

PROLOGUE

*I*stanbul never seems to age, it simply adapts to survive, thought Momar Singh as he surveyed the ancient city's skyline. The minarets of the Hagia Sophia, the dome of the Blue Mosque, and the hills surrounding the bay were all postcard perfect. Hardly a ripple on the river meant the fishing boat was steady and even as it docked under a forbidding stone cliff.

Before stepping off the bow, Momar made the tiniest of adjustments to his turban, brushed off dust particles no one could see, and made one last pass over his beard. If he was sure of anything on this perilous errand, he knew appearing unkempt in the High Council Chamber would not do. He glanced up at the immense camel-colored walls and tower at the apex of the cliff, the ancient stones concealing so much beauty, so much power.

After paying the fisherman a few coins, he stepped onto the dock. The small buildings around the water were humble and simple, yet tidy. He squared his shoulders and strode carefully up the path that led to the outlying edge of the High Council fortress.

A plain steel gate was inset into the stone, the simplicity of the metalwork was precisely the reason no one ever noticed it. Behind

the gate stood a figure dressed in blood-red robes, his face obscured by the drape of a hood. As Momar approached, the gold symbols embroidered down the front of the scarlet robes caught his eye, the threadwork glistening in the morning sun.

The hooded man—Momar knew him to be a Crimson Scribe—slipped the hood down onto his shoulders. “I am Ginju. Armaros is waiting,” he said as he swung the gate open.

Momar knew of Ginju, one of the oldest and most senior of the Crimson Scribes, but had never met him. The man’s bald head was ringed with a pattern of tattoos, many matching the symbols on his robe. Momar had always found tattoo choices fascinating, though he knew these particular symbols had everything to do with the man’s calling and powerful position, rather than an artistic decision.

Momar followed Ginju into the keep. They passed through a few hallways and rooms, all connected and each one grander and more imposing than the last. Every time Momar had been here he’d wanted to stop and admire the intricate details, but he’d always had an errand or a specific purpose that kept him from lingering. Today was no different—one did not ignore one’s guide, especially when one was to meet Armaros.

After passing through a final courtyard, they stood before huge, multistory double doors, one slightly ajar enabling him to see into the chamber itself. Ginju indicated with a simple hand motion that Momar was to enter. Momar nodded once and gave a small bow of gratitude, then stepped inside.

The council chamber never failed to send a chill down his back; the enormity of the room made him aware of how small humans were, while the craftwork of the place made him proud of what humans could accomplish. A shaft of golden light from the oculus opening at the zenith of the marble dome overhead illuminated a raised throne dais. An older woman, her silver hair braided and falling down her back, knelt before the largest of twelve thrones. Seated on this central throne, was a life-sized marble statue, but the sculpture's body was obscured by massive wings folded around itself. Eleven slightly smaller and empty thrones fanned out to either side.

As Momar stepped deeper into the cavernous space, he could see the woman's face was upturned and that she rested one hand on the wing of the seated stone figure.

The woman cocked her head slightly to one side. "Momar."

He bowed. "Armaros." He imparted as much respect and honor as he could into the one word.

Armaros rose, touched her forehead once before she turned to him, gracefully stepping down from the dais to his level. "And how is the Layil child?"

"Two years old. Healthy." He hesitated a bit and cleared his throat. "Precocious." Nothing else needed to be said.

"Very good." Armaros looked into Momar's eyes. "Your visit is quite unusual, but unfortunately, I don't think there is another way."

She shook her head.

“Anything that will help me keep her alive is worth doing. As the Layil Scribe, it is my sworn duty.” Momar made a small inclination of his head, deferring to Armaros and her position.

She raised one eyebrow. “I am well aware of your duties. This, however, will be dangerous. You may not learn enough, and I fear for what you may reveal. Are you prepared for the Twins to probe your mind?”

He nodded. “I am as prepared as I can be.” He couldn’t think of any adequate way to fully ready oneself for being sent outside the human concept of time—he was human, after all.

