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Chapter 14: The Last Raise

POV: Shammy **Word Count Target:** 4,500

The burial site at midnight felt nothing like it had hours earlier.

I could feel it the moment we crossed the property line. Earlier, the air had been contaminated, thick with chemical waste residue, heavy with guilt. Now it was clean. Not just physically. Something deeper. The atmospheric layers had reorganized. The pressure systems had settled. Whatever Irkal had done when she called Celeste up from the ground had changed how this place felt.

She was lying in state in the back of Dr. Bright's vehicle, wrapped in white cloth, hands folded over her chest. We'd carried her here because this was where she wanted to be. Where her daughter had died. Where justice had finally been served.

Where we were going to let her go.

"She's here," I said, stopping at the edge of the old mining shaft. "The resonance is—"

I didn't have words. It wasn't necromantic, exactly. Not the lingering grief I'd felt throughout Santero. It felt like completion. A circle closing.

Ace stood beside me, katanas on her back, eyes fixed on the spot where Irkal's body lay. She'd barely spoken since we left the borrowed house. Since Bright had made his offer. Since we'd voted and decided and committed to a future that wasn't the one we'd expected.

"The dead are gathering," Ace said quietly. "I can feel them."

"Daniel. Rosa. The others." Mai was behind us, tablet recording, voice steady despite everything. "They're coming to witness."

"Witness what?"

Ace didn't answer.

I could feel it too. The air thickening. Pressure differentials arranging themselves around the burial site like mourners at a funeral. The dead were coming. All of them. The seven people Reyes had murdered, plus Celeste, plus whoever else Irkal had called back over the years. They were coming to pay their respects.

And then Irkal opened her eyes.

It wasn't a raise. Not like what Irkal had done before. Not a calling-up, not a ritual, not a deliberate act

of necromancy. This was something else. Something that looked like waking up from a sleep you'd chosen.

She sat up slowly. Looked around at the burial site, at the three of us, at the sky full of stars.

"I did it." Her voice was clear. Strong. "I raised her. She testified."

"We know." Mai's voice was thick. "We recorded everything."

"Reyes?"

"Custody. The evidence is public. The consortium is exposed." I stepped forward. "You did it, Irkal. You gave Celeste her voice."

Irkal smiled. The smile of someone who'd finally set down a weight they'd been carrying so long they'd forgotten what it felt like to stand up straight.

"Where is she?" Irkal asked. "Celeste. Is she—"

"She's here." Ace's voice was quiet. "She's been waiting for you."

I felt it before I saw it. The atmospheric shift. Sudden pressure drop, the crackle of something that shouldn't exist, the arrival of a presence that had been trapped between worlds for seven years.

Celeste materialized at the edge of the mining shaft.

She looked different than she had during the ritual. More solid. More present. More like someone who'd made a choice about where she wanted to be.

"Mama."

Irkal made a sound that was more grief than word. She stood up, unsteady, shaking, alive in ways that shouldn't have been possible, and walked toward her daughter.

"Celeste. Baby. I—"

"You did it." Celeste's voice was clear. Strong. "You gave me justice. You gave me a voice. Now I can rest."

"I don't want you to rest." Irkal was crying. "I want you to stay. I want—"

"You can't ask me to stay." Celeste smiled. Her mother's smile. The same curves, the same warmth. "I've been dead for seven years, Mama. I've been waiting for you to let me go. I love you. I'll always love you. But it's time."

The air around us was changing. Pressure differentials shifting, rearranging, the way they always did before a major weather event. But this wasn't a storm. This was the atmosphere itself deciding to participate in a farewell.

Around the edges of the burial site, other figures were appearing. Daniel. Rosa. The other witnesses. They were coming to say goodbye too.

Ace was standing very still. I could feel Violet inside her. Not stirring, not pressing, just present. Watching. Understanding something about grief and loss and what it meant to let go.

"How does it feel?" Ace asked quietly. "The raise. When it's done."

Celeste looked at her. At the violet shimmer in her eyes. At the fragment she could probably see better than anyone.

"It feels like flying." She paused. "The moment before you jump, when you're weightless and everything is possible." Another pause. "It feels like being dead and finally knowing it's okay."

