

Chapter One

A Single Truth

Arthur Perez ran under a starry sky. Every breath was a labor, every heartbeat a thunderclap. His feet ached after so many miles. He would have long since given up if it were not for the wind that glowed around him. It had no beginning. He could see no end. Arthur smiled, feeling part of something greater than himself as pale blue currents illuminated his path through the dark side of morning.

“Feel that air, *anak!*” Joshua said, running alongside Arthur.

“It’s hard to ignore, Dad,” Arthur squinted up at the flurry of light.

“This is *our* time! We have the city to ourselves!” Joshua wore nothing but navy track shorts, whereas Arthur was bundled in several layers of thermo-gear—a shield against the chill.

“It’s worth getting up this early just to not have people stare at me,” Arthur said. He stood at six-foot-six with noodly limbs and a slight forward-leaning neck as if he was in constant danger of toppling over. His father, on the other hand, was a head shorter but twice as broad with hard muscle earned from service as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Marine Corps.

“Hopefully you’d be running fast enough to not notice them!” Joshua guffawed and slapped his son on the back. It was like being hit with a sandbag.

Despite having the breath knocked out of him, Arthur beamed at his father. Joshua’s thick-dark hair was combed back against a headwind that outshone the moon and stars. Under the spectral light, Arthur watched rich black geometric patterns swim between light and shadow on Joshua’s *moreno* skin. Of all the tattoos his father wore—from wrists to collar bone down to

the tops of his feet—the ones Arthur was most fond of were a cluster of tiger stripes that stretched across Joshua’s shoulders.

Hunger hit Arthur. The clamor from his stomach along with the swirling brightness of the wind sent his vision into a tail spin. He gritted his teeth. The sensation seduced him to stop, to rest. It would be so easy.

“Keep it up,” Joshua said. “This is a great pace.”

Arthur shook his head in an attempt to correct the dizziness. “I wish I’d eaten something before heading out.”

Joshua grunted.

In a rush, the cold air filled Arthur’s nostrils, and he forgot his fatigue. The icy-blue gust whipped off his sweatshirt’s hood, exposing his ears and the back of his neck to the elements. “I should have remembered, Dad,” Arthur said, “but it was a grind getting out of bed.” He hastened to pull the hood back over him.

“Some mornings are tougher than others,” Joshua sighed. “It happens to everyone.”

“When have you ever had a tough morning?”

“You think I jump out of bed all the time?” Joshua raised a brow.

Arthur shrugged. “You probably didn’t have a choice . . .”

“That’s right,” Joshua grinned. “It wasn’t always so easy.”

Arthur tried picturing his dad standing in line at boot camp with the other recruits when he first enlisted—messy hair, bags under his eyes. The image just did not fit with how Arthur remembered his father.

Ahead, Arthur made note of their next landmark: the Washington Monument.

“Ah,” Joshua said. “I suppose you’re too tired for a little race?” He inclined his head to

the triple arches that rose like mountains over the cityscape.

“We’re almost done, aren’t we?” Arthur said. The air circled around him as if in anticipation. “I think I have enough in me to leave you in my dust, old man.”

Joshua’s bark of laughter echoed off the stone buildings on either side of them. The sound combined with Joshua’s expression brought Arthur back to every race his father finished when he was a boy—arms raised in triumph, red-faced but beaming at his wife and son, ready to admire his shiny new medal.

Together, father and son broke into a sprint. Arms pumping, legs churning, Arthur hardly felt the road as he flew down Smithsonian Avenue. With glee, the wind streaked alongside him like fish in a glacial lagoon. Arthur hastened his stride—as if he could outpace the wind.

They arrived at the traffic circle around the Washington Monument. One solitary cab streaked behind them as they crossed the intersection that, in a few hours, would host a medley of tour buses, commuters, and cyclists navigating the heart of Washington, D.C. They made a point of going through the middle arch, saluting the statue of Washington atop the monument as they did so. Washington rode a five-horse chariot, gazing imperiously down at the runners. He faced the Capitol Building across the grassy lawns of the National Mall. It was said the architects wanted him to keep an eye on Congress.

“Alright,” Arthur said, stumbling as he reduced his speed. “You get this one.”

Joshua did not slow down, nor show any signs of wanting to enjoy his victory.

“Dad, are we still going?” Arthur struck forward, pursuing his father down to a marble plaza.

A Reflecting Pool stretched the length of the plaza to the Lincoln Memorial at the other end. With the way his calves burned and the growing blisters underfoot, Arthur was unsure how

much farther he could go. But Joshua kept going, and Arthur—with the wind rushing ever onwards around him—would follow.

Arthur closed the distance to his father as he ascended the flagstone steps of the memorial. They slipped between fluted columns and passed by colossal Lincoln on his throne through a passageway to a circular chamber on the other side. Together they rounded the statue of an eagle, rising from the middle of the floor on alabaster wings.

