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Chapter 11: Blood

POV: Ace **Word Count Target:** 4,300

The burial site was exactly where Daniel had said it would be.

An old mining shaft, abandoned decades ago, now surrounded by a chain-link fence and a sign that read HAZARDOUS MATERIALS, NO TRESPASSING. The sign was faded. The fence was rusted. The man standing at the entrance with a rifle was neither faded nor rusted. He looked professional. He looked like someone who had been paid to stand in the middle of nowhere and make sure no one asked questions.

There were five others like him. Mai had counted from the ridge where we were positioned, using binoculars that picked up thermal signatures. Six private security contractors. Armed. Positioned around the perimeter. And in the center of it all, a white truck that was currently being loaded with drums by men who looked like they wished they were anywhere else.

And Reyes.

I could see him. Deputy Samuel Reyes. Tall, broad-shouldered, with the kind of face that looked trustworthy in a photograph and calculating in person. He was directing the loading operation, and every few minutes he checked his phone like he was waiting for confirmation of something.

"Comms relay," Mai said quietly. "He's been in contact with someone. Probably the consortium. They're coordinating evidence destruction."

"Can you jam it?"

"I can try. But the device he has, the atmospheric disruptor, it's interfering with my equipment. If I try to jam comms, I'll probably trigger it." She looked at me. "We need to disable the device first."

"Shammy."

Shammy was crouched beside us, her hair sparking with barely contained energy. She'd been building charge since we left the reservation. Gathering atmospheric potential like a battery, preparing for something she hadn't fully explained yet.

"I can reach it," she said. "The device. It's on the east side of the site, near the main generator. If I can get close enough"

"You'll be exposed." Mai's voice was sharp. "The moment you move, they'll see you. And that device"

"I know what it does." Shammy's eyes were bright. Not afraid. Focused. "It disrupts my abilities. It tears the atmosphere apart. But it has to be pointed at me to work. If I move fast"

"Too risky." I stood up. "I'll draw their attention. Mai, comms and documentation. Shammy, wait for my signal."

"Ace." Mai started.

"That's an order."

I jumped off the ridge.

The descent was fast.

I let gravity do the work, dropping from rock to rock, katanas already drawn, the blades humming at a pitch that meant Violet was fully awake and paying attention. The security contractors saw me coming. Of course they did. I wasn't trying to be quiet. They started shouting, reaching for weapons, forming the kind of response pattern that suggested they'd trained for this.

They hadn't trained for me.

The first one went down before he could raise his rifle. Not dead. I wasn't trying to kill, I was trying to disable. But the blade caught his shoulder and he went down screaming. The second one got his weapon up but I was already past him, inside his guard, my elbow hitting his solar plexus hard enough to fold him in half.

"Contact! Contact!"

Three more converging. Reyes was backing toward the truck, phone pressed to his ear, shouting something I couldn't hear. The device operator was spinning toward me, the black box in his hands glowing with a light that made my skin crawl.

I charged.

The device fired.

The world went white. Not light. White. The absence of everything. For a moment I couldn't feel the air, couldn't feel Violet, couldn't feel anything except static and emptiness. The device had created a pocket of atmospheric sterility, a zone where the natural laws of the world had been temporarily suspended.

I kept moving anyway.

Training took over when thought couldn't. Muscle memory. Reflex. The thousands of hours I'd spent learning to fight in every condition, against every disadvantage. The device was killing my connection to Violet, but my body remembered what to do.

The operator went down.

Then the next one.

Then the next.

I was dimly aware of Shammy. She had launched herself from the ridge the moment the device fired, using the chaos as cover, her body a blur of motion and lightning. She hit the generator and the world erupted in sparks.

The device stopped working.

Violet flooded back.

Reyes was running.

He was heading for the truck, abandoning his men, abandoning the evidence, abandoning everything. I could see it in the way he moved. Fast, desperate, the gait of someone who had always known this day might come and had prepared an escape route.

I let him run for thirty feet.

Then I caught him.

It wasn't graceful. It was fast. The katanas sang through the air and I was behind him, my blade at his throat, my body pressed against his back in a hold that would have been intimate if it weren't also completely incapacitating.

