

*Twenty-four years ago*

## PROLOGUE

They came for Ernesto Torres at the height of the storm.

No one walked the streets of the coastal Cuban hamlet, save Ernesto and those who hunted him. The factory had gone quiet. The tobacco fields went untouched by human hands, their high reeds bent beneath the wind as sheets of water funneled down from a slate gray sky. Some had gone inland to take refuge in the natural shelter of La Sierra de los Órganos, but others remained behind, boarded up windows, and buckled down until the worst passed.

Stronger hurricanes had come and gone, and Ernesto had lived through them all. He stood in the doorway of his one-story home facing the shore, light spilling out behind him, his raincoat dripping from his walk through town. The last remnants of cloud-free sky disappeared as the rain and wind assaulted his clothes. Still, he stood unmoved, a statue beneath the overhang of a small porch. Hurricanes fascinated him, primal gales that erased sound, sanded earth, and broke those who brooked them no respect. They reminded him of the Boundless.

*"Cierras la puerta!"* a woman called from inside. "You'll let the rain in."

He turned back to the doorway, smiled with fatigue, and sighed. "Mariana."

"Don't 'Mariana' me," she said from just inside the cracked doorway. "Either come in or go out, but close the door."

Ernesto looked down the tip of his nose. They'd had this conversation every year during hurricane season. She never understood how he could sit like a child, starry-eyed, watching the violent weather, how he could find new fascination in a shift of clouds, the sound of winds, or the angle at which the rain fell. Every year it happened, and every year he watched. Never with the strongest hurricanes, of course. He did not defy nature. He respected it. When it called to him like this, he answered.

When his wife called him away from it, his answer seldom came as quickly.

"Stop looking at me like that," Mariana said, her tone softening. Her Spanish still carried the Oriente accent that he had loved since they had met, and her words carried despite the rain and wind. "You can sit outside with the door closed, no? Keep the rain out."

"Of course." Ernesto stepped back to let his wife close the door, but she moved outside to him instead and pulled the door shut behind her. "The eye is not far," he said. "The sky will spin soon. But I think it will stay west of us."

"Do you?" She sounded skeptical, amused.

"I think so, yes."

"We could've gone to Havana. You wouldn't have missed it."

Ernesto grinned ruefully. "Stop it. I am no storm-chaser."

"No? If you had no job, no children or grandchildren, you wouldn't chase the storm?"

He watched staccato raindrops attack the reddish sand loam of the street, their echo the dominant sound. "No. I think it would find me."

The door behind them cracked open. Ernesto turned to see the big dark eyes and tasseled curls of their youngest grandchild peeking through the slit in the doorway, the smell of stewing fish and vegetables briefly drifting out before the wind pressure drove it back inside.

"*Abuelita*," she called. "Can we eat now?"

Mariana looked to Ernesto, whose face wore a calm expression. "I should check on the stew," she said. "They keep asking."

He nodded. "Go on. I will be a few minutes."

"No more?"

"No more."

The two locked eyes. They had been together many years. She'd watched his black hair slowly recede, his thick mustache silver, his paunch soften and grow rounder. He'd seen his sliver of a girl become the woman who bore him children, who in turn gave them grandchildren, and she was still pretty despite the wrinkles, holding that mix of frailty and strength in her eyes. She wasn't his first love, but she was his last, and that was most important.

Mariana stepped away slowly, her extended right hand pushing through the door as their shared gaze lingered. Neither spoke. The little girl wrapped her arms around her grandmother's leg. Mariana looked down, her eyes content, but the reverie breaking. She bent down to kiss the girl's forehead. "Let's see if it's ready."

The door closed behind her. Ernesto looked westward again.

"Hello, stranger."

Ernesto's eyes spun toward the voice. To his left, a man stood just off the edge of the porch, seemingly at ease, one hand loose at his side, the other tucked inside the dark, water-slicked, hooded poncho that veiled him from the elements.

"It's quite a storm," Ernesto said. "Not wise to be out."

"We're used to chaos, you and I."

Ernesto tensed with alarm. The man's Spanish carried a Russian-like accent, his voice crystal clear despite the winds, but he was no Russian. "Best to respect the storm," Ernesto said. "That is the best advice I can give."

The man smiled. "You give. I take. It is our way."

Ernesto's breath stuck in his throat. His eyes widened at the choice of words.

*It's him.*

Ernesto reached for the door.

"I have six with me, all armed. I'm not here for your family. Just you, Ernesto. Don't do anything to change that."

Ernesto's hand stopped on the doorknob. Slowly, his fingers slid back from it. "Why?"

"Times change."

Ernesto's lips pressed inward as he turned back toward the hooded man and examined the portion of his face left unshadowed by the hood. It was square with a broad nose. He was no older than his mid-30s. "You're too young. You're the new one."

The man shrugged. "He died."

"Was it you?"

"Does it matter?"

“He would not have violated the realm of family,” Ernesto said. “He understood the balance between us.”

“He’s gone. Borders are arbitrary.”

“The laws are not.”

“Laws change.”

The hooded man motioned toward the road.

Ernesto hesitated. His thoughts collided, sad and longing, violent and final. The day had come.

“Come,” the hooded man said.