“Dad?” Arthur said. “Hello, anybody home?”

Joshua descended the flight of stairs on the back side of the memorial to the banks of the Ceopaak River. To Arthur’s dismay, the wind dimmed. Without its luminous presence, Arthur felt more like he was trudging through knee deep sand than running on paved road.

“Okay,” Arthur said. He stumbled to an unsteady walk. “Okay . . . I need a moment.”

At last Joshua slowed as well, though he continued to pace.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur said, hands on hips. “But . . . the wind’s gone.”

Joshua halted. He stuck out his hand as if preparing to give someone a high-five. “I can still feel it,” he said. He had yet to turn and face his gasping son.

“I mean I can’t see it,” Arthur said.

Indeed, the wind continued to blow from where they stood, halfway across Memorial Bridge. It was as steady a current as the river below, though invisible. Arthur was buffeted by the frigid air. Joshua, however, remained perfectly still.

“Be careful,” Joshua said, “the wind should not dictate how long or well you run.”

“It usually just turns up,” Arthur said. “I don’t seek it out.”

“Yet you let it tell you when to go and when to stop,” Joshua said. “Its nature is to be unpredictable. It isn’t as reliable as a man’s own two feet. You should remember that.”

“What?” Arthur said. His breath billowed from him in jets of vapor. “What’s going on? Back there we were laughing, having a good time. Now you’ve gone solemn and stoic?”

Joshua remained silent. He had his eyes set across the river. On the other side of the bridge St. Mary’s Church sat atop a grassy hill, its steeple rising from the Earth like a skeletal finger.

“I only really need the wind when you’re not here,” Arthur said.

“You’ll understand once you’ve earned these,” Joshua slapped his shoulder. His attention fixed on the chapel on the hill. “Even then, those who have earned their stripes have difficulty reading the winds.”

“It’s hard, Dad,” Arthur added. “All of this. Sometimes every part of me wants to stop trying.”

“That’s exactly the moment you must keep going,” Joshua said over his shoulder. “You think I’m not hurting, too?”

“You love it,” Arthur said. “I’m just trying to keep up with you.”

“*Anak*, if it does not bring you joy, why do it in the first place?” Joshua faced Arthur. “Even so, it hurts, Arthur. It’s cold, and it hurts.”

A ringing filled Arthur’s ears; something shifted inside his chest like when the air pressure suddenly turned inside a descending airplane. “What hurts?” He took a step forward.

Joshua retreated in equal measure, though it appeared to Arthur he did so without intending to, like something kept a distance between them. “Running helps, keeps it away for a little bit,” Joshua said.

“Keeps what away?” Arthur said, taking another step. So did Joshua. The urge to rush to his father’s side, to comfort him, pulled at Arthur’s insides. “Dad, are you hurting?” However

much he tried to close the gap between him and his father, Joshua always appeared to be just out of reach.

“It’s important to me you remember—”

“I do,” Arthur said.

“—your stripes,” Joshua went on as if not hearing Arthur. “What it takes to earn them.”

The wispy outline of clouds emerged overhead, dark against a greying sky. Arthur’s stomach sank at the sight of dawn.

“I do remember—” Arthur balled his numbing hands into fists.

A pink stain broke the horizon.

“—I never forgot.”

“If that’s true, why did you break your promise?” Joshua said.

Arthur shivered in the fading runner’s high.

“You broke your promise, *anak*,” Joshua said. “You took them before you knew what they meant.” His voice broke as if he struggled against a great weight.

Arthur reached out to lay a comforting hand on his father’s shoulder, but Joshua turned and ran. “No,” Arthur hastened to close the distance between them. “Dad—I can explain!”

The wind burst into light as Arthur went after him. It closed in like water rushing down a drainpipe. The howling in his ears was so loud, he could not hear his own protests. The air cut his lungs as he worked to stay in the chase.

On the other side of the bridge, they banked left along a path that led from the church into the cemetery. The wind knocked Arthur’s shoulders, forming a tunnel of pulsing blue light. Arthur kicked his heels higher behind him. He tried to breathe past a stitch in his chest. He would not let his father get away again. He would explain everything. Try as he might, the wind

battered him. Arthur raised his arms as if to guard himself.

“You took them before you knew what they meant,” Joshua repeated, his own voice carried by the wind, magnified one-hundred-fold. “You have to find what you are looking for.”

“Wait—!” Arthur wheezed.

The light of the wind became so bright, Joshua’s form slowly blurred like it was dissolving into smoke.

“How can I leave knowing my son didn’t earn his stripes on that greatest challenge . . . the Ultimate Test of a Runner?”

At the brink of tears, Arthur grasped at the ribbons of air in hopes they could pull him along. The wind revved like he stood next to a jet engine, until all at once it vanished.