“Very well. We will begin.” Without another word, Armaros took a step closer to Momar and placed her hands on his shoulders. He closed his eyes, waiting for the transfer. Light and warmth flooded his being.

Momar stood on golden sand, nothing else around him as far as he could see. A brisk wind stirred the sand and brought his attention back to himself. The wind picked up intensity, forcing him to wipe the granules from his eyes.

The sand began to shift and assemble itself into a rectangular shape. Billions of grains poured upward as if looking at an hourglass in reverse. In a second or two, a full-sized mosque built of sand appeared. But as he moved forward, it crumbled to nothing with his first step. Then the sand built itself into a monastery, then a cathedral, then a Greek temple—the structure changing with each of his measured footfalls as he drew ever closer.

In the end, the temple shape remained. Momar walked through

an opening into an open courtyard. At the other end of the sandy expanse were two large thrones, each draped with a glowing, pearlescent figure. As he continued his approach, the walls of the courtyard and the surrounding temple melted away. Now only the two figures remained seated on their thrones, an adolescent girl and boy, and him.

The girl asked, “Are you human?” Although she was unclothed, her hair covered her like a robe. Everything about her glowed, including her all-white eyes.

Momar nodded and bowed slightly. While his breathing seemed to have increased, he couldn’t feel his heartbeat. He swallowed once and tried to maintain his outward calm.

Then the boy asked, “And how is it a human can step outside of time?” He too was clad only in his own hair, and his eyes narrowed as he spoke.

“I am a Scribe. The Offspring family I serve sent me here to seek what only you may know.” He bowed again.

Both figures queried in unison, as they sat up, “WHY?”

Momar could both see and feel their irritation blended with something akin to a cruel curiosity. Momar’s body moved back a step as if pushed by an invisible hand. There was so much danger here—so many paths that could go horribly wrong. “There is a child I ...”

The Twins rose as one. Momar could feel them both in his mind, the pain building in his head. They demanded together, “She’s not just any child, is she?”

They raised both of their arms toward Momar. “You. Will. Show. Us ...”

The pain in his skull approached blackout level. His knees buckled and his hands went to his head—the agony singular in its intensity. Visions flashed through his mind—a large gathering of First Born and Offspring, a man in a hood with a huge sword, and twining cords of metal enveloping a body. He heard the wailing of a woman and the screams of children. Having the Twins in his mind was a link of sorts, and he felt every mote of their anger, their sadness, their sense of longing. Danger, peril, jeopardy, menace—it was all of them and it was all-encompassing.

The Twins screamed, “... Show ... Us ... EVERYTHING!”

ONE

Guards restraining her arms, blood seeping from her lip, and rain pissing down outside—Mara shook her head at the insanity of it all. *Another day in freaking paradise.*

“They jumped me. You know it. I know it,” she said in an even voice. Juvie guard-ladies did not appreciate hysterics or screaming or swearing. She looked over at one of the girls sprawled on the floor and nodded in that direction. The same way she would have recited boring poetry, she said, “I was just doing my job, cooking the eggs. She smacked me in the face with a pan.” She had also said many inappropriate words that slurred Mara’s parents, intellect, and mental state, but it would have been a colossal waste of time to bring it up.

One inmate on the floor sat up with her hand on her cheek, and glared at Mara, her gaze promising payback of the worst kind. “She lies. Never touched her. We were all just putting things away.”

Mara rolled her eyes and shook her head. “No, they were not, and I’m not lying. You think I split my own lip?” She dabbed at it with her tongue.

The guard on Mara's right side said, "Enough. Let's go, Layil." She pulled Mara toward the doorway, the other guard following suit. A third guard pointed to the mess on the stovetop and said to the other gawking inmates, "Clean that up and go about your business."

