

CHAPTER ONE

Don't fool yourself, Amos's inner voice warned, sharp and insistent. *They're still hunting you. It's not safe here. It may not be safe anywhere.*

The forest clearing was remarkably tranquil in contrast to his pessimistic outlook. Sunlight slanted through the branches, illuminating the long yellow-green grass with its warm light. The sight should have tempered his mood, but it didn't.

It took several moments before Amos realized he was holding his breath, not daring to disturb the calm. Hardly a leaf stirred in the slight breeze, and aside from the occasional bird or cricket, the quiet was absolute.

You're sleep-deprived and probably still bleeding, his inner voice accused, hammering home its relentless criticism. *Even if you heard anything coming, your reflexes are too dull to do anything about it.*

He shifted the meager weight of the backpack on his shoulders, gritting his teeth. He refused to succumb to lethargy, whether brought on by physical exhaustion, or the throbbing pain in his side. *Keep moving. Just another ten steps. Then ten more. Just keep moving.*

He willed himself into a rhythm, edging around the circumference of the sunlit clearing. Once again, he found some respite from the sun's heat under the dense foliage.

The cool air revived him. His headache began to fade as the muscles around his eyes relaxed. The throbbing pain under his ribs was a nagging reminder—keep moving. The forest floor became a downward slope, and he paid close attention to the rough and rooted terrain under his feet.

The last thing he needed was a sprain or a broken bone from an ill-advised step. He couldn't afford any delays. Not until he put a great deal more distance between himself and what was on his trail.

Did I tell anyone the Story? He wracked his brain, desperate to recall if he'd let any betraying detail slip about his destination. As far as he knew, he'd told only one other person, a fellow Runner. A friend who knew how to keep his mouth shut. Perhaps the secret was still his. The next few days would depend on it.

The terrain sloped at a steeper rate as he worked his way through the brush. The silence was uncanny. His own stumbling steps were obscenely loud in his ears.

If they're anywhere nearby, they'll hear you. His inner voice lashed him without mercy. *Faster! Quieter! Keep moving!*

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The faint trickle of running water reached his ears. *Further down, maybe a half kilometer or so*, he estimated. The stream was a familiar landmark, and hearing it was reassuring. He'd remembered the route accurately. Even after all these years.

Just make sure you cross the stream without soaking yourself, especially considering what you're bringing with you. Amos halted, leaning against a tree to catch his breath. The closer he got to the rushing stream, the less he'd be able to hear. This was perhaps his final opportunity to detect the sound of pursuit. He couldn't afford to stay still for long, but one last listen wouldn't hurt.

If they've set a Tracker on me, I can't take too many precautions. He forced himself to draw deep but silent breaths as he listened. *People, I can deal with—probably even fool the dogs with some luck. But a Tracker ...*

He hadn't *seen* their attackers at the Mission with his own eyes, but there was little doubt in his mind at least one Tracker was involved. It was the only explanation that made sense. How else could the Mission have been discovered?

Resolutely, Amos muzzled any further thought of his frantic escape from the Old City. He resumed his trek downslope, hoping any potential pursuers were far behind. Despite the rough terrain, he made good time, picking his footing with care between the moss-covered rocks and protruding roots. The denseness of the forest was working to his advantage. It would be difficult for his pursuers to sight him unless they were much closer than he believed.

How good is a Tracker's eyesight? He wondered, not for the first time. Their knowledge about the enhanced abilities of the fanatical creatures was piecemeal at best.

That they possessed unnatural strength and endurance was fairly obvious, as was their single-mindedness where their targets were concerned. The Hoarders had designed their Trackers for grim efficiency.

And let's not forget their killer instinct. His mouth formed a grim line. *The perfect stealth weapon for the Hoarders. Once a Tracker has your scent, nothing gets in their way until you're dead. All over an Implant I didn't even know I had.*

A rock shifted under his foot, throwing him off-balance. He caught himself against the rough bark of a tree, barely averting a headlong fall. The pain under his ribs blossomed into a new fire, wringing a small gasp from him. His hand burned from the bruising impact against the tree. He examined the damage to his palm, unsurprised to see blood welling.