In the suffocating silence, Arthur was left running at break-neck speed with no wind to inspire him and no father to guide him. Yet he did not stop. He could not.

He’ll come back, he thought. I won’t be alone for long.

His quads burned from the incline of the hillside lane. He had reached a height from where he could see most of downtown. Its insipid monuments lay under morning’s shade like corpses.

Arthur mounted the curb.

“Don’t stop—” he told himself.

The texture of the ground changed.

“—keep going—” the words materialized in front of him in a hazy cloud.

He traded firm asphalt for softer earth. The icy grass made running at any rate a gamble.

“—one more step . . . just one more, and he’ll be back.”

Running suspended him between staying upright and collapsing under the labor. He

dodged around knee-high blocks of granite.

“He can’t go. Not y—”

A streak of white flashed around his periphery. Relief swelled in his chest at the wind’s return. Arthur diverted his attention from where he was going. When he caught sight of nothing more than the pale belly of a passing blue jay, something sharp stabbed at Arthur’s right hip. With a cry, he twisted and fell, biting his tongue on impact. He had glanced his hip off the edge of a granite slab: a tombstone.

Arthur rolled over, groaning. The sharp taste of iron was the only stable thing as the world spun around him. He heard a soft thud of approaching footsteps. *Who the hell else would be here at this hour?* he thought.

“Woah buddy, you alright?” someone asked, kneeling at Arthur’s side.

The new arrival brought with him a wave of heat when the new-day sun had yet to breach the horizon. Arthur’s fingertips and nose throbbed at the shift in temperature.

“Layne?” Arthur said as the young man helped prop him up.

“That was a nasty fall,” Layne Novak said.

Arthur wiped his mouth. The side of his tongue was tender when he brushed it against a tooth as he spoke. Arthur tested his hip with a prod. He winced at the bruise that would likely be there later. In the distance, the brow of the sun turned the purpled sky blue. The sound of bells pealed behind him from St. Mary’s.

“What were you looking at?” Layne said. *Very smart not paying attention to where you’re going at that speed.*”

Arthur glanced over. The rising sun made Layne’s terra-cotta skin glow. The brown of his eyes was speckled like something golden lay beneath. He was of an age with Arthur, though

Arthur was taller still by several inches. He did not wear a sweatshirt nor pants. Instead, Layne dressed in light long-sleeves and shorts, like it was early spring not the middle of fall.

“How did you find me?” Arthur asked.

“We’ve been friends for how long?” Layne tilted his head. “Where else would you be the morning of Halloween?” Layne propped his arms around his knees. “He’s right over there, isn’t he?” Layne gestured behind them with a thumb. “Knew you’d be close.”

Arthur nodded. The streets below filled with morning commuters. Far up the hill as they were, they heard nothing of the traffic from the city.

“You want to see him this time?” Layne asked, “Or are we going to just walk in circles?” He raised his hands. “I’m fine with either. That trek down from the apartment was not long enough to cool me off.”

“I didn’t stop here on purpose,” Arthur said. “Usually the sun rises before we even get to the bridge, then he . . .”

Layne slouched over his pretzeled legs. He did so with a great sigh. A sigh Arthur felt warming the side closest to him as if he sat next to a radiator. Indeed a distinct dark green circle had spread around them. Layne’s body heat had melted the icy dew off the grass for several feet.

“So you were with him again, huh?” Layne said. “Mom used to say our ancestors continue to watch out for us, you know? When I asked her how she knows that, she told me they’re that feeling of hope when you’re down because they can see things we can’t. They can see the bigger picture.” Layne sat around to face Arthur. “You’ve been running around with a ghost every time you take the route that leads you here. He might be trying to tell you something.”

“Like what?”

“Like it’s okay to come visit him? I know you didn’t go to the funeral—”

“I already knew he had gone,” Arthur snapped. “I was the first one to know . . . besides those who were overseas with him, I suppose,” his voice hardened. “I didn’t want to see him get put into the ground.” He would never forget the sensation of seeing his father’s figure appear that morning as he walked along the Ceopaak River Trail: like someone stood right behind him in an empty room.

“That must have been terrifying,” Layne said. “To know something but not know what it was. Did you think you were just seeing things?”

Arthur frowned, “Hard to say.”

Dawn concluded her arrival as the full disk of the sun cleared the horizon. Arthur hoped to catch the faintest glimmer of blue-white across the sky, one that did not belong to a bird’s belly. “I can’t even describe what it felt like. I’d never talk to him again—” *I’d never get a chance to explain myself*, he thought. “—but then he came to me when I decided to run our favorite route,” Arthur pointed a thumb behind him. “Right as I crossed over the old canal bridge. And he’s just how I remember him! Before that last day we were together. Suddenly it made everything so much easier to swallow, almost like he never left.”

