

# PROLOGUE

## THE WORLD OF THE ELEVEN

**F**ive thousand years ago the Age of Embodiment began with the White One and the Eleven, who brought the element relium from the Before into our world. As the children of the Eleven and their human mates slipped into the stream of history, they were known by many names. Among themselves, they are the First Born. Their descendants, the Offspring, are found in every culture around the world.

They are almost human—but not quite. The relium coursing through their veins gives them strengths unknown to man. Their participation in the human world is limited by the Covenant, which forbids the Eleven and their descendants from killing each other, bearing children together, and manipulating the will of humans.

Each family developed a line of scribes bound by a blood curse and tasked with recording family secrets and lore. Only the Keeper of the Lines knew every twist and turn of their complex genealogy, keeping the cipher-locked secrets in the closely guarded Book of Tracings. As the number of Offspring

grew, the Eleven established the Crimson Scribes to govern their vast legacy.

Many array themselves around the Eleven. The Amyclaeon Guard are sworn to protect them and enforce their will. Monks in the order of *Pro Lapsis Astra* dedicate themselves to praying for these Fallen Stars. And more ominously, the Hidden Eye, on a holy mission to eradicate abomination, is hunting them around the globe.

Now, in our time, their world is crumbling. Will the children of the Eleven return to the Before or will revolution sweep the globe?

# ONE

MARA

TORU'S ISLAND, NORTHEASTERN JAPAN

**M**ara crouched at the top of the cliff, listening for sounds of pursuit over the roar of the ocean. She'd ripped her jeans climbing up the snow-covered rock. Frigid night air wafted up her leg and throbbed through the soles of her combat boots. Thin clouds scudded across the moon.

She stomped the blood back into her feet and rubbed the knotted muscles in her forearms before turning her attention to the target—an ancient, pagoda-topped fortress that dominated the small island. A biting wind whipped through the battlements, but there was no sign of life.

*So far, so good.* Toru Itou didn't know she was coming.

Mara snatched another look over the precipice. The three guards from the security station at Toru's boat slip sprawled unconscious where she'd left them at the base of the rock face. They'd been easy to surprise. The island was like freaking Alcatraz, ten miles from mainland Japan and ringed with cliffs.

They probably didn't have scrawny blonds tackling them very often.

Besides, they were human. Not much of a challenge for Offspring like her. If that were the extent of Toru's security detail for the biolab, this would be easier than roller derby. Mara peered at her nails, bloodied from the climb, and tore off a jagged bit with her teeth.

After more than a month on the run, she'd lost track of the days, but December was almost over. Maybe it was New Year's Eve. *Crack the champagne, boys.* Mara ran a hand through her short, spiked hair. Back in Portland, women were painting their nails and primping their curls. Their dates were hoping to get laid. Even Mara's own decidedly wilder friends would be cooking up a party that involved loud music, spur-of-the-moment tattoos, and possibly a midnight ride down Burnside on kiddie bikes.

Mara pulled the collar of her leather motorcycle jacket up to block the cold and blew on her hands to warm them. This tour-de-Japan wasn't exactly the party she'd hoped for, but at least she wasn't locked up. This time last year she'd been fresh meat, facing twelve months in Cascadia Correctional Facility. It was a helluva place to turn eighteen. The only good thing about it had been Ethan.

Light-brown skin, curly hair hanging in his brown eyes, reflexively reaching for his longboard even though those assholes who ran Cascadia wouldn't let him keep it in lock-up

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much less ride. He was one of the few people in group therapy—otherwise known as blowhards talking about feelings—who hadn't been afraid to look her in the eyes.

*Ethan was always calling your bluff, tough girl.*

Even freezing her ass off, she grinned. They'd been released the same day. Mara had been sure Ethan was going to kiss her on the front step of Cascadia. She was leaning in for it, eager after all those months without a hand on her body. Getting beat up in the prison kitchen didn't count. Of course, Momar pulled up to get her a few moments too soon.

*You owe me one, Ethan Skylar.*

Mara's awareness of the biting wind and darkness faded as grief swirled through her like bile. Momar Singh—aloof, exacting, steadfast—the part bodyguard, part stiff-upper-lip man-nanny had raised Mara and her little brother, Max, while their parents squinted in their stupid microscopes.

*Momar was all the father I needed and now he's dead.*

Mara shook the tears out of her eyes like a dog after a bath. She wanted things different. *But they're not. Not by a long shot. If you can't do what you came here for, Max is as good as dead too.* Even now, after a very brief period of hope at Momar's funeral, her brother had relapsed and lay in a deep coma. Only a steady transfusion of the blood she'd collected from Sinioch Moreau kept him alive.

