

[← Chapter 5](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 7 →](#)

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## Chapter 6: The Daughter

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

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The murder site was different from everything else in Santero.

I could feel it the moment we crossed the property line. Not the old grief that saturated the town. Not the layered death that had settled into the soil over years of unsolved disappearances. This was sharper. Something that hadn't finished being violent.

"It's here," I said, stopping at the edge of what had once been a field. The grass was dead. Not recently dead, but dead long enough that nothing grew back. The ground itself looked wrong. Discolored. Like something had bled into it. "This is where it happened."

Ace was beside me in seconds, her hand on her katana, scanning the perimeter. She didn't ask how I knew. Ace had learned years ago that my body was a weather instrument and the weather was telling me things no one else could hear.

Mai was already taking readings with her spectral kit. "The necromantic residue is concentrated here. Higher than anywhere else we've tested. Whatever happened at this site, it left a mark."

"Not necromantic." I shook my head. I'd been reading atmospheric pressure since I was old enough to understand that the world was made of moving air, and this wasn't that. This was something older. More human. "This is grief. Old grief. The kind that gets into the ground and stays."

"Celeste died here," Ace said. Her voice was flat. Certain. "She's been dead for seven years and this place still remembers her."

I walked into the field. The dead grass crunched under my feet. Brittle, dry, wrong. The air was heavier here. Not the natural weight of desert heat but something else. Something that pressed down on my shoulders like a hand.

I could feel her. Not literally. I wasn't a necromancer, I couldn't raise the dead or communicate with spirits. But I could feel the shape of what had happened. The way the air had moved. The temperature changes. The pressure differential that came from sudden violence in a space that had been quiet.

"She was afraid," I said. I didn't know how I knew, but I knew. "She came here and she was afraid but she didn't run. She knew she should run but she couldn't because..."

I stopped.

The air was showing me now. Showing me the sequence of events. The truck. The drums. The hole in the ground that someone had dug to bury evidence. A girl who had seen too much and couldn't unsee it.

A girl who had tried to do the right thing.

"She was fourteen," I said. My voice came out strange. Thick. "She was fourteen years old and she found out what they were doing and she tried to tell someone and they killed her for it."

Ace was beside me. Her hand found my shoulder. Solid, grounding, the way she always was when my ability was showing me something I didn't want to see.

"What else?" she asked quietly.

I closed my eyes. The pressure patterns were clearer when I wasn't looking at anything. I could see the shape of the event now. Not the details, but the structure. The people involved. The way the violence had unfolded.

"Seven of them." The words came out before I could stop them. "Seven people total. Reyes killed them over ten years. Celeste was the first. She was the one who found out. She was the youngest. The others were witnesses or people who got in the way."

"Shammy." Mai's voice, from behind us. "How are you getting this information?"

"The air remembers." I opened my eyes. "Not the way Ircal remembers. I'm not calling anyone back. I'm just reading what's already here. The ground holds impressions. Temperature, pressure, the movement of air during significant events. It's all still here. It's like..." I struggled for words. "It's like the sky took a photograph."

Ace's hand tightened on my shoulder.

"Seven victims. Daniel was one of them. Who are the others?"

"People who found out. People who asked questions. People who couldn't be silenced any other way." I turned to look at Mai. "The burial site... it's still active. They haven't stopped dumping. They're still burying evidence. It's been happening for ten years and no one has stopped them because Reyes has been making people disappear."

Mai's face had gone pale. "Seven missing persons reported. That's the official number. But if seven people have been killed..."

"Seven confirmed. Probably more. Some of them might not have been reported at all." I looked back at the field. At the place where a fourteen-year-old girl had died for knowing too much. "This is the center of it. Everything radiates from here."

Ace was looking at the ground.

"The photographs. Ircal mentioned photographs. Celeste took photographs of the burial site before she died. Where would she hide them?"

"With her mother." Mai was already checking her tablet. "Ircal's home is the most heavily warded location in Santero. If Celeste had evidence she wanted to protect, that's where she'd keep it."