Layne stared ahead. They sat in heavy silence. A breeze rustled past Arthur’s ear. He thought it mocked him—felt but not seen.

“And you interact with him?” Layne said.

“Yeah,” Arthur said, “but it’s sort of the same conversation give or take a few lines.”

“Like he’s stuck on repeat,” Layne said.

Arthur squinted at the brightening day.

“Buddy, I’m telling you this means something. Ghosts can show up when there’s

unfinished business,” Layne said. “So far has he said anything that stands out?”

The look on his father’s face returned to Arthur as he recalled what was said when they crossed the bridge. “I think he’s in pain.”

“Pain? How can that be?”

“I don’t know. He hadn’t mentioned that before,” Arthur clutched one of his shoulders.

“Strange,” Layne sat around. “How can a ghost be in pain?”

Arthur squeezed his eyes shut. “I hate feeling like this. Useless. I wish I could help him. If only I had the power to do . . . something.”

“He didn’t say anything else? Nothing to give you some clue as to why he’s hurting?”

“No, after that he just went on about his tattoos like always . . .” Arthur trailed off.

“Your dad’s ink was pretty cool,” Layne said.

“They’re based off a practice called *Batek*, you know?” Arthur said.

“You probably mentioned it before,” Layne said, picking at the grass.

“It’s the way our ancestors used tattooing back in the Philippines to distinguish you in the community, mark your deeds. They are a symbol of status, how their values were upheld. Dad said the practice died out after colonization, but some of us are trying to remember our traditions.”

“That’s special to have a link to your roots,” Layne said. “To know what they are, for that matter. I don’t blame you for wanting them yourself.”

“Each time you achieved something you could get a new addition. Dad talked about his tiger stripes, specifically. What they represent . . . how to earn them,” Arthur sat up. “Wait a minute,” he turned to Layne. “Ghosts can linger if they have unfinished business.”

“Think we already covered that,” Layne nodded.

“My dad said: *How can he leave knowing I didn't*—but I thought he was just repeating one of the last things he said to me,” Arthur slapped his forehead. “His pain. It makes sense. What if *leave* doesn't just mean leave the country? What if this time it also means leave this *world*?”

“Woah,” Layne said. “I hate double meanings . . .”

“The Ultimate Test of a Runner!”

“The what?” Layne said.

“*Find what I am looking for*,” Arthur's skin prickled at the shift of air around him. “The princess—of course!”

“Princess?” Layne waved his hands. “What is happening?”

“Help me up,” Arthur said. He sucked his teeth as his blistered feet took his weight inside his damp blue Mercuries. “I *can* make this right with him.” His bruised hip did not make itself known until he started to move. “If I don't, I don't think he'll be able to move on.”

“That doesn't look good,” Layne remarked on Arthur's limp.

The wind rushed ahead as if it had been waiting this whole time for him to get back on his feet. It spurred him to walk in spite of the pain. Arthur reminded himself this was nothing. He could not imagine what kind of pain a spirit could endure.

“Slow down,” Layne said. “What's the Ultimate Test of a Runner?”

“I'll need to see my mom,” Arthur said. “She's the only one who can help.”

“We can go later,” Layne said, “bring the girls with us. You should stay off that a bit.”

Arthur shook his head. “This is what I get for not paying attention. I need to learn if I'm going to earn my stripes the way Dad wanted me to.”

“Oh, I see,” Layne wagged his finger at Arthur. “Your dad wasn't talking about *his*

tattoos was he?”

Arthur shook his head again. “Ever since I grasped what *Batek* was, how I could get them when I was older, tiger stripes were the ones I wanted to get first.”

“Here I thought you got them just to match your dad,” Layne said.

“That’s exactly why I did it!” Arthur said.

St. Mary’s Church was within sight.

You broke your promise, Joshua had said on the bridge.

“Dad must have thought I didn’t care about earning my stripes the way he had. The way tattoos were earned back in the Philippines—through trials and victories.”

With ease, Arthur recalled the searing sensation on his skin while he sat in the chair at the shop for his own tiger stripe tattoos. How the blood oozed beneath the plastic wrap like fresh gashes rather than ink on skin. “I got them to feel close to him when we weren’t together. To remember him whenever he was away.”

“So you think he’s still hanging around because you didn’t get your tattoos the proper way,” Layne said. “Like you have to pass some kind of test. This *Ultimate* one?”

“It’s been a while since I’ve thought of it,” Arthur sighed.

The wind picked up, hissing between the scarlet leaves of a nearby maple tree.

“I gave up thinking I’d ever do it when I got to high school,” Arthur added. “It was a childhood story for a childhood dream. Tattoos—*Batek*—are something for men to do. Why should I hold on to a story I heard as a kid?”

“What was it,” Layne said, “the story?”

“*The Princess and the Guru*,” Arthur focused on the air in his face. “The Legend of Tiger Run!”