we had evidence, someone would listen." Tala laughed bitterly. "We were fourteen. We thought evidence mattered."

"What did you see?"

"Drums. Hundreds of drums, buried in holes that had been dug with heavy equipment. The trucks were dumping waste. Chemical waste, the kind that smelled like poison. I could taste it in the air, and it made me sick. But Celeste." Her voice shifted. "She was angry. She took photograph after photograph. She was going to show everyone. She was going to make them listen."

"What happened?"

Tala's face went pale. "Reyes was there. He wasn't supposed to be. The reports said he was at a conference or something, but he was there. He saw us. He." She stopped. Took a breath. "He tried to grab the camera. Celeste ran. I ran. But she was faster. She knew the terrain better. She could run faster than anyone I knew."

"But he caught her."

"He caught her." Tala's voice was barely a whisper. "I hid in the brush. I watched him. I watched what he did to her. I watched him put her in the ground." Tears were streaming down her face now. "And then he looked for me. I ran. I ran all night and all the next day and when I got back to the reservation, I told my grandmother everything."

"Your grandmother"

"She went to the tribal council. They filed reports. They tried to get the Foundation to investigate." Tala shook her head. "No one listened. The same way no one listened to Irkal. The same way no one listened to anyone who tried to tell the truth about what was happening in Santero."

"How many?" I asked quietly. "How many people did Reyes kill?"

"Seven that I know of. Probably more." Tala wiped her eyes. "There was a man who saw the burial site and tried to report it. They found his body in the river. There was a woman who worked at the county office and tried to access the disposal records. She disappeared. Celeste was the youngest." She looked at me. "She was my best friend. She was fourteen. And no one cared."

"We care." I reached across and took her hand. "Mai is documenting everything. Ace is going to stop Reyes tonight. And Irkal. Irkal is dying to give Celeste a voice. You are not alone in this."

Tala's hand tightened on mine. "Irkal is dying?"

"The raise. It costs her. She's burning out. She has hours left."

"She asked me to testify." Tala's voice was thick. "She raised one of the victims, someone who saw me with Celeste that night. She asked if I would give my testimony, to complete the picture. To give Celeste justice."

"Will you?"

Tala was quiet for a long moment. Outside, I could feel the storm building. Not my storm, but Irkal's storm, the one she had created with her grief and her determination. The one bearing down on Santero like an inevitable thing.

"I was going to say no," Tala said finally. "I was going to say I couldn't relive it. But if Irkal is dying." She looked at me. "If Irkal is willing to burn herself out for this, the least I can do is give my testimony. I'll talk to your analyst. I'll give you everything I know."

"Thank you."

"Thank Irkal." Tala stood up. "And when you stop Reyes, if you stop him, tell him something for me. Tell him my grandmother's grandmother was a great warrior. Tell him she once killed a man with her bare hands to protect her village. Tell him we are not as weak as he thinks we are."

I nodded. "I'll tell her."

When I left the adobe room, Ace and Mai were waiting outside. The grandsons had gone. The elder was standing at the edge of the reservation, looking toward Santero.

"He's moving," she said. "The man called Reyes. Six vehicles. Twenty minutes out."

Ace's blades hummed. "The burial site?"

"The burial site. Yes." The elder turned to look at her. "You cannot stop him alone. You know this."

"We have federal evidence now." Mai held up her tablet. "Photographs. Testimony from the raised witnesses. Tala's statement. If we can hold the site until dawn"

"Dawn is hours away." The elder shook her head. "Reyes has private security. Professional men with guns. And he has the device that disrupts the air." She looked at me. "The storm woman. He will use it against you."

"I know." I'd felt it before. The sterile suppression, the way my abilities could be stripped away by technology designed to tear atmospheric layers apart. "But I have something he doesn't expect."

"What?"

I smiled. It wasn't a brave smile. It was the kind of smile that came from having two people beside you who would never leave you alone.

"I have them."

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,000

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