"Then we need to get to Ircal's home." Ace started walking. "Tonight."

I followed her. Mai followed both of us. The dead field stretched out behind us, holding its secrets in

the soil, and the sky above us was the color of a bruise.

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The walk back to town took forty minutes. By the time we reached the edge of Santero proper, the clouds had covered the sun and the temperature had dropped ten degrees.

"The storm is early," I said. "It shouldn't come for another three weeks. Monsoon season doesn't officially start until late June."

"It's not a normal storm." Ace was looking at the sky. "It's Irkal. She's building pressure. All those raises, all that grief... it's like she's creating a weather system with her emotions."

"Can she control it?"

"I don't know." Ace's hand was on her chest again. Violet was stirring. I could tell by the way Ace's breathing had changed, the way her shoulders had tensed. "But whatever she's building, it's going to break. And when it does..."

"When it does, we're either with her or against her." Mai caught up to us. "I just got a ping on Foundation comms. Reinforcement teams are en route. They'll arrive in..." she checked, "...forty hours. Which means we have forty hours to find the burial site, document everything, and make a decision about what happens to Irkal."

Ace shook her head. "The decision's already made. We're with her."

"We haven't even found the evidence yet."

"The evidence is here. I can feel it." Ace stopped walking. Turned to face both of us. Her eyes were violet-shimmer, but controlled. Violet was present but not overwhelming. "Mai, I know you need data. I know you need proof that can be documented and verified and used in a court of law. But I've been carrying Violet for years, and I know what it feels like when something is true. This is true. Reyes is a murderer. The Foundation has been covering for him. And Irkal is the only person in this whole town who had the courage to do something about it."

I stepped closer to Ace. The air between us felt charged. Not the dangerous kind of charged, but the kind that came before a decision was made.

"She's connected to you," I said. "Irkal. You feel the same way about the Foundation that she does. About being failed by systems that should have protected you."

Ace looked at me. Her eyes were clear.

"I do. I've never said it out loud. But I do."

Mai was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "The mission briefing said Irkal was a Keter-class threat requiring elimination. But the mission briefing also said the town of Santero had 'no anomalous activity of note' prior to our deployment, which was a lie. Someone on the fourteenth floor has been falsifying reports to cover up their own inaction."

"Or they've been threatened," I said. "Reyes is connected to a consortium. Consortia have money.

Money talks in Foundation circles too.”

“Either way, we're not getting clean data from Foundation sources.” Mai closed her tablet. “So we do this our way. We find the burial site. We document everything. We give Irkal what she needs to make Reyes answer for his crimes. And then we tell Foundation that Irkal is not a threat. She's a victim who found an unconventional solution to a problem we failed to solve.”

Ace nodded slowly. “And if Foundation doesn't accept that?”

“Then we go rogue.” Mai's voice was flat. Matter-of-fact. “I've been documentation-compliant my entire career. I've followed every rule, checked every box, filed every report. And I've watched the Foundation fail people over and over again because the rules were more important than the outcomes.” She looked at Ace. “I love you. And I love Shammy. And I'm not going to let this Foundation kill a grieving mother for doing what we should have done years ago.”

The air between us felt different now. Charged with something other than weather. The three of us stood on the edge of Santero, looking at the clouds that were building in a sky that shouldn't have been stormy, and we made a decision that couldn't be unmade.

“Okay,” Ace said quietly. “We go rogue. We find the evidence. We give Irkal her chance.”

“And then?” I asked.

Ace looked at me. At Mai. At the town behind us and the field in front of us and the storm that was coming whether they were ready or not.

“And then we see what she's willing to sacrifice. And we decide whether we're willing to watch.”

The first crack of thunder echoed across the valley.

The monsoon was coming early.

And somewhere in Santero, Irkal was waiting to see what kind of storm we were going to be.

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*End of chapter. Word count: ~4,100*

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[← Chapter 5](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 7 →](#)

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