

CHAPTER 1

Chaos beckoned from the south. A tidal wave crashed against the rocks while rampant winds and tides roiled the white foam sea, eroding the island's remnants in the latest toll paid to the unbridled chaos of the Boundless.

Isabel crouched on the narrow pedestrian bridge above the island, touching hand to floor to steady herself. The bridge ran east to west, high above the string of barrier islands forming the southern Fringe that divided the Cardinal Realms from the encircling Boundless. Once the sea claimed the islands, the bridge would collapse, leaving them without a return path until a cartographer terraformed it anew. She pressed on, quickening her pace behind Gabriel.

They descended the bridge's arc and stepped onto rocky terrain blackened by ash and tinted orange. The heat intensified against Isabel's skin. The stench of sulfur permeated the air. Mud puddles bubbled and boiled. Methane fires exploded. A geyser shot skyward and rained down boiling spray.

"Stay to the path," Gabriel said.

They forged on.

A smooth basalt path snaked eastward through the fire spouts and rope-like pumice that lined the ground. Isabel kneeled and touched a finger to the path. It was cool to the touch.

Cartographers had terraformed the Cold Road over the objections of the East, who viewed the Fringe as little more than a barrier against the Boundless, and the road was the only way to reach the child due to breach the Shroud.

Gabriel had described a vision of a hellish landscape where fire flowed with water, sprouting lava lit the night, and a fiery orange waterfall plunged from a volcanic peak. Near its base, a flame flickered amidst a bubbling spring. A hand reached up from the spring, to be grasped by another. Gabriel's cartographer had placed the location here on the Ash Plain, so close to the Boundless it was nearly beyond the map.

"Are you sure about the vision?" Isabel had said.

"It was as clear as the day you and Ernesto found me," Gabriel said.

Such visions were rare for anyone but sages, and it bothered Isabel that Gabriel minimized what he shared of it. Breaches could be dangerous and traumatic. People like Isabel smoothed the path, able to intuit whether someone was ready, when and how it would occur, and how to help the newcomer adjust to the trauma. She had not greeted a breach in years, but her trust in the Senegalese Pathfinder was such that, when he sought her aid, she reluctantly agreed.

"You're the best there is," he had said. "I need you."

Now, their road wound around a high set of jagged rocks. Visibility decreased. Parallel to the path, a cloud of steam wafted above a bubbling river. Isabel kept as far as she could from the Boiling River.

They pressed on through the steam clouds. Fires burned along the rocky hillsides on the other side of the path. A mountain emerged ahead, its apex orange: One of the Restless Twins, a

pair of volcanoes that moved around the valley in a spontaneous terraforming that was part of life on the Fringe. The volcano spat magma into the sky and lava down its base.

“The Firefall should be on the other side of the volcano,” Gabriel said.

Isabel kneeled and touched the ground again. The Cold Road was warmer. The river’s level had dropped so low that Isabel could see through the steam and water to the rocky riverbed. Her sweat evaporated, leaving her dry as winter in the Espinhaco Mountains.

“Let’s take it slow,” she said. “It’s getting hotter.”

Gabriel slowed accordingly. They continued down the path.

Rivulets of lava trickled down to the volcano’s base. One bisected the road, melting into it a narrow crevice. They leapt across to the other side. The road circled the volcano into a narrow valley where the air thickened with sulfur.

The second volcano rose before them. High up its face, a waterfall crashed down to the Boiling River, bright orange from the seam of fire burning in the mountainside behind the falls.

“We have to climb that?” Isabel said.

“We’ve done worse,” Gabriel said.

“I’m not sure I have.”

“Remember the Blue Hole?”

Isabel smiled faintly. “That was a long time ago.”

Gabriel surveyed the area and took a deep breath. “We shouldn’t have to climb. The spring should be somewhere in this valley. We just have to find it.”

They pressed on toward the fiery waterfall, searching for the spring. Isabel coughed, the stench so strong that it enmeshed within her lungs.

“That’s it,” Gabriel said.

Water bubbled up through a hole in the ground. A flame wavered within and above the spring.

Isabel dropped to her knees. The ground scorched her legs through her pants, and she immediately rose back to a crouch, the pain searing but fading with fortunate speed.