"Deputy Reyes," I said. "Samuel Reyes. You're under arrest for the murder of seven people, the illegal dumping of toxic waste, and about fifteen other charges I'm sure Mai will be happy to enumerate."

His body was shaking. Not from cold. From the realization that it was over.

"You're Foundation," he said. "I called Foundation. They said they were sending a team to"

"We are the team." I pressed the blade tighter. "And we're not here to help you."

"This is illegal. You don't have jurisdiction"

"We're not Foundation." The words came out flat. True. "We're rogue agents who have decided that your crimes are more important than our careers. And we're going to make sure you answer for them."

His knees buckled. I caught him. Held him upright by the throat, which was the only way to hold someone who was collapsing while not actually supporting their weight.

"Ace." Mai's voice, from somewhere behind me. She was approaching with her disruptor drawn, tablet under her arm, her expression the kind of professional calm that meant she was furious. "Don't kill him."

"I wasn't planning to."

"You were planning to."

I didn't disagree. "But I'm not going to."

Mai stopped beside us. Looked at Reyes. Her eyes were flat, cold, the eyes of someone who had read the files and knew exactly what this man had done.

"Seven people," she said. "Including a fourteen-year-old girl."

Reyes didn't respond. His eyes were fixed on something in the middle distance. Probably the life he wasn't going to get back to. The freedom he wasn't going to have again. The comfortable certainties that had protected him for so long.

"Where are the photographs?" Mai asked. "Celeste's photographs. Where did she hide them?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

My blade pressed harder. Not enough to cut. Just enough to remind him that the blade was there.

"Irkal has them," I said. "She has all seven. She has Daniel Acosta's testimony. She has the burial records. She has everything. The only thing she doesn't have is you." I paused. "And now she does."

"Foundation will protect me. I have contacts"

"Foundation is the reason we're here." Mai's voice was flat. "Foundation declined to investigate your town five separate times. Foundation redacted the names of every officer who filed reports about you. Foundation was planning to kill Irkal and bury everything you did." She smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile. "But Foundation doesn't know we're rogue now. And when this goes public, when federal prosecutors see what we've documented, Foundation's protection is going to evaporate like it never existed."

Reyes was quiet for a long moment.

Then he said: "The girl. Irkal's daughter. She didn't suffer."

The blade trembled.

"Ace." Mai's voice was careful. "Ace, don't."

"You." My voice came out wrong. Too many words. The words were tumbling out and I couldn't stop them. "She was fourteen. She was fourteen years old and she was going to be a veterinarian and she loved animals and you put her in the ground like she was trash. You"

Violet surged.

I felt it happen. Felt the fragment inside me rise up and take control the way it always did when the guilt got too heavy. My vision went violet, my thoughts went silent, and the body I was riding lurched forward with a violence I hadn't authorized.

Reyes screamed.

And then Mai was there. Her hand on my wrist, her body pressed against mine, her voice in my ear saying my name over and over like it was a prayer or a command or both.

"Ace. Ace. ACE."

The violet receded. Slowly. Reluctantly. Like something that didn't want to let go.

I was standing over Reyes. My blade was at his throat. I was close enough to smell his fear-sweat,

close enough to see the tears in his eyes.

“She didn't suffer,” Reyes whimpered. “I made it fast. I didn't”

“I know you didn't.” My voice was steady again. Barely. “That's not the point. The point is you did it at all.”

Mai's hand was still on my wrist. She wasn't pulling me back. She was anchoring me. Grounding me. Making sure I didn't drift away again.

“He's in custody,” she said quietly. “We have him. He's ours now. And we're going to make sure he answers for what he did.”

I nodded. Slowly. The violet faded completely. Violet retreated to wherever she went when I was in control, and I was in control again, and the blade at Reyes's throat was still there but the hand holding it was steady.

“Get him up,” I said. “We have a lot of evidence to document.”

Mai did. She hauled Reyes to his feet, zip-tied his hands, marched him toward where Shammy was standing over the remaining contractors with lightning still crackling between her fingers.

I stood in the desert, in the shadow of the burial site, and breathed.

The storm was still building overhead. Irkal's storm. The one that would break tonight when she finally raised Celeste.

And somewhere in Santero, a dying woman was waiting for us to bring her justice.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,200

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