Ace nodded slowly. "I understand."

"Do you?" Celeste tilted her head. "You're carrying something that died before it was born. Something that never got to fly. How long are you going to carry it?"

Ace didn't answer.

"I think you should let it go," Celeste said gently. "Not now. Not yet. But someday." She smiled. "It would like that. It would like to finally rest too."

The figures around the burial site were growing more solid. The dead were fully present now. Not raised, not called. Just there. Bearing witness.

"Reyes is in prison," Irkal said. She was holding Celeste's hand, or trying to. Her fingers passed through the ghostly form, unable to make contact. "The consortium is exposed. The burial site will be cleaned. Seven families will get their loved ones back."

"We know." Mai's voice was steady. "The federal prosecutors called this morning. The case is airtight."

"Good." Irkal looked at each of us. "Thank you. All of you. You didn't have to help. You could have followed orders. You could have let me die alone."

"You're wrong." Ace's voice was quiet. "We had to help. Because no one helped you. Because the system failed you." She paused. "Because we know what it's like to carry guilt that never ends."

Irkal nodded.

Celeste's form began to fade at the edges. Not dissolving. Just becoming less solid. Less present. The moment was passing.

"Mama. I have to go. The dead don't stay. We can't."

"I know." Irkal was crying openly now. "I know. I just—"

"You loved me. That's all that mattered. That's all that will ever matter." Celeste looked at the sky. At the stars that were suddenly brighter than they'd been a moment ago. "I'm going to go now. I'm going to find out what's next. And when you come to join me someday, I'll be waiting."

"I don't want you to wait."

"Then don't take too long." Celeste smiled. "I want to introduce you to my grandparents. They were waiting for me. They're proud of you, Mama. For what you did. For never giving up."

The light began to gather around Celeste. Around all the figures, all the witnesses, all the dead who had been called and raised and given voice. It gathered like dawn.

And then it broke.

Dawn came early.

I felt it happen. The atmospheric layers reorganizing around the burial site as the dead finally departed. The pressure systems settling into something almost peaceful. The grief that had saturated this valley for years beginning, slowly, to dissipate.

Irkal was kneeling in the dirt where Celeste had been. She wasn't crying anymore. She looked empty. Not in a bad way. In the way you feel after you've cried so much there's nothing left.

Peaceful. Quiet.

"It's done," she said.

Ace knelt beside her. "No. It's not done. It's just beginning."

Irkal looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"The trial. The prosecution. Making sure Reyes stays in prison. Making sure the consortium pays." Ace's voice was quiet. "That's going to take years. And you're going to be there for all of it."

"I'm dying." Irkal smiled. "Or did you forget?"

"I didn't forget. But Celeste told you not to take too long. She told you she wanted to introduce you to your parents." Ace stood up. "That means you're not done. That means you have work to do first. Living work."

Mai was already on her tablet. "The permanent raise cost you. But it didn't cost everything. Your vitals are—" She checked the readings. "Abnormal. But stable. You should see a doctor. A real one. Not a Foundation one."

"How long do I have?"

"Based on these readings?" Mai was quiet for a moment. "I don't know. Months. Maybe years. The raise burned through most of your reserves, but not all of them. You're depleted. But you're not gone."

Irkal laughed. A real laugh, surprised, relieved, the laugh of someone who'd expected to die and discovered she wasn't dead yet.

"Celeste told me not to take too long. I thought she meant dying quickly." She paused. "But maybe she meant something else."

"Maybe she meant you should live," I said. "Really live. Not just survive. Because you earned it. Because you never gave up."

Irkal looked at the sky. At the stars fading as dawn approached. At the place where her daughter had been.

"I will," she said. "I'll live. For her. For all of them." She stood up slowly, brushing dirt from her black clothing. "And then someday I'll join her. And I'll tell her everything. Every day I lived. Every moment I got to have because she gave me justice."

Ace nodded. "That's all any of us can do."

The sun rose over Santero.

Somewhere in the distance, federal prosecutors were waking up to evidence that would change everything.

And in a valley that had been saturated with grief for a decade, the air finally felt clean.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,300

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

