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Chapter 9: The Fifth Night

POV: Ace **Word Count Target:** 4,400

The ride to Irkal's house took eleven minutes. Ace counted every second.

Mai was driving. Shammy was in the back, her face pressed to the window, reading the atmospheric chaos that was building toward something none of them could name. The photographs were in Mai's backpack, sealed in evidence bags, ready for federal submission if they survived the next few hours.

Ace sat in the passenger seat with her katanas across her lap, feeling Violet's presence like a second heartbeat. The fragment was active. Not fully in control, but alert. Aware. Tracking the same frequencies Irkal had been broadcasting since the first witness raised its hand in the morgue.

"She's dying," Ace said. The words came out before she'd decided to speak them.

"I know." Mai's voice was steady. "The readings I've been getting, her vital signs are deteriorating. Ritual burnout isn't something you recover from. She's been burning herself down for seven years."

"How long?"

"Days. Maybe hours." Mai glanced at her. "The three-witness raise accelerated everything. She doesn't have five days. She has one. Maybe less."

The car was quiet except for the engine and the wind.

Ace thought about Irkal in her doorway. Gray and trembling, preparing to die for a voice she couldn't give her daughter any other way. She thought about the photograph on the wall at Rosa's Diner. Seven faces, one of them a fourteen-year-old girl who'd tried to do the right thing and been murdered for it. She thought about the fragment inside her own chest. The piece of something that had died before it was born and had been riding her guilt ever since.

She thought about what it would mean to trade your life for someone else's voice.

"She should have more time," Ace said finally. "She should have"

"She should have had help." Mai's voice was flat. Controlled. The voice she used when she was angriest. "She should have had Foundation investigate five years ago. She should have had local law enforcement take her seriously. She should have had the system work the way it's supposed to work. Instead she got nothing, and she did what anyone would do when the system fails. She built her own."

"Her own system killed her."

"Her own system gave her daughter a voice." Mai's hands tightened on the wheel. "I'd rather die giving my daughter justice than live knowing I didn't try. Wouldn't you?"

Ace didn't answer.

But she felt the words land somewhere inside her. In the place where Violet lived. In the place where the guilt had been accumulating for years.

Yeah. She would. She absolutely would.

Irkal's house was quiet when they arrived. The candles that had been burning at the windows were out. The wards that had been humming were silent. The woman who met them at the door was not the woman Ace had met at the church.

This Irkal was diminished. Gray-faced. Moving like someone who had forgotten how to use their body. Her eyes were too bright. Fever-bright, the eyes of someone whose systems were shutting down one by one.

"You came back," she said. "I wasn't sure you would."

"We came back." Ace stepped inside. The air in the house felt different. Thick. Charged. Heavy with the weight of what was about to happen. "We found the photographs. We have everything we need to destroy Reyes."

"But you're too late." Irkal smiled. It was a terrible smile. Grief and resignation mixed together. "I'm out of time. The five days you mentioned? Collapsed. When I raised the three witnesses, I burned through reserves I didn't know I had. I'm dying, Agent Ace. I'm dying and there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Ace's hand went to her chest. Violet was pulsing now. Not screaming, but present. Attentive. Like the fragment recognized something in Irkal that it recognized in itself.

"How long?"

"Tonight. Before midnight." Irkal walked to her kitchen table and sat down heavily. "I tried to wait. I tried to give you more time. But the body doesn't negotiate. The body decides, and the body has decided."

Mai was already pulling out her equipment. "Let me check. My instruments might"

"Your instruments will tell you what I already know." Irkal's voice was calm. Tired. "I'm a curandera. I've been reading bodies my whole life. I know what dying feels like. I've guided others through it. Now I'm going through it myself."

Shammy had been standing in the doorway, very still. Now she stepped forward. "The storm is here. I can feel it outside. The pressure you built, all the grief and anger, it's been gathering for days and it's finally ready to break."

"That's not a storm." Irkal looked at her. "That's Celeste. When I go, she'll come fully. The permanent raise. I won't be the one performing it. She will. My daughter is going to raise herself, and she's going to tell everyone what happened, and then." Irkal paused. "Then I don't know. Maybe she'll rest. Maybe she'll stay. Maybe she'll tear the world apart looking for Reyes. That's up to her."

Ace sat down across from Ircal. The table between them was old wood, scarred with use, probably passed down through generations. On the table was a photograph of Celeste. Young, smiling, alive.

"She's beautiful," Ace said.

"She was." Ircal's hand brushed the photograph. "She wanted to be a veterinarian. She loved animals. Had three dogs and a cat and she was convinced she was going to save every stray in New Mexico." She laughed softly. "She would have, too. She had that kind of heart."

"What happened to her?"

