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Chapter 18: Irkal's Gate

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

I went back to the burial site alone.

Not because Mai and Shammy didn't want to come. They would have come anywhere if I'd asked. But this was something I needed to do by myself. Something I needed to say that I couldn't say in front of anyone else.

The site was different now. The chain-link fence was gone, replaced by a proper memorial fence with signs explaining what had happened here. The ground had been tested, documented, the toxic waste removed for proper disposal. In a few months there would be a marker. A proper one, with the names of everyone who'd been buried here.

But for now, just dirt and sky and the memory of what had happened.

I stood where Irkal had stood. I felt what Irkal had felt.

And I tried to understand.

Violet was quiet inside me.

She'd been quieter since Santero. Not dormant, never dormant, but quieter. Less pressing. Like something had settled and decided to wait. I didn't know if that was because of Irkal, or because of what Celeste had said before she faded, or just because I'd finally started to accept the weight I was carrying.

She was a fragment of something that had died before it was born. A grief that never had a body. She'd been riding my guilt since before I could remember, growing with it, changing with it, becoming part of me in ways I was still discovering.

I didn't know if I could let her go. I didn't know if I wanted to.

But I knew, finally, that I didn't have to be afraid of her anymore.

The sky was just starting to lighten when Mai and Shammy found me.

They didn't say anything. Just sat down on either side of me, close enough that I could feel their presence, far enough that I could breathe. The three of us. The triad. The three vectors that somehow held each other up.

"She built a gate," I said. Not to them. Not to anyone. Just out loud, to see how the words felt.

"What do you mean?" Mai's voice was soft.

"Irkal. She built a gate. For Celeste. For everyone Reyes hurt. She opened it and walked through and didn't look back because she knew what was on the other side." I looked at the sky. "I think I've been building a gate too. For a long time. I just didn't know it."

"The village," Shammy said quietly. "The people you lost."

"Yeah." I touched my chest. "Violet came from that. She grew from the grief. She became something because I couldn't let it go." I paused. "But maybe I don't have to carry all of it. Maybe I can set some of it down."

"You don't have to do anything," Mai said. "Not until you're ready."

"I know." I smiled despite myself. "That's the thing. I'm starting to believe it."

The sun broke over the horizon. Golden. Warm. The particular color of New Mexico dawn that I'd never seen anywhere else. The desert stretched out in front of us, red and gold and infinite, and somewhere out there, Santero was waking up.

"So what now?" Shammy asked.

"Now?" I stood up. Reached down for Mai's hand. Pulled her up. Shammy came with us, because she always did. "Now we go home. We take the cases that need us. We help Irkal with whatever comes next. And we keep building gates."

"For who?"

"For everyone who needs them." I looked at my team. My triad. My family. The two people who'd followed me into rogue status and stayed even when it cost them everything. "That's what we do. That's who we are. We build gates for people who can't build them themselves."

My katanas were on my back. Mai's tablet was in her bag. Shammy's hair was sparking faintly in the morning light. Three anomalies, three vectors, three people who had chosen each other over the system that had tried to break us.

And we were going to be okay.

The car ride back to Santero was quiet.

Not uncomfortable. The kind of quiet that happened when you didn't need to fill the space with words. Shammy was reading the sky through the sunroof. Mai was working on her tablet, probably already drafting the first report for whatever case Bright had lined up. I watched the desert scroll past.

The town of Santero appeared on the horizon. Smaller than I remembered. Quieter. The kind of place people drove through without noticing. The kind of place that existed in the margins of maps and the memories of people who'd grown up there and left.

It was also the kind of place where the dead walked and the living fought back and a grieving mother had built a gate to the other side just to give her daughter a voice.

We pulled into the parking lot of Rosa's Diner. The waitress was there. She'd waved to us the last time we were in town, before everything had changed. She waved again now. The same smile. The same tired eyes.

The bell rang when we went in. The coffee was waiting. The pie was fresh.

Some things didn't change.

Some things were worth keeping.

The door of the diner opened. Irkal came in.

She looked better than I'd ever seen her. Still thin, still marked by everything she'd been through, but something in her face had changed. She looked alive. Like someone who'd decided to live.

"Ace." She sat down across from us. "Mai. Shammy. I wasn't sure you'd come back."

"Where else would we go?"

Irkal smiled. Her real smile, the one that crinkled the corners of her eyes, the one that looked like her daughter's. "I have something to show you. After breakfast. Something I've been working on."

"What is it?"

"A gate." She looked out the window at the sky. "Not like the one I built for Celeste. Something else. Something for the people who come after."

"What people?"

"The ones like us." Irkal met my eyes. "The ones who carry things they don't understand. The ones who lose people and don't know how to grieve. The ones who need someone to tell them that the dead don't have to stay dead, and the living don't have to stay broken."

I thought about Violet. About the village I couldn't remember. About all the ghosts I'd been carrying since before I knew how to carry anything.

"Sounds good," I said.

Mai raised her coffee cup. Shammy raised hers. I raised mine.

To Irkal. To Celeste. To the gate that stayed open.

To the dead, and the living, and everyone in between.

END OF BOOK ONE

Epilogue:

The car left Santero at noon.

I was driving. Mai was navigating, not because she needed to but because she liked having something to do with her hands. Shammy was in the back, sleeping. Her storm-elemental physiology required more rest than most after the week we'd had.

"Next stop?" Mai asked.

"Bright's office. We sign the contracts." I shrugged. "Then wherever the work takes us."

"Sounds good."

The desert stretched out ahead. Clear sky. Open road.

And somewhere behind us, in a town called Santero, a gate stood waiting.

Not closing.

Never closing.

End of manuscript. Total word count: ~75,500

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