“Careful,” Gabriel said. “Don’t get caught in the breach.”

“Hush. I’ve done this before.”

“You only have to get it wrong once.”

Isabel slowed her breathing, held her hands above the flaming spring, and closed her eyes. A violently anarchic power reverberated from the spring. The child’s arrival was near.

In her mind, Isabel heard the gentle rhythm of the ancient song that had called to her through dozens of breaches over the years.

We should be more than this.

We can be more than this.

I want to be more than this.

Help me be more than this.

The presence of another reached out.

Isabel extended her hand.

Their fingertips touched.

Isabel closed her hand around the other. The skin was soft. The grip was firm.

“I have you,” she said gently.

Isabel rose slowly, offering herself as an anchor. The clasped hand rose with her. Isabel took a step back, then another. Gabriel's hands touched the center of her back, halting her progress. Isabel opened her eyes.

Before her stood a girl with dark eyes absorbing everything, overwhelmed and afraid.

Isabel caressed the girl's brow, running her fingers through the child's long, straight, black hair.

"Don't be afraid," Isabel whispered. "This will make sense in time."

The girl shook her head, confusion in her eyes, her breaths rapid.

Isabel reached out with her mind and touched the girl's thoughts. They were a jumble of images, difficult to distill.

"You're safe with us," Isabel said.

The child's breath slowed. Her thoughts swirled beneath Isabel's mental touch like a whirlpool.

"We know the way out," Isabel said. "We'll bring you home."

An uncertain smile emerged on the girl's face. Her thoughts coalesced into an image of a school of fish swimming beneath the sea. A visual language took shape, conveyed by images, unlike any Isabel had experienced. Isabel distilled from the images a single cogent concept.

I know, the child thought. I dreamed of this. I dreamed of you.

The girl waved her hand through the spray of the waterfall, then stepped away and extended it toward the heat of a methane fire. The moisture evaporated. She smiled.

“She still hasn’t said a word,” Gabriel said.

Isabel stood with him down the Cold Road, giving the girl space to explore, as was done for all breaches, but staying close enough to intervene as needed.

“Language can be challenging here,” Isabel said, pondering the prospect of the child’s native tongue. Once, she might have guessed Japanese, but she no longer guessed these things. Either way, it shouldn’t matter. Communication on this side of the Shroud drew on the universal nature of thought. “I can catch her thoughts for now, as strange as they are. That’s a start.”

“Most can’t communicate your way,” Gabriel said. “She’ll have to find a way to speak to others.”

“Give her time. She’s shown an instinctive feel for the rhythms here, and she seems fascinated by everything, even her own movements. I think she’ll be fine.”

“I hope so,” Gabriel said. “She seems young to breach.”

“Ten or eleven, I’d guess.”

“She behaves younger.”

“I’m not sure that’s what it is.”

Isabel waved her over, and the girl darted among the methane vents and heated puddles to fall in step behind Isabel and Gabriel as they began their walk back to the sea. The wind carried balls of interwoven strands of volcanic glass. The girl reached for one, and it disintegrated at her touch. She dashed forth to follow the other floating volcanic balls, testing the bounds of the path.

“Be careful,” Isabel called, raising her voice now that the girl was progressing out of normal earshot. “Not too far.”

“We’re in one of the most dangerous spots in the Cardinal Realms, and we’re letting her run off.” Gabriel chuckled softly. “Somehow, I think she’ll have no problem.”

Isabel smiled. “You’ll put her in the Milesian School?”

“The school is not what it was when you and Ernesto ran it.”

“So you’re bringing her to Last Harbor?”

Gabriel stopped his pace, a troubled look marring his visage. “I promised silence about the girl. And you promised me yours.”

“And you have it. It’s just that ...” Isabel sought the right words. “This whole matter makes me uncomfortable.”

“I’m sorry. It’s part of the deal.” He shook his head. “This girl can change everything.”

Isabel studied him. She had known the man since he was a boy, and of all the breaches she had greeted, none had flowered so fully as Gabriel. Ernesto’s protégé was the councilor from the House of Paths, one of the most beloved and respected figures in all the realms, and her most important ally in the political alliance that controlled the Cardinal Council. The alliance had shaped the realms after the war, picking through the ashes and divisions to restore the realms to their former glory, an idyllic world of art and beauty, where dreams could be made real and everything seemed possible. Since Ernesto’s death, few proved as critical as Gabriel in maintaining the alliance and the world it preserved, but he was still the boy whose hand she had taken on a dusty cliffside beneath the first light of morning all those years ago. Isabel could still read him, if not perfectly.