And the healer was running out of blood.

*Because I killed Sinioch.*

She hadn't meant to kill him, but when Sinioch had threatened her brother ... A rush of remembered rage filled Mara. Sinioch hadn't stood a chance. For that crime, she'd been sentenced under the Covenant that governed all descendants of the Eleven.

*So much for second chances.*

Mara jerked off her leather backpack and unzipped it. She'd removed her gauntlets for the climb but felt naked without them. As she pulled out the eight-inch tubes, she watched the way the surface of the slate-colored metal roiled and churned, devouring the moonlight.

They weren't iron or silver but relium, and far more precious than gold. *And deadly.* Mara knew that better than anyone. At her touch, a gauntlet sprang open lengthwise. She pushed the sleeve of her jacket above her right elbow and slid her arm into the slot. The metal pulsed like a beating heart and closed around her forearm, rippling as it molded to her flesh.

She was Offspring—mostly human but not quite, and the relium of the gauntlets responded to the same element in her blood. Mara grimaced as she put on the left gauntlet. These relics had been bought with sacrifice. As a rule, Mara didn't go in for all that save the world crap, but for Max ... She felt a catch in her throat. *Yeah, I'd drag myself onto a burning pyre for the little dude.* The cold in her bones deepened, and it wasn't just the freezing night or the looming fortress.

"Stop it," she muttered to herself. "Get your ass in there."

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The monk and the healer who were taking care of Max were convinced that the Offspring, Toru Itou, was holding Mara's mother here. Mara's job was simple—break her out and bring her home where she could get to work finding a cure for Max.

Mara wrenched on the backpack and sprinted from the cliff edge to the foundation of the fortress. A broad set of stairs spat her out into the main level, an immense open-air room that shoguns had used to review samurai troops long ago. Her snow-covered boots left slushy splotches across the glossy bamboo floor.

The upper levels were only accessible by a narrow stairway, but the old structure had been retrofitted with a belowground bunker serviced by an elevator, its stainless-steel door like a robot biting through the ancient walls. The last guard she'd poleaxed before climbing up here had said her mother was in something called Block Eighteen.

Mara jammed the down arrow with an icy finger and waited, edgy and impatient.

She hadn't seen or heard from either of her parents in over a year. They'd disappeared the same night she'd been arrested and sent to Cascadia. If she wasn't so pissed, Mara might have been worried.

Still, being minutes away from some gushy reunion with her mother made her stomach churn. What would she say? *Thanks for letting me rot in detention. Really appreciated the eleven months, two weeks, and three days of awesome!*

The elevator hummed to a stop, and Mara tensed, but when the doors shushed open on silky hydraulics, it was empty. She entered and mashed the only button with her palm. From the time it took for the elevator doors to open again, Mara guessed she was pretty far underground. *Block Eighteen must be some kind of lab. Just the place to find Mom revving up a centrifuge and muttering formulas.*

For as long as she could remember, her parents had been holed up in research facilities, studying the blood of Offspring to find out why they lived longer and healed faster, why some could heal the sick, and others kill with nothing more than a touch. And her parents had created, whether on purpose or by accident, the toxin that even now was worming its way through Max's body, incapacitating the relium in his blood, and killing him slowly but surely.

Mara sucked in a breath, realizing she'd been clenching her fists so hard her nails had cut bloody half-moons into her palms. *Max is the only reason I'm here. I don't give a crap about Mom.* The elevator doors opened. Mara slid through them, ready to pound anyone who so much as glanced at her, but the bunker was empty as a morgue.

*Cold enough for corpses.*

A shiver rippled through her.

Offspring. She was sure of it. For the past month, she'd been hounded, chased, and attacked, and if she'd learned anything—other than it was almost always better to hit first and ask



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questions later—it was this: Mara knew in her blood when others of her kind were near.

*My own personal alert system.*

She scanned the cinder block walls of the bunker. Her breath billowed in the antiseptic, blue-lit air. Long banks of stainless-steel drawers were stacked five high and five across. Numbered blocks of twenty-five drawers each filled the cavernous room.

*This is no lab.*

Other than a faint hum that seemed to emanate from the drawers, Mara heard only the low thump of her beating heart. She oriented herself to the numbering system and walked down the aisle toward Block Eighteen.

The sensation of accelerated blood flow that alerted her to the presence of other Offspring was faint, almost smothered. No attack was imminent. Block Eighteen was cold storage, not a research lab.