Two girls in bright orange jumpsuits stepped forward to do as the guards had instructed, one to the smoking eggs on the grill, one to the pots and pans scattered across the floor. Neither made eye contact with Mara as she was escorted out of the kitchen. *Which was exactly as it should have been.*

At least the guards were pulling her along almost in step this time. It was always a challenge to have one side yanked forward, then the other. Made her feel like a toddler just learning to walk. The last thing Mara heard before the kitchen door slammed shut behind her was one of the girls on the floor saying, "Enjoy solitary, blond bitch." There were mumbled profanities after that, pitched low so the guards couldn't hear. And so many threats.

Mara heard every word.

It really was a magical place.

Once through the door, the guards loosened their death-grip on her arms just a tad bit and Mara said, "Really, I know the drill. I can walk on my own." Solitary confinement was a blessing in this hellhole. Sometimes she broke the rules just to get a little peace and quiet. Sure, the meals in confinement were even worse than the cafeteria, if that was possible, but no worse than doing a cleanse in some expensive spa on the outside.

OFFSPRING

The cranky guard-ladies on either side of her ignored her and steered her down a different corridor. She looked from one to the other, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion. “Hey, I don’t mean to tell you how to do your job or anything, but solitary is the other way.” Mara couldn’t help the words floating out and instantly kicked herself. The guards here didn’t care that the inmates were young girls. Their nightsticks were not decorations, and their training included how to land a painful hit without leaving any visible marks.

Miss Right Guard said, “I know you’re gonna miss the alone time, but it seems to be your lucky day, Layil.” She tugged Mara’s arm again.

Mara snorted a little. “Lucky? Scrubbing toilets with my own toothbrush is lucky?”

“Nope. Wrong again. You’re being released. Two whole days early. We got a big delivery of new girls and we need the room, so we’re booting your skinny ass out.” Miss Left Guard chuckled a little bit.

They led Mara through another set of doors and into the dorm wing, stopping at Mara’s bed. The guards dropped her arms. “You got five minutes to get your crap together. Meet us at the monitor station,” Miss Right Guard said before both women turned on their heels and left the dormitory.

Home. *I’m going home.* She could see Max, and Momar, and Max, and Dadima, and Max, and Mick, and her baby ... she could ride her baby again. The smile that had crept onto her face crashed

and burned. Because she'd also have to explain to Momar, in graphic and minute detail, everything that had happened inside juvie, and everything that had led up to her conviction.

Nobody has that kind of time.

Thinking of time made her jump. Five minutes? She only had five minutes! Mara dabbed at her lip a bit, wiping the blood on the sleeve of her jumpsuit. She reached into her cubby and pulled out everything she possessed, or everything the Cascadia Correctional Facility would let her possess. The sum total of her life here in paradise was a grayish towel, some skinny black flip-flops, her journal, and her pencil drawings. But her most treasured possession was a picture of Max on his last birthday. The cake in the pic was bigger than he was, and his grin a million times bigger than the cake. She smiled at the thought of being able to hug him in person sooner than she'd expected. *The little guy isn't all that little anymore.* He might complain when she gave his shaggy blond head the noogie it seriously needed.

"Excuse me, is this your spot?" A quiet voice interrupted her thoughts.

Mara's head snapped up. A petrified young face was looking at her, the girl's arms full of sheets, towels, and new flip-flops. "I was told this was my bunk." Mara felt the waves of terror coming off the newbie like rays of the sun.

"Out with the old, in with the new, right?" Mara laid out her towel and placed her things in the center, then wrapped it up into a bundle.

OFFSPRING

“Huh?” The new girl didn’t seem to follow, which was the normal response to almost everything that came out of Mara’s mouth.

Mara could have scared the bejeesus out of the girl but opted for honesty and kindness. *Do unto others, right?* She reached into her cubby and pulled out a battered copy of *Faces in the Water*. She placed it on top of the bunk. “Yeah, I know how you feel. This’ll help you keep what’s left of your sanity. Good luck. Keep your head down. And don’t engage with any of the gang kids.” She picked up her things and walked out of the dorm room.

If she never saw this place again, it would be too soon.