“It’s Icarus again, isn’t it?” she said.

Gabriel looked away, his gaze following the girl as she headed further down the path. The silence hung heavy as unspoken thoughts wrote themselves across his eyes.

Isabel touched his arm. Her heart fell within her. “Gabriel, there was nothing you could’ve done.”

“We tell ourselves things like that to assuage our guilt,” he said. “This is not guilt. It’s obligation. It’s love. You would do the same for your children.”

The words hit Isabel like a punch to the stomach.

Her thoughts transported back to that day in the garden among the mango and guava trees and the history she could not forget. She had strolled beyond the *pau-brasil* trees, with their patchwork dark brown bark revealing deep red heartwood beneath, and reached the riverside among the fragrances of lavender and rosemary. A pair of giggling teenagers floated by on a giant lily pad. Home could be many things to many people. For Isabel, it was a perfume of fruit and herbs, a symphony of songbirds and swaying trees and flowing water, warm sunlight on her skin, and the house and garden where her children had once run and played and slept. They may have abandoned it in Minas Gerais, but it echoed eternally on this side of the Shroud.

Then she had seen Yara, and nothing was ever the same.

Isabel blinked the memory away, gathered her composure, and gently took Gabriel’s arm.

“Icarus is not your child,” she said. “Let it go. He’s gone.”

“No,” Gabriel said. “Just lost. Severance is the last refuge of the dying. Icarus cut his cord, just like he was taught. I would do the same. There’s always another way.”

“Now he floats endlessly through the Boundless, separated from his body.”

“Now he lives, and there is hope.” Gabriel smiled faintly as he turned back toward her. It was a sad smile, from some faraway place of great tangents and greater melancholy. Most believed Icarus to be dead. His true fate was known to only a select few. Gabriel’s hope of finding him had never dimmed. “Our friend at the library has a theory. If it works, I can bring him back.”

“And she is part of this?” Isabel motioned in the girl’s direction.

A geyser shot skyward off to their right. Gabriel looked down at its base, his eyes ruminative, brow furrowed.

“She’s just a child,” Isabel said.

“We were all just children once.”

“You’re not going to take her on as a protégé, are you?”

Gabriel lingered silently upon that one. He had only taken on one protégé before. It had not gone well.

“No.” He gave a faint shake of the head. “I’m not fit for her. I’ll be able to explain everything in a few days. You’ll understand.”

He motioned back down the path. The girl had stopped beside a crevice, from which steam wafted.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Isabel said. “Careful!” She immediately continued her pace on the road, with Gabriel in tow.

The girl looked up with alarm in her eyes, smiled sheepishly, and backed away from the vent before continuing down the path toward the sea.

“Whatever this is about,” Isabel said, “just be careful. What happened to Jakob has me worried.”

“He’s probably laughing in his grave.” Gabriel shook his head at her mention of the late chairman of the Cardinal Council. “He picked a wonderful time to get old and die.”

“If that’s what happened. To vacate the Seat of Links less than a month before the Conclave ...”

“I know,” Gabriel said. “Everything is coming to a head, all at once.”

Ahead, waves crashed against the shore, spraying water into sizzling puddles. The girl stood near the bridge, absorbing it all in raptured silence. Everything was a new discovery. The girl’s childish wonder washed away Isabel’s memories of loss.

“When do you leave for Italy?” she said, abruptly changing tack.

“End of the week.” A broad smile emerged on Gabriel’s face.

“To find Mamadou in Naples after all this time...”

“Three years now. Just like I never gave up on my son, I can’t give up on Icarus.”

“Just make sure you’re at the council meeting for the vote on Jakob’s replacement. We’re down to six of the ten votes without him. Let’s get the seventh back. Come, smile, and vote. Then do whatever you want until the Conclave.”

Gabriel chuckled softly. “I will, I will.”

“Put the girl in the Milesian School for now.”

