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Chapter 16: The Storm After

POV: Shammy **Word Count Target:** 4,100

The monsoon broke over Santero three weeks early.

I felt it coming for days. The pressure systems rearranging themselves, the atmospheric layers thickening in preparation for something that felt less like weather and more like release. The elders at the Pueblo said it was impossible. Monsoon doesn't come until late June. Patterns too stable to shift that dramatically.

But Ircal's storm had been building since she'd first raised a witness, and now, with justice served, with Reyes in custody, with her daughter finally at rest, the storm was ready to break.

"It's going to rain," I said, standing on the porch, watching the sky. "A lot."

Ace was beside me, katanas cleaned and sheathed for the first time in days. She looked different. Not physically. Something in the way she held herself. Lighter.

"Should we go inside?" she asked.

"No." I smiled. "I want to feel it."

The first drops hit the desert like a promise. Then the second. Then the sky opened and the rain came down, warm and clean, washing away the dust and the grief and the months of waiting.

I stepped off the porch and into the rain.

Santero was different in the rain.

I'd felt its grief for weeks. The layered weight of unsolved murders, of missing people, of families that never got closure. I'd felt it in the air, in the pressure differentials, in the way the atmosphere held its breath. But now the rain was washing it away. Not erasing it. The memory would always be here. But releasing it.

People were coming out of their houses. Standing in the rain. Some crying. Some laughing. Some doing both, because grief and joy weren't opposites. Just different ways of being alive.

Rosa's Diner had its lights on. The waitress, whose name I'd never learned, was standing in the doorway watching the street fill with water. When she saw me, she waved.

"You're the Foundation people," she said. "The ones who brought down Reyes."

"We were never really Foundation people." I grinned. "But yes."

"Thank you." Her voice was thick. "My cousin was one of them. The ones who disappeared. We never knew what happened. We just knew they were gone."

"Irkal knows. She's been raising them. Asking questions. Now you can finally bury them properly."

The waitress nodded. Tears and rain on her face.

Inside the diner, Ace was ordering coffee. She looked uncomfortable. The diner was crowded, full of people who kept looking at her, wanting to thank her or touch her or just see the woman who'd helped Irkal give her daughter a voice. But she sat with it. Drank her coffee. Let people see her.

That was new.

The memorial was held at sundown.

Irkal had asked for something simple. No Foundation involvement, no federal presence, just the people of Santero and the families of the dead. We'd arranged it at the old mission church, the one with the blue dome, where Irkal had first raised her witnesses and where Ace had first understood what it meant to carry grief that never ended.

The church was full.

I stood at the back, between Ace and Mai, and watched Irkal walk to the front. She looked better than she had in weeks. Still thin. Still marked. But something in her eyes had changed. She looked alive. Like someone who'd finally decided to live.

"Seven years ago," Irkal said, "my daughter died. She was fourteen. Brave and kind and she wanted to be a veterinarian. She saw something she shouldn't have, and she tried to do the right thing, and someone put her in the ground because that's easier than answering questions."

The church was silent.

"I raised her." Irkal's voice was steady. "I broke every rule to bring her back, to ask her what happened, to give her a voice. And she answered. She told the truth. And now she's at rest. And the people who hurt her are in prison. And the system that failed us has been exposed."

She looked at the faces in the congregation. At the families who had lost people. At the friends who had wondered. At the strangers who had become family through shared grief.

"I can't give you back what was taken. I can't undo what happened. But I can tell you this: your loved ones spoke. They told the truth. They bore witness. And now the world knows what happened in Santero."

She stepped back.

And then Ace stepped forward.

I felt it happen. The atmospheric shift as Ace moved, the way the air changed around her as she

walked to the front of the church. She wasn't supposed to speak. She hadn't planned to. But something was happening to her.

"I was raised in a village that no longer exists," Ace said. Her voice was quiet, but it carried. "I lost everyone I knew in a single night. And I've spent years carrying that guilt. Carrying a fragment of something that died before it was born. Carrying grief that never ends."

The church was silent.

"Irkal showed me what that grief could become. Not destruction. Not violence. Not the thing that Violet sometimes wants it to be." She touched her chest, the place where Violet lived. "It can become justice. It can become voice. It can become the courage to stand up and say: this is wrong, and I will not be silent."

She looked at Irkal.

"Thank you. For showing me that the dead don't have to stay dead. That grief doesn't have to be a weight. That we can choose what we carry."

Ace stepped back.

And then Irkal did something I'd never seen her do before.

She hugged Ace.

Brief. Just a moment. Two people who'd found something in each other they hadn't known they were looking for. But in that moment, I felt the atmospheric pressure in the church shift. Something settled. The last piece of something unresolved falling into place.

The dead had spoken.

The living had listened.

And now the grief could rest.

After the service, after the prayers and the tears and the quiet conversations, Ace and I stood on the church steps and watched the stars come out.

The rain had stopped. The sky was clear, clearer than I'd ever seen it in New Mexico, without the haze of dust and desert heat. The stars spread overhead like the universe was exhaling.

"I'm going to miss this place," I said.

"Why?" Ace was looking at the sky too. "It's a dying town. Full of grief. Hot and dusty and nothing works right."

"It's full of people who survived." I smiled. "That's worth something."

Ace was quiet for a moment. Then: "Celeste told me to let Violet go. Someday. When I'm ready."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I didn't know what to say." She looked at me. "She's been with me for so long. She's part of me. I don't know who I am without her."

"You're Ace." I put my hand on her shoulder. "You're the blade and the shadow and the depth vector. The person who catches me when I fall. The person Mai loves. Violet is part of you, but she's not all of you. Someday, when you're ready, you'll know the difference."

Ace nodded slowly.

"Someday," she said. "Not yet. But someday."

Mai appeared on the steps behind us. "The car's packed. Bright's sent a helicopter, lands in thirty minutes. We should get to the pickup point."

Ace and I followed her. Down the steps, through the quiet streets of Santero, to the car that would take us to a helicopter that would take us to whatever came next.

We didn't look back.

Some doors, once closed, stayed closed.

But some doors, the important ones, stayed open.

And Irkal's gate, the one she'd built for her daughter and for everyone Reyes had hurt, would stay open forever.

End of chapter. Word count: ~3,700

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