“I think not.” The fingers on Ernesto’s hands went taut. A pool of energy welled within him. It had been years, but the old revolutionary had not forgotten how to fight. His mind raced. He kept two guns inside, ready for the day someone might come for him. He hadn’t touched them in years, but he had prepared.

The hooded man raised an arm. His poncho flapped rapidly in the wind.

A silhouette emerged in the distance. Then, three more appeared, clad the same way as the first. They all approached.

“They’re armed,” the hooded man said. “This is no bluff.”

Ernesto knew it was true. His head dropped. His resistance collapsed. It wasn’t just Mariana inside. Their grandchildren were visiting from abroad. He could not put them at risk.

“Come,” the hooded man said. “Before your family notice and get in the way. I know where they sleep now. Their minds are open to me. Don’t make this messy.”

Ernesto watched the raindrops pound the ground and disappear. He was defeated.

“Nothing is sacred to you,” Ernesto said, his voice an angry whisper.

“You’re a worthy adversary, Ernesto. You had to go.”

Ernesto blinked. His jaw tightened. He looked up at the porch's overhang, then out to the storm.

He would never see his family again, never get to say goodbye. This was the bargain Ernesto was making now. His silent assent would preserve their lives.

Across the Rift, they would know what to do. Isabel would take on one mantle. Gabriel would take the other. Only this brought any sliver of content.

Lightning shattered the sky. Thunder clapped violently a second later.

Ernesto glanced back toward the house. His youngest granddaughter peered around the window curtain, just beyond the hooded man’s view, her dark eyes wide and uncomprehending. Ernesto put two fingers to his lips, kissed them, and subtly extended his hand to toss the kiss to her. Normally, she would smile, but he could see she didn’t understand. His movements were too subtle, lest he draw the hooded man’s attention to her. It was probably better this way, better that she not comprehend what was happening.

“You’ve had your time,” the hooded man said. “It’s time for the other side of the coin.”

Ernesto turned away toward the sea.

*Every coin has two sides, he answered silently. Every truth has three.*

Waves crashed the shore in the distance. The winds were strengthening, the sky darkening, the scent of the sea at hand.

Ernesto closed his eyes and stepped out into the storm.

## CHAPTER 1

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

Isabel crouched on the narrow pedestrian bridge high above the island, touching hand to floor to steady herself after the onslaught of the tidal wave. The bridge ran east to west, high above the string of barrier islands that formed the southern Fringe dividing the Cardinal Realms from the encircling Boundless. Once the sea claimed the islands, the bridge would collapse, leaving them without the optimal 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 with sulfur. The heat intensified against Isabel's skin. Puddles of mud bubbled and boiled. The stench of sulfur permeated the air. Methane fires exploded ahead. A geyser shot skyward and rained down boiling spray.

"Stay to the path," Gabriel said.

They forged on.

A smooth path of basalt snaked eastward among 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 largely as a barrier against the Boundless. It was good that they did, because it was the safest way of reaching the child due to cross the Rift.

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 identified the location based on the image: The Ash Plain, so close to the Boundless it was nearly beyond the map.

"You're sure this was a vision?" Isabel had said.

"A vision," Gabriel said, "as clear as the day you and Ernesto found me."

Such visions were usually experienced by sages, which Gabriel was not, and it bothered Isabel that Gabriel minimized the amount he shared about it. Crossings of the Rift could be dangerous and traumatic. People like Isabel smoothed the path, able to intuit whether someone was in fact ready, when and how it would occur, and to help the newcomer adjust to the mental trauma. She had not greeted a first crossing 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, as the road wound around a high set of jagged rocks, the air grew hotter still. 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. A series of fires burned along the rocky hillsides on the other side of the path. Isabel intermittently tested the path with her pinky finger, but it remained merely warm to the touch.

A mountain emerged ahead, its apex orange, the first of a pair of volcanos known as the Restless Twins, due to their tendency to move around the valley in a spontaneous terraforming that was part of life on the Fringe. The first volcano erupted, spitting 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 still a manageable temperature, but the river’s water level had dropped low enough that the riverbed’s rocks jutted above the shallow bubbles. Isabel’s sweat evaporated, leaving her dry as winter in the Espinhaço Mountains.

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

Gabriel slowed accordingly as 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 it to the other side. The road circled around the volcano into a narrow valley where the air was thick with sulfur.

The second mountain 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. The riverbed retained a trickle of water, but the heat evaporated it immediately, leaving steam in its wake.

“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. “It’s fine. We shouldn’t have to climb. The spring should be somewhere in this valley. We just have to find it.”

They followed the dry riverbed toward the fiery waterfall, encountering first moisture, then isolated puddles, and finally a trickle of water coming from the falls. Isabel coughed, the stench so strong that it enmeshed itself within her lungs as she searched the ground for her target.

“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’s heat passing through fabric to her legs.

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

“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 chaotic power reverberated from the spring. The child’s arrival was near.

In her mind, she heard the gentle rhythm of the ancient song that had called to her through dozens of first crossings 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.

Her eyes still closed, Isabel rose slowly, offering herself 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 young girl with dark eyes that took everything in, 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 gentle 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 in unison beneath the sea. A visual language took shape, conveyed by images, unlike any Isabel had ever experienced. Isabel distilled from the images a single cogent concept.

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

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