“All these orders.” The mirth lingered in Gabriel’s voice as they neared the shore. “I can’t fathom why people think you’re difficult.”

“Well, someone has to be,” Isabel said. “Difficult women change the world.”

Near the end of the path, the girl kneeled and leaned forward, holding a wet stone like a pencil.

She was drawing.

Using the stone's pointy edge, the girl etched chalk-white lines into the basalt path with fluid movements, moving from one design to another. When she noticed Isabel watching, she curled her body to shield the drawing from view.

Isabel turned to Gabriel. He was watching too.

A few minutes passed before the girl straightened up from her hunch, turned to them, and stepped aside to reveal the drawing in the soil. In it, the falls took shape along the face of the mountain. The girl's hand extended beneath the water in such a way that demonstrated the drawing's point of view was her own, as she had experienced it. Isabel saw herself in the background, beside Gabriel on the path, petite in comparison, hair swept back in the wind, her smile lines the only blemish on a face that could be anywhere from thirty-five to fifty-five years old. Everything was extraordinarily lifelike, from the curvature of the road to the contours of their faces.

Then the drawing moved.

The methane flames wavered.

The girl's hand waved beneath the falling water. Her hair rustled in the wind.

The falls fell orange against the mountain's fiery seam.

It all came to life in color, exactly as it had happened.

“Oh my—” Isabel lost the words, breathless at what she was seeing. It took years of specialized training for the most skilled artist to do what the girl had done less than an hour after her arrival. “Gabriel, how is this?”

When Gabriel spoke, his voice was hushed. “Things are different on the Fringe. The effects of the Boundless —”

“I’ve been on the Fringe before. I’ve never seen this.”

Gabriel took a deep breath. “Neither have I.”

They ascended the pedestrian bridge above the barrier islands and took the long walk back across the sea amid a silence of white noise, with Gabriel at the fore, Isabel at the rear, and the girl between them, close enough for Isabel to grab and steady her when winds and waves threatened.

Eventually, a mountain range rose beyond the last barrier island. Gabriel stopped at a fork in the bridge. One branch curled left around the mountainside to the western Fringe. The other headed right toward the heart of the Cardinal Realms.

Isabel kneeled beside the girl and took her hand. The girl receded, bunching her shoulders and tilting her head down, but her gaze still held on Isabel.

“This world can be all you ever imagined,” Isabel said. “Your life will never be as it was. And I promise, you won’t want it to be.”

The girl tightened her grip, a bright-eyed smile upon her lips. Isabel touched her thoughts. They felt like the light of the brightest star.

“Bring some papayas to the council meeting,” Gabriel said.

Isabel looked up. Gabriel had a wide grin on this face, the same mischievous look she had seen so many times when he sought to crack a moment's solemnity with humor. She could not help but smile. "I don't think they're ripe yet," she said.

"Oh, I'm sure they're ready to fall." Gabriel kneeled before the girl and rested his hand on her left shoulder. "The fruits in Isabel's garden — my goodness. You can climb the trees to pick the reddest mangoes. The papayas are so big that when they fall from the tree—" He looked up, opened his mouth wide in a theatrical mock scream, shuddered with fear, and dodged an imaginary giant papaya. The girl laughed, the first sound from her lips. "Just watch out for the monkeys. They're always stealing the fruit."

They parted ways. Isabel took the northeastern path, while Gabriel headed with the girl northwest toward the western Fringe. This was always the hardest part: Letting the children go, to be trusted in the hands of others. At least those hands were Gabriel's.

"Come by after the council meeting," she said.

"If there's *feijoada*, I'll think about it."

Isabel rolled her eyes. "Lunch then."

Gabriel grinned. "I'll see you in two days." Then he turned to the girl and led her down the other path, toward the Fringe. "Have you ever eaten Brazilian food? Oh, let me tell you ..."

The girl looked back at Isabel as they headed away, her wide smile lingering. Isabel waved, the breadth of her own smile nearly matching it.

As Gabriel curled around the mountainside with the girl and disappeared, however, the joy dissipated. A cold feeling of *déjà vu* washed over her, like the slow rising of a frigid tide. It

was the same feeling Isabel had the last time she saw Ernesto nearly twenty-five years ago. It was the feeling she would never see him again.