"She found out where the trucks were going at night. She followed one. She saw the drums being buried. She took pictures because she thought." Ircal's voice cracked. "She thought if she had evidence, someone would listen. Someone would care. She was fourteen. She didn't understand that some people have power and some people don't, and having evidence doesn't matter if no one believes you."

"Reyes found out she was following him."

"Reyes found out and he." Ircal stopped. Took a breath. "He put her in the ground like she was nothing. Like she was trash. And then he went home and slept well and woke up the next morning and was a deputy sheriff, because in Santero, Reyes was untouchable."

Ace's hand went to her chest again. Violet was very active now. Pressing against her ribs, humming at a frequency that made her teeth ache. The fragment recognized something.

The fragment knew.

"I lost my village," Ace said. The words came out before she'd decided to speak them. "I was young. I don't remember most of it. But I remember the fire. I remember running. I remember feeling responsible. Like if I'd been faster, or stronger, or better, I could have saved them."

Ircal was watching her.

"I carried that guilt for years," Ace continued. "And then Foundation found me, and they told me I was special, and they put this." She touched her chest. ".inside me. A fragment of something that had been neverborn. Something that died before it ever lived. And it rode my guilt like a wave. It grew with it. It became part of me."

"Violet," Ircal said quietly.

"You know about her?"

"I know what she is." Ircal's eyes were clear. "I've seen others like her. People who carry pieces of things that were never alive. The Foundation collects them. Uses them. They're called Neverborn fragments, and they're." She paused. "They're a form of grief. A grief that never had a body to belong to."

Ace nodded slowly. "She's been with me for years. She takes over when the guilt gets too heavy. When I feel responsible for something I can't control. She." Ace's voice was rough. "She protects me. But she's not very good at knowing when protection becomes destruction."

"No. They never are." Ircal reached across the table and put her hand over Ace's. Her hand was cold.

Trembling. "You and I are the same, in the end. We both carry things that died before they should have. We both have fragments that grew out of grief. The only difference is that I can let mine go, and you can't."

"Can't I?" Ace looked at her. "What if there was a way to." She stopped. The thought was half-formed, dangerous, the kind of thought that could break something that didn't need to be broken. "What if there was a way to give Violet rest? To let her go?"

"I don't know." Irkal's hand tightened. "I've never encountered a Neverborn fragment that wanted to leave its host. They're not passengers. They're not parasites. They're something in between. A grief that found a home and doesn't want to leave. Violet isn't hurting you, Ace. She's keeping you company. She's the only thing in your head that understands what it's like to carry guilt that never ends."

Ace wanted to pull her hand away.

She didn't.

"When you raise Celeste tonight," she said, "what happens to you?"

"I go where she goes. Or I don't. I don't know." Irkal smiled. The same terrible, resigned smile. "I've spent seven years trying to figure out what happens after death. Talking to the dead, calling them back, asking them what's on the other side. They never agree on anything. Some of them say there's nothing. Some say there's everything. Some say." She paused. "Some say it depends on whether you're ready."

"Are you ready?"

Irkal was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said: "I don't know. I know I'm tired. I know I've been fighting for so long that I don't remember what it felt like before I started. I know." Her voice cracked. "I know I just wanted my daughter back. Even for a minute. Even for a moment. Even if it was going to cost me everything."

Ace stood up. Walked to the window. Outside, the sky was dark with clouds that shouldn't have been there, lightning flickering at their edges.

"She's waiting," Ace said. "Celeste. She's waiting for you."

"I know." Irkal stood up too, slowly, like her body was forgetting how to hold itself. "Are you going to stop me?"

Ace turned. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because you gave me something," Ace said. "You showed me what it looks like to carry grief so heavy you'd tear yourself apart to honor it. And I don't want to honor it. I want to live with it. I want to find a way to carry it without it destroying me." She paused. "I think Violet is part of that. I think she's been part of this whole time. And I think"

She stopped.

The door opened.

Mai came in, tablet in her hand, face pale. Behind her, Shammy, her hair sparking with static.

"Reyes is moving," Mai said. "Private security. Six vehicles. He's not running. He's attacking. The burial site. The witnesses. The Pueblo settlement. He's burning everything."

Ace's katanas were in her hands before she'd consciously reached for them. The blades hummed. Bright, eager, ready.

"How long?" she asked.

"Thirty minutes. Maybe less." Mai was already gathering her gear. "We need to move. Now."

Ace looked at Irkal. At the woman who was dying, who had minutes left, who had been preparing to give everything away. "Can you wait? Can you hold on long enough for us to stop him?"

"I can try." Irkal's voice was thin. "But not long. Minutes. Maybe an hour if I'm lucky." She smiled. "Go. Stop him. I'll be here when you get back."

Ace nodded. Turned. Walked out the door.

Behind her, Shammy and Mai followed.

And behind all of them, the storm that wasn't a storm broke over Santero, and somewhere in the dark, a woman who had nothing left prepared to give everything away.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,250

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