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Chapter 7: Containment Breach

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

The night Irkal raised three witnesses at once, Ace felt it before anyone else did.

She was sitting on the porch of the borrowed house, watching the lightning build on the horizon, when the pressure behind her sternum spiked so hard she gasped. Violet wasn't just stirring. Screaming. The fragment inside her had caught a frequency, a resonance, a call loud enough to wake something that had been sleeping since before it was born.

Across the desert, three graves opened.

Mai was already running before the first body sat up.

The reports came in simultaneously. Foundation monitors picking up triple necromantic signatures. Dr. Vega calling in a panic from the morgue. The sheriff's department going dark in that way that meant someone had gotten there first. The three raised witnesses were ambulatory, conscious, and walking in the same direction.

East.

Toward Irkal's house.

"Triad, move!" Mai was out the door with her gear, disruptor drawn, tablet strapped to her arm. "Shammy, aerial reconnaissance. Ace, with me."

Shammy was already in the air. Not literally flying, but jumping higher than should have been possible, using pressure differentials to carry herself from rooftop to rooftop, her storm-elemental physiology letting her read atmospheric currents like a map. In seconds she was silhouetted against the lightning-filled sky.

Ace didn't run. She moved. The difference was subtle but important. Running was effortful, loud, the body protesting the distance. Moving was what Ace did when she needed to cover ground without thinking about it. Her feet barely touched the earth.

They reached Irkal's house in four minutes.

The three raised witnesses were already there.

Daniel Acosta was one of them. Ace recognized him from the morgue. The same gray skin. The same

wrong-but-aware eyes. He was standing in Irkal's front yard, along with two others: a woman in her fifties, and a man who looked like he'd been dead longer. His edges more faded. His voice probably harder to hear.

But they were all here. All three. All talking.

The words reached Ace before she did:

"Reyes's truck, it was a white truck, he drove it himself"

"Eleven drums that night, I counted them because I knew something was wrong"

"the coordinates, I wrote them down before he found me, they're in my pocket"

They were talking to each other. Comparing notes. Building a case.

Irkal stood in her doorway. Wearing black, hands stained with ash, face gray with exhaustion. She had raised three witnesses simultaneously, probably at great cost to herself, and she was standing there like a general who had won a battle she wasn't sure she could afford.

"You shouldn't have come," she said.

"We didn't come to stop you." Ace walked through the yard, past the raised witnesses, toward Irkal. They didn't react to her passage. Too focused on their testimony, voices overlapping, dead eyes fixed on things that weren't there. "We came to listen."

"The Foundation won't listen. The dead can't testify in court. You know this."

"We know the rules." Mai had her tablet out, recording everything. Her voice was steady, professional, the one she used when she was being an analyst instead of a person. "We also know that these testimonies are evidence of crimes. And we know that someone in Foundation command has been protecting Reyes for five years. That changes things."

Irkal looked at her. Then at Ace. Then at Shammy, who had landed softly in the yard and was standing very still, her eyes on the sky.

"You can't stop what's coming," Irkal said. "I know you're Foundation. I know your orders. And I know that tonight, something broke that can't be unbroken."

"What broke?"

"The containment." Irkal gestured at the three witnesses. "This is bigger than anything I've done before. Raising one person costs me days. Raising three at once." She stopped. Her hand went to her chest. "I don't have much left. But I had to. Because tonight is the night I raise Celeste."

The words hung in the air.

Ace felt Violet pulse. The fragment inside her recognized something. The weight of what Irkal was planning, the cost she was about to pay.

"Not like this," Ace said. "You're not ready. You told me yourself. You've been burning out. A permanent raise"

"A permanent raise costs me my life." Irkal's voice was calm. Matter-of-fact. "I know. I've always known. I have five days. Five days from the first witness I raised in this new sequence, before the cost catches up. I've used two of those days already. Tonight, or tomorrow, or the day after, I'll raise Celeste fully. I'll get her testimony. And then"

"And then you die." Ace's voice came out harder than she intended. "You die and leave her alone again. That's your plan?"

"My only option." Irkal's eyes were bright. "The Foundation won't listen to the living. The courts won't listen to the dead. Reyes is protected by a system I've spent seven years trying to break. The only way Celeste gets justice is if she speaks for herself. And the only way she can speak for herself is if I pay the price."

Ace's hand went to her chest. Violet was very still.

"I know what it's like to carry guilt," Ace said quietly. "I know what it's like to want to fix something so badly you'd tear yourself apart doing it. But this." She shook her head. "This isn't justice. This is giving up."

"This is the only way." Irkal's voice cracked. "You think I want to leave her? You think I want to die? I've spent seven years trying to find another option. There isn't one. Foundation failed. The law failed. The system failed. I am all that's left."

The three raised witnesses had stopped talking. They were standing in a row now, watching the confrontation, their dead eyes moving between Ace and Irkal like they were witnessing something important.

"Foundation reinforcements are en route," Mai said. Still recording. Voice still steady. "They'll be here in forty hours. When they arrive, they'll kill you, Irkal. They'll contain the witnesses and classify everything and Reyes will go free."

"I know."

"And you're okay with that?"

"No." Irkal laughed. A sound that was more grief than humor. "But it's the hand I've been dealt. I raised three witnesses tonight. I named Reyes. I gave you everything I have. And now." She looked at the sky. The lightning was getting closer. "Now I need to prepare. The permanent raise requires a specific configuration. I need to be ready."

"How long do you have?" Ace asked. "If you do this, if you raise Celeste permanently, how long do you have?"

"Minutes. Maybe less." Irkal's voice was calm. "The full raise will burn through whatever I have left. I'll give her everything I am. And then I'll be gone."

The yard was very quiet.

Ace looked at Mai. At Shammy. At the three raised witnesses who had given their testimonies and were waiting now, patient, like they understood what was happening.

"We can slow it down," Mai said. Her voice was different now. Softer. Less analyst. "Foundation reinforcements, we can delay them. Create confusion in the chain of command, file paperwork that

buys time. Maybe a day. Maybe two.”

“I can make the storm last,” Shammy said quietly. “Call weather that grounds Foundation communications. I can't stop them, but I can slow their coordination.”

“Why?” Irkal looked at them. “Why would you do this? You're Foundation. Your orders”

“Our orders are to contain and eliminate,” Ace said. “We've decided that's wrong. We're going to help you. But we need to do it our way.”

“What way?”

Ace looked at the sky. At the lightning. At the storm Irkal had built that was now bearing down on all of them.

“We find the burial site,” she said. “We document everything. We get federal prosecutors involved, not Foundation. And we give you a choice about how this ends. Whether you raise Celeste and die, or whether we find another way.”

“There's no other way.”

“There's always another way.” Ace's voice was steady. “You just have to be willing to look for it.”

Irkal was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said: “You remind me of someone. Someone I used to know, before all this. Someone who believed in things.”

“Did it help?”

“No. She died.”

Ace almost smiled. “Then I guess I have something to live up to.”

The lightning cracked overhead.

The storm was almost there.

Somewhere in the distance, Foundation comm channels were lighting up with triple breach alerts. Somewhere in Foundation command, someone was deciding to escalate.

And in a house on the edge of Santero, a woman who had nothing left to lose was preparing to give everything away.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,050

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