The drawers in the block were unmarked. She picked one at random and gripped the handle. The sharp, die-cut edges bit into her palm. Her reflection in the polished metal surface grimaced back like a small, ferocious animal. The blue light reflected off the stainless-steel studs that dotted her ears from top to bottom. Snow still clung to her shoulders.

*I don't want to know what's in there.*

A shudder drove through her.

*What are you gonna do? Go home and sit by Max's bed while he dies?*

Mara realized she'd been holding her breath and let it out in a long hiss. Even in the cold, her hands had gone slick with sweat. She wiped them on her jeans and checked to make sure the gauntlets were secure on her forearms.

*Okay. Let's do this.*

Mara took the handle again, this time in both hands, and pulled.

The drawer slid out with a soft sigh. She flinched backward, half expecting the contents to leap out at her.

She forced herself to look down.

The albino girl, wearing a threadbare sundress, was young—maybe eleven—about the same age as Max, and like him, her muscles were stiff and contracted in some kind of predeath rigor mortis. *She's been dosed too.* The hum was louder now, and Mara noticed an electronic panel on the inside wall of the drawer. Snaking from the panel into the vein inside the girl's left arm was a clear tube through which dripped an occasional pulse of crimson fluid.

*Blood from a First Born.*

Mara fought the urge to retch.

The blood of the first generation born to the Eleven and their human mates was far richer in relium than that of Offspring, whose genetics had been diluted by more generations of outbreeding with humans. It was the only thing strong enough to counteract the toxin and prevent immediate death.

She slid her hand under the girl's back.

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Bony stumps protruded from each of the girl's shoulder blades. The unscarred skin stretched taut over them and gave an odd tilt to the girl's chest, pushing her rib cage up as if she were on the verge of levitation. Mara flexed her shoulders and felt her leather jacket pull tight against the matching stumps jutting from her own back. The deformity, an evolutionary remnant of their ancestors, marked them as Offspring.

"I knew it," she whispered to the still face.

Mara swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. She wanted to find an empty drawer and shut her own damn self in, but that would do shit for Max. Instead, she went back to the search.

A Black man lay inside the next drawer, his bright cotton tunic still stained with blood from whatever struggle had brought him here. His bloodshot eyes bulged sightlessly at the ceiling. Hope trickled out of Mara. The guard had said, "Your mom's in Block Eighteen, lower level." Now she understood the mockery in his voice.

*I should have broken his butt-ugly jaw.*

Mara leaned against the wall of drawers, her breath coming into rhythm with the hum of the stasis machines. She had no doubt that her mother was lying in one of these drawers. She didn't need to see it, did she? There was no point.

*If you can't help Max, I don't care how you got here.*

It was her own fault that she was lying like a mummified mermaid in a freak show.

“I don’t need you,” Mara muttered as she began wrenching open the drawers.

An old woman in a sherbet-orange housedress. A gaunt man with Russian mob tattoos. A round-faced Mexican woman who smelled vaguely of roses. Each face stared at her, rigid and unseeing. A tremor raced up her spine.

“If you didn’t want an Offspring daughter, you should have a married a goddamned human.” Mara slammed the drawer shut and the clangs reverberated through the bunker, ricocheting off metal and concrete.

“I hate you! I hate you!”

But she opened every drawer.

Her mother, Veronique, was in the last one, green eyes staring, no longer beautiful. Her hands were frozen in rigid claws, and Mara could imagine her scrabbling at the slick metal, buried alive. A fitting fate for a recluse. She’d been kind but not motherly and, like an old-fashioned doll, both hollow and brittle.

Mara’s breath came in shallow, desperate bursts, and she fought the urge to pull her mother’s body from the suffocating drawer.

*There’s nothing you can do.*

She should go, and go quickly, before someone discovered the guards she’d knocked out and came looking for her. Instead, she reached toward her mother’s face. Mara cupped her cheek, feeling the constricted muscles under her skin.

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“Mom?” she whispered. “Wake up.”

Nothing. Of course not. She’d been an idiot to expect a response.

*You couldn’t wait to have me out of the house.*

It had been a long time since her mom had done anything for her.

*Well, I couldn’t wait, either, but you should’ve been there for Max! He’s just a kid!*

Mara’s arms fell to her sides, as heavy and lifeless as the bodies in the drawers. Max was her responsibility now. She was his legal guardian. *I love him!* True enough, but in the dark bunker, Mara had to admit she’d been hoping their mother would take back the job. *Eighteen is too young to be someone’s parent.*

“You’ve been a shitty mom,” she whispered.

Mara was bone-weary.

*Always fighting and running and never getting anywhere.*

As she pushed her mother back into icy darkness, the click of the latch sounded as final as the slice of a guillotine.