Tracker! His inner voice shrieked, although he had no way of knowing if any of the subhuman killing machines were nearby. *What are you thinking? Blood on a tree? Why don't you just send up a flare to let them know where you are?*

Although he chafed at the delay, Amos knew he must deal with the bloody mark he'd left on the tree. Unbidden, Doctor Simon's warning about the connection between Implants and blood came to mind. *I don't know exactly how this works*, she'd admitted with her usual candor. *But I can tell you this much, once it's in the blood, there's no turning back.*

His face twisted into a grimace as he shoved the memory into the recesses of his mind. This wasn't the appropriate time or place to mull over what had happened. He needed to get under cover. He pulled his serrated hunting knife from its belt sheath, and with speed and dexterity, carved out the small section of rough bark. Not a trace, not a scent could be left. Amos opened one of his jacket pockets, meticulously dropping the bloodied wood chips inside. *Leave no trace. None!*

He dug up some of the wet earth near the tree, smearing it over the small area where he'd carved the tree trunk. The dark earth dulled the pale under-bark his knife had exposed. Amos spread some fallen leaves over the ground where he'd dug, stepping back to survey his handiwork with a critical eye.

Not bad, but probably not enough. His inner voice nagged at him. *You make too many foolish decisions.*

Shut up, Amos thought, anger surfacing. *I don't have time for anything else.*

His inner voice didn't miss a beat. *Sure, you say that now. But if a Tracker finds you before dawn, you'll wish you had this moment back.*

Frustrated by his own pointless internal dialogue, Amos slammed his knife back into its sheath, making a louder noise than he anticipated. He froze, motionless beside the now-camouflaged tree, every nerve tingling with adrenaline. He listened intently—he could almost imagine he heard the sweat forming at his temples.

Nothing. Just the murmur of the nearby stream. No pounding footsteps. No crashing underbrush. No betraying shouts or the hiss of weapons-fire. He hadn't given away his location with his unthinking carelessness.

Reassured for the moment, Amos resumed his downhill trek. It took a great deal of resolve to not break into a run. He must maintain firm control if he wanted to avoid discovery, or succumb to the very real possibility of an injury-causing misstep. The stakes were high. Everything depended on keeping his wits about him.

The stream was further downhill than he anticipated, but it wasn't long before he perched on a large boulder by its banks. The sound of water cascading over the rocks was much louder now.

Amos was very aware of his breathing, as if a part of him was a separate observer of the

unfolding drama. He balanced on the boulder, ears attentive for any sound of pursuit, as he scanned for the best possible way across the stream. He would have felt at ease splashing through whatever depths lay hidden beneath the white water, even with the knowledge of how cold—bone-chilling cold—the water would be. He mentally listed the contents of his pack, most of which could survive an unplanned dampening.

Except for one little pocket, his inner voice chided him. If you damage it—or lose it—there goes your only bargaining chip.

Bargaining chip? Amos almost laughed out loud, jolted by the idea. As if Trackers ever negotiate for anything. As far as they're concerned, the only good Runner is a dead one.

He shook his head, refusing to waste any more time with needless inner argument. One direction was as good as the other. He chose to go to his left, following the current downstream. The trees flanking the waterway remained dense, their branches meeting overhead to create a green tunnel over the stream. The rushing water was both hypnotic and noisy, which did little to assuage his unease. He scrambled over the rocks, following the winding waterway as he searched for a safe place to cross.

In a different scenario, Amos could almost imagine he was on a pleasant trek in the wilderness. No tension, no pressing problems requiring a solution. No gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach—the one he realized some time ago was named Fear. Just a challenging, but otherwise pleasant excursion into the wild.

The throbbing ache under his ribs kept his thoughts grounded in reality, reminding him what was at stake. He opened his shirt to examine the bandage. To his relief, the bleeding appeared to have stopped. He didn't dare examine the ragged wound. Not now, not here. He could only hope his hasty attempts at stitching the injury were adequate.

He resumed his journey, following the stream's winding course, pausing every now and then to listen. The rushing water made it difficult to hear, but he was satisfied he was still alone.

Trackers are known for their stealth. His inner voice whittled away at his confidence. *This is no time to get over-confident or sloppy.* It was one of those rare moments when Amos and his inner voice agreed. *Maybe if I'd been more careful, the Mission would still be standing ...*

He clamped down on the wayward thought, ignoring the mental echo of the gunfire which spurred him to run for his life.

Guilt was a distraction he couldn't afford.

CHAPTER TWO

A short time later, the meandering waterway took a sharp turn to the south, and there he discovered a much larger outcropping of rocks in the crook of the stream. Amos studied the sprawling boulders with a critical eye, and knew he'd found as good a spot as any for crossing.

He centered the weight of the backpack as best he could, and picked his way gingerly over the water-soaked jumble of rocks. All of his concentration was required in choosing the most secure foot and handholds. His inner voice protested with vehemence, sounding the alarm over his lack of attention to his surroundings.

