

CHAPTER 1

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, the fields untouched. Most had fled the coastal hamlet for refuge beyond the mountains, but Ernesto remained, the hurricane calling him like an old friend. As he stepped beneath the portico to shield from the rain, his hand opened his 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."

Ernesto turned to the doorway. He had held it cracked open, hand on the doorknob, distracted by the spectacle. He smiled and sighed. "Mariana."

"Don't 'Mariana' me," she said, standing just inside the door, peeking through the opening. "Either come in or go out, but close the door."

Ernesto looked down the tip of his nose, thumbed his mustache. 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 violence of nature, finding 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, he answered. When called away from it, his answer seldom came as quickly.

"Stop looking at me like that," Mariana said, her tone softening but still audible above the wind and rain. Her Spanish still carried the eastern accent he'd loved since they first met. "You can sit outside with the door closed, no? Keep the rain out."

Ernesto stepped back to let her close the door, but she joined him outside 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 over the sea."

"Do you?" She sounded skeptical, amused.

"I think so, yes."

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

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

"No? If you had nothing keeping you here, you wouldn't chase the storm?"

The staccato raindrops hit the reddish sand loam of the street, resounding like a drumbeat.

"No," he said. "I think it would find me."

The door behind them cracked open. Their great-granddaughter peeked through the slit in the doorway, her tight curls rustling in the wind. An aroma of stewing fish and vegetables briefly drifted out before the wind pressure drove it back inside.

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

Mariana looked to Ernesto. "I should check on the stew," she said. "She keeps asking."

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

"No more?"

"No more."

The two locked eyes. His sliver of a girl was still pretty despite the wrinkles, a mix of frailty and strength in her eyes. They had been together many years. She wasn't his first love, but she was his last, and that was most important.

Mariana inched away, her extended right hand pushing through the door as their shared gaze lingered. Neither spoke. The little girl wrapped her arms around Mariana's leg, just like Ana used to do. Mariana looked down and kissed her forehead. "Let's see if it's ready."

She went inside, closing the door behind her.

Ernesto stood alone again. He looked westward to the sea and the storm.

"Hello, stranger."

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

"The eye is near," Ernesto said. "Not wise to be out."

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

Ernesto tensed. The man's Spanish carried an unrecognizable accent, his voice crystal clear despite the wind. Beneath the hood, his face was square with a broad nose. Familiar.

"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. The choice of words was clear.

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. His fingers went taut, then slowly slid away.

"How did you find me?" he said.

"The same way I found Gabriel and Icarus. Nobody's perfect. Not even you."

A pool of energy welled within Ernesto. His mind raced. He kept two guns inside, ready for this day. He hadn't touched them in years, but the old revolutionary had not forgotten how to fight. He scanned the white, green, and pink homes along the street. Every window was boarded up, the houses empty. Few took chances, even with this rare December hurricane. It left places to hide, if there were truly six armed men. If not, it was just the two of them, but the hooded man was at least twenty years younger.

"You timed it for the Conclave," Ernesto said.

The hooded man shrugged. "And the Third. We both know she's ready. Before the end, you'll give me her window — and your successor's." He motioned toward the road. "Come."

Ernesto hesitated. The gun was inside. So were two people he loved. He could not put them at risk.

The hooded man raised an arm. His poncho flapped rapid-fire in the wind.

A silhouette emerged from beyond the lime green house. Two more appeared further down the street, clad in the same dark clothes as the first. They approached.

“This is no bluff, Ernesto,” the hooded man said.

Ernesto’s chin dropped. Resistance collapsed. His thoughts collided, sad and longing, violent and final. The day had come.

“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’ve been a worthy adversary. You had to go.”

Ernesto blinked. His jaw tightened. He looked up at the porch's overhang, then out to the sea. He would never see his family again, never get to say goodbye. This was the bargain he was making now. His silent assent would preserve their lives.

Mariana knew what to do. They had long ago made contingency plans for the day he disappeared. He’d thought it would be the Castro regime. He knew it could be this.

The Cardinal Realms were another matter. He had to cross the Shroud, get to the child before they did. For that, he would need Isabel one last time.

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

He glanced toward the house. His great-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 her the kiss, but he could see she didn’t understand. His movements were too subtle, lest he draw 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, gripping Ernesto’s upper arm. “It’s time

for the other side.”

Every coin has two sides, Ernesto answered silently. Every truth has three.

He turned away toward the sea.

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.