

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 high reeds of the tobacco fields bent beneath the wind as sheets of water funneled down from a slate gray sky. Some had gone inland to take refuge beyond 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. Now, as he returned home and opened his front door, one last desire called, and he turned back to watch the waves rise and fall on the distant sea. The wind and rain assaulted his clothes, but 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 eastern accent 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 Shroud, 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.