What other option do I have? Amos couldn't think of any. *I can't fall into the water, so I'll just have to risk it.* Fear retreated to a respectful but wary distance. Its icy tendrils refused to loosen their grip, urging him to make a speedy crossing. *At least I don't have to worry about being quiet. The rapids will cover any noise.*

He crested the last boulder, sliding down to dry land. Well, *almost* dry land. Directly before him lay a muddy patch of ground, scored and torn. He crouched down, surveying the scene through narrowed eyes, absorbing every possible detail.

A spirited struggle had transpired by the stream's edge, judging by the churned and ripped earth in front of him. Amos considered, for a brief moment, leaving some bloodstained evidence of his own, just to throw any pursuers off his scent.

Or perhaps he could plant the idea he'd come to an unfortunate and bloody end. It might—just *might*—be enough to dissuade his pursuers. But he had a gut feeling there simply wasn't enough time to do a convincing job. Time was no longer an ally.

You don't have that much blood to spare, either. His inner voice managed to sound practical and mocking at the same time. *Not if you expect to keep the same pace.* Fear advised against any delay as well. Self-doubt joined on its heels, reminding him of the legendary abilities of the Trackers. His decision was made for him.

Amos skirted the edge of the muddy patch, pressing deeper into the forest. After the steep descent on the opposite side of the stream, the renewed uphill climb put heavy weights on his feet, slowing him down. But the terrain was beginning to look familiar. Thick, towering pines surrounded him, their defiant roots anchored in the rocky ground, interspersed with ever-larger boulders and jumbled piles of stone. He was getting close.

For a moment, his inner voice balked as the still-unanswered question raised its head again. *Did you tell the Story to anyone? Let anything slip? An unguarded reference to your past? A*

thoughtless comment?

Amos refused to be distracted by the nagging inner voice. The sun moved further west as he continued south. Or south-by-south-east, he guessed. His exact direction was no longer clear, muddled by his many twists and turns. But the landmarks, recalled from a much earlier time, were still as fresh in his memory as the first time he'd been here. When the Story began.

An outcropping of boulders, so high they formed a mini-cliff, benignly enforced another turn. He staggered down a short incline, and forged his way up the opposite side. He reached for a branch to pull himself to the top of the ridge, and then jerked his hand back.

Sure, pull on the branch! Maybe strip the leaves off as a pointer for Them to follow! Maybe re-open those cuts on your hand for a good blood-scent! Get it together, Amos!

The shadows lengthened at an alarming rate. Nightfall would come quickly after the sun set. The prospect of wandering blindly in the dark, feeling his way, was not a welcome one. Amos dug deep into what remained of his adrenaline, quickening his steps. He paused only long enough to cover his back-trail as best he could in the final push to his goal.

A sigh of relief escaped his lips as he rounded another small boulder-cliff and spotted the cave's entrance. His memory hadn't led him astray. Amos surveyed the dark opening with a critical eye, striving for an elusive objectivity. He was encouraged to realize the entrance *was* difficult to see. The cave remained well-hidden, unless one already knew where to look. The underbrush was sparse on the steep slope, compared to the profusion of new spring growth framing the stream below. What little foliage there was served as an effective mask for the cave's location.

Hope outweighed exhaustion as he navigated the steeper incline. Despite his weariness, he took extra time to ensure his tracks were all but invisible behind him. No sense in getting sloppy this late in the game.

He took one last cautionary look around. The forested slopes remained as silent as an empty cathedral, and even the rushing stream was muted by the distance. Amos cupped a hand over his bandaged ribs and ducked down, crawling into the dusky recesses of his underground refuge.

The stone was rough under his hands and knees, and he paused for a moment as the cuts and bruises on his palm scraped painfully on the gritty surface. He sniffed cautiously, but smelled nothing to suggest the cave had become an animal's lair. His eyes adjusted to the gloom as he scanned the interior of his hiding place. The cave was as large as he'd imagined it, putting to rest any worries his memory had painted it more spacious than it was. A wave of relief washed over him, almost—but not quite—masking the icy presence of fear.

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Amos shucked his pack off and pulled out a small lantern he'd wisely included in his hasty packing. *Was it just yesterday? The ambush caught all of us off-guard.* He shook his head, positioning the lantern to prevent its rays from betraying his presence outside the cave mouth.

He crawled deeper underground, and found the spot he was looking for. The cave was where the Story began, but it was the lowest part of the cave where the Story's epicenter resided.

He reached into a crevice, his fingers brushing against the familiar piece of rock. The one which slid to the right, if you knew just how. A useless pocket of space lay behind it, too small for hiding anything of value.

