

PROLOGUE

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

The streets lay empty, save Ernesto and those who hunted him. The factory had gone quiet, tobacco fields unpicked. Sheets of water funneled down from a slate gray sky. Most had fled the coastal Cuban hamlet for refuge beyond the mountains, but Ernesto remained, the hurricane calling him like an old friend. As he returned home, his hand opened the front door, but his eyes watched the sea. Waves crashed, winds assaulted, and Ernesto stood alive in the moment. 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 to the doorway, smiled, and sighed. "Mariana."

"Don't 'Mariana' me," she said, standing just inside the cracked doorway, peeking through the opening. "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. He knew 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, 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 hit 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 tight 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 seen his black hair slowly recede, his thick mustache silver, his paunch soften and grow rounder. He'd watched his sliver of a girl become a woman, mother, and grandmother, 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 wind, but he was no Russian. "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.

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 came 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. 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.

Twenty-four years later

CHAPTER 1

Chaos beckoned from the south. Winds roiled the white foam sea, waves crashed against the rocks, and Isabel crouched on a narrow pedestrian bridge high above, steadying herself by touching hand to deck. The barrier islands below divided the Cardinal Realms from the Boundless, but their complete erosion appeared imminent. Once the sea swallowed the islands, the bridge would collapse again, the latest toll paid to the unbridled chaos of the Boundless.

Isabel quickened her pace behind Gabriel as they descended the bridge's arc and stepped onto rocky terrain tinted orange and blackened by ash. The heat intensified against Isabel's skin. Mud puddles bubbled and boiled. Methane fires exploded. A geyser shot skyward and rained down steaming spray.

"Stay on the path," Gabriel said.

They forged on.

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

Cartographers had mapped and terraformed the Cold Road anew only a few years ago, and fortunately so. No other path led to the spring where the child would breach the Shroud to cross between worlds.

They followed the path around a high set of jagged rocks. Visibility decreased. The

stench of sulfur emerged. A cloud of steam wafted above a bubbling river running parallel to the path. Isabel kept as far as she could from the Boiling River, and 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 here 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 the rocky riverbed, despite its rising steam. Her sweat evaporated, leaving her dry as winter in the Espinhaço Mountains.

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

They continued down the path.

Rivulets of lava trickled down to the volcano’s base. One melted a narrow crevice into the road, bisecting it. 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. A waterfall crashed down from it 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 spot. Isabel coughed amid the smoke and stench.

“That’s it,” Gabriel said.

Near the base of the fiery falls, water bubbled up through a hole in the ground. A blue and orange flame wavered within and above the spring.

Isabel dropped to her knees. The ground scorched her legs through her pants, and she immediately rose 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 violent force reverberated from the spring. The child’s arrival was near.

In her mind, Isabel heard 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 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 young girl whose dark eyes brimmed with confusion and fear.

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, 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,” Isabel said.

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

“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 while touching another’s mind. She distilled from the child’s images a single cogent concept:

I dreamed of this. I dreamed of you.

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