Almost useless. But not today. Not tonight.

He dug into his pack again and removed the incriminating item—his Implant. He stared at it for a long moment, feeling anew the peculiar combination of fascination and revulsion. It lay dormant in his palm, stained brown-red with dried blood. His blood.

To his relief, the diminutive piece of technology fit with ease into the pocket-sized space in the crevice. There were even a few centimeters to spare. He slid the smooth rock back into place and pulled his hand out of the crevice with a small smile of satisfaction. His plan, hastily concocted, was working.

Don't pop the champagne just yet. His inner voice scoffed at his brief sense of triumph. *You're playing a dangerous game, and Hoarders don't play by the rules. Any rules.*

For once, he didn't argue. His life was filled with more than enough regret and guilt, and the Hoarders' ambush at the Mission only added another layer. He was safe, for the moment, but there was no way of knowing how the other Runners had fared.

That didn't prevent him from enjoying a sense of cold accomplishment. So far, so good. He'd escaped the ambush at the Mission, and as far as he could tell, he'd made it out of the City without being followed. His Implant was hidden at the bottom of the cave, and as long as the Story remained untold, the Hoarders would have no reason to search for it there.

A lot had happened in twenty-four hours, but he'd made it this far. Amos rolled onto his back, staring at the cave's shadowy ceiling. Physical and emotional exhaustion conspired to overwhelm him, and he slept.

CHAPTER THREE

This isn't my world. Aubrey Carter shivered, cold and miserable. She pulled her jacket tighter in an effort to ward off the bad weather. *Everything about this place is foreign.*

The rain continued its incessant pounding. The drops ricocheted off the pavement, spraying water mid-calf in height. Not that it made much difference—everything and everyone in the City was already soaked and dripping. The streetlights on either side of the four-lane boulevard were useless. Only a few of the towering lampposts still possessed unbroken glass, and even those were as unseeing as a corpse.

At least there are no actual corpses littering the gutters. Aubrey grimaced, trying to curb her over-active imagination. *Things are scary enough already. I don't need to add more to it.*

Here and there, the occasional barrel fire—down alleys she wouldn't dare explore alone—cast a sullen and surreal glow. The firelight shimmered through the raindrops, ignored by the people hunched around the barrels, warming their hands. Several had erected makeshift canopies to protect the fires. Despite their efforts, Aubrey heard the sizzling sound as the spiteful rain navigated imperfections in the canopy to find the flames below.

The downpour mixed with the guttural noise of traffic, creating a sullen and mind-numbing drone. A surprising number of vehicles were on the streets, giving Aubrey a moment's pause as she wondered why so *many* Hoarders were in the City on such an inhospitable evening.

Hoarders preferred to remain aloof. Most never ventured out of their walled and prosperous Enclaves. Anyone living beyond their fortified walls—Aubrey and everyone she knew—received only their antiseptic contempt. So why were so many Hoarder vehicles racing through the storm-wracked streets?

Everything around her appeared gray. The boarded-up store-fronts, the empty apartment buildings, the lamp-posts, the pavement, even the anonymous vehicles roaring past, splashing gouts of water over the sidewalks. Gray, the color of depression, defeat, and despair.

How fitting. Aubrey shivered again. She paused a moment, slicking the rain away from her eyes, shielding her gaze with her hands. Staying too long in one spot would be a mistake.

The rain convinced everyone to withdraw into their own private worlds, diligently searching for the promise of a dry haven. Which didn't mean watchful eyes weren't still alert to any aberrant detail. *They found me once already. I can't let my guard down.*

Aubrey kept her pace under control, holding herself in check despite her instincts. Her heart pounded in her ears and the adrenaline in her veins screamed *run*, but she resisted. *Don't draw attention. Don't stand out from the crowd. Hidden in plain sight.* She fought the temptation to hunch her shoulders in anticipation of ...

What, exactly? What could they do on a crowded street, filled with human traffic sloshing through puddles on the sidewalk? Not to mention the aggressive convoys of Hoarder vehicles

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racing by with surprising frequency. She shivered again, and not just from the cool breeze pressing her drenched clothing against her skin. *That's just it—I don't know what they might do. Or what they could get away with, even on a public street.*

The simple yet sobering realization prompted her to tug her hood further forward over her face. Her mind remained clear. *Keep your pace steady and your shoulders down.*

It was easy to lose track of how far she'd already come, between the driving rain, the bustle of human traffic, and the faceless quality of this crumbling section of the Old City. Her own familiar town seemed a thousand kilometers and several lifetimes away. She resolutely shoved any stray flashbacks into a hidden vault in her mind. The macabre event which catapulted her into this journey was also filed away. She was well aware that dwelling on her memories could be a lethal distraction. As paranoid as it might sound, it wasn't an exaggeration. *Concentrate, Aubs, concentrate.*

Thunder rolled behind her, ominous and threatening. No lightning—at least, none she'd seen so far—but the growling rumble added another level of anxiety to her rain-soaked quest. There were so many people around her, passing her in the opposite direction, catching up to her from behind and shoving ahead. Everyone was intent on getting someplace where the rain was not.

Any of them could be one of the Soul-less. She swallowed hard to keep her heart in her chest where it belonged. *Anyone could be my executioner. By the time a Soul-less reveals itself, it's already too late.* She took a deep breath to clear her gloomy thoughts. She couldn't allow herself to fall into a void of abject hopelessness. She *must* keep her wits about her, stay focused on reaching her destination. Pessimism was her internal enemy, threatening to overwhelm her, paralyze her, and make her easy prey.

The next intersection appeared out of the deluge. Aubrey wondered—with a sense of morbid detachment—what life had been like when the traffic lights still functioned. Before the Hoarders seized control over the resources they craved, and the entire City degenerated into a festering pool of poverty. She'd heard stories of pre-Enclave civilization when she was a child, but it was hard to reconcile the tales with the dreary scene around her.

A crowd gathered at the intersection, jostling against one another. Each person scanned the wide boulevard, alert to the potential approach of another Hoarder convoy. *Like penguins testing the ocean for sharks.* She swallowed hard, appalled by the grim aptness of the comparison.

She perched precariously among the wary pedestrians, the toes of her boots peeking over the sidewalk's edge. She glanced down at the oversized sewer drain tucked beneath the curb, mesmerized by the filthy waterfall cascading into the darkness below. She wondered how many

bodies had been scraped into the sewer after a failed attempt to cross the street.

There's your overactive imagination again. Aubrey chided herself, unable to shake her sense of foreboding. *I've heard too many stories about how rough life in the City is. I can't afford to jump at every shadow.*

The muted rumble of powerful engines sounded nearby. The restless mob, anxious to avoid the Hoarders, crowded behind her, almost propelling Aubrey into the street.

She gasped, leaning back, and managed to stay on the curb for an additional moment. The oncoming vehicles were visible but still a block away, and the crowd surged ahead as one. Aubrey was carried along on the crest of the human wave. Despite her best efforts, she stumbled on the slick, uneven pavement. Her heart was in her throat as she pictured herself falling headlong, the sound of squealing tires and breaking bones the last thing she'd ever hear.

Her worst fears were averted. A firm hand grabbed her arm, just above the elbow, at once steadying her and also dragging her precipitously toward the opposite curb. Aubrey had a brief impression of a young woman, not much beyond her teen years, hard-faced and determined as they splashed their way onto the sidewalk.

She heard a terrified shriek from behind, as some of the stragglers—*how many? how old? how young?*—were caught in the next wave of vehicles. Her mind flinched away from finishing the thought as the oversized trucks roared past.

Part of her wanted to turn back and see if any had survived, but she knew better. *Don't draw attention. Don't stand out. Hidden in plain sight, remember?*

And no one else in the stone-faced crowd was looking back.

It was then she realized the woman hadn't released her arm once they were on the relative safety of the sidewalk. Her new companion kept an iron grip on Aubrey, half-leading, half-dragging her down the street. But not in the direction she'd been heading—no, they'd taken a sharp left at the corner, moving at a swift pace on a new route.

Aubrey tried to wrest her arm free, but the hand fastened on her elbow was surprisingly strong. Her heart stopped beating for a precious second or two. *One of the Soul-less?*

No, that doesn't make any sense. Aubrey answered her own question. *I'm still alive, aren't I?*

The woman wove her way through the faceless crowd with surprising ease, striding toward the rain-slicked stairs of an abandoned tenement. Her grip on Aubrey's elbow shifted with lightning quickness, latching onto her hand with a firm grip. Together, they raced up the steps and out of the press of the crowd.

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The woman fumbled with one hand in her coat pocket, her other hand crushing Aubrey's in its fierce grasp. For one panicky moment, Aubrey considered shoving her down the steps while she was preoccupied with unlocking the door. Everything was wet and slippery. Her companion would be unable to keep her balance on the slick stairway. Aubrey could make a break for it—all she needed was a few seconds to get a head start.