

CHAPTER ONE

“Live in the shadow of an Enclave? Not a chance.”

There was no need for Amos to raise his voice. The conviction behind his words, coupled with the loathing in his voice, was as sharp as the knife fastened to his belt.

The shopkeeper remained silent. It was Don, the towering bruiser with the baritone drawl, who replied first. “Starvation wages still puts food on the table, I guess. But I’m with you, Amos. I couldn’t live this close to Hoarderville. I feel sorry for these people.”

“They’re desperate.” The shopkeeper, Mateo, gestured toward the shantytown nestled against the Enclave’s exterior wall. “When people have few alternatives, a day-pass to work inside the Enclave appears promising.”

They stood just outside the door of his clothing shop, one of many lining the crooked footpaths in the shantytown next to the Enclave. The retractable awning, faded and worn at the edges, shielded them from the late-afternoon sun. Their position gave them a clear, covert view of the Enclave.

Amos wore a sturdy jacket, mid-thigh in length, an effective cover which concealed his weapons. Don, his long-time friend and traveling companion, was clad in similar attire, for the same pragmatic reason. To the casual observer, there was nothing to distinguish them from the other inhabitants of the shantytown.

“I’ve never been this close before.” Amos scowled, craning his neck as he tried to estimate the wall’s height. “All my life, I’ve known the Enclave was here, on the coast. I’ve never wanted to see how the high-and-mighty live.”

The Enclave was the Hoarders’ impenetrable fortress. The opulent mega-city was enclosed on all sides by a towering wall, with a minimum of gates providing access inside. The nearest gates were heavy, guarded by a phalanx of hard-bitten soldiers, a threatening reminder that entrance was hard-won.

Etched above the gate, stark and utilitarian, was its sole identifier: “Gate Seven.” Above the chiseled number was an open balcony—five meters wide, Amos guessed—bristling with advanced weaponry to intimidate the foolhardy.

How many different ways can they make it clear we’re not wanted? Amos ground his teeth at the Hoarders’ heavy-handed scare tactics.

The Hoarders kept everything of value under their tight-fisted control—energy, technology, medical advances, education—and therefore all the political power. For the most part, they acted as if anyone living outside the Enclave didn’t exist. At best, there was a grudging recognition of their value as a cheap source of temporary labor, to carry out tasks the Hoarders considered beneath them.

A bustling community had developed outside Gate Seven, fanning out from the stark access point. A daily line-up of hopefuls competed for the coveted work permits, their sole access into the Enclave and a day's meager wages. There were always fewer jobs than applicants. Those fortunate enough to acquire a single-day permit would find themselves banished outside the walls again by nightfall.

To repeat the same process the next day. And the next.

The shops in the shantytown were located closest to the gate, with an ever-shifting number of makeshift housing units spreading out beyond the market. A fragile economy had evolved to provide for the needs of the hopeful job-seekers and their dependents.

Amos found the shantytown's atmosphere to be a strange mixture. On the surface, it was the camaraderie of people sharing a common plight. Underneath, resentment smoldered against the Citizens of the Enclave—the Hoarders—and the unjust society they represented.

The crumbling husk of the Old City lay to the south, indistinct in the fading afternoon sun. From their current vantage point, the empty towers of the City's former financial district were visible, rising like a miser's skeletal fingers in the distance.

Amos's gaze lingered on the ruins. They were a long way from the familiar surroundings of their Hub, hidden in the sub-basement of the downtown Mission.

And you thought you knew what "hidden in plain sight" meant. Amos's inner voice couldn't resist the taunt. But let's face it, a coward who abandoned his own brother wouldn't have what it takes to live in a Hub next to the Enclave, would he?

Amos scowled, determined to stifle the annoying voice. *I don't have to listen to you. I can't change the past. I was just a kid. And this can't be about revenge.*

Don glanced at him, raising one eyebrow, and leaned closer so Amos alone could hear him. "Let it go, Amos. This is no time for second-guessing yourself, especially this close to the Enclave."

Without waiting for an answer, Don turned his attention to the shopkeeper standing to his left.

No, much more than a shopkeeper. An ally. A conduit of information. The leader of a Hub audaciously established in the Enclave's shadow.

He'd given his name as Mateo Reyes, but added nothing more. Anonymity was a potent weapon for a Hub leader in such a high-risk location.

"If you'd be kind enough to point us to your drop-box, we'll collect the mail and be on our way," Don said. "Neither rain nor snow, nor gloom of night . . . you know the routine."

Don's drawl and lighthearted speech were not accidental. His steadying influence had calmed the frayed nerves of his companions on more than one occasion.

Mateo squinted at him, adjusting the brim of his cap so he could look Don in the eye. His mannerisms were quick and precise. In Amos's opinion, he had the look of someone who'd lived under the threat of discovery perhaps too long already.

"We have no drop-box *per se*," Mateo replied, his unblinking gaze disconcerting. "It would be impossible to keep one secure in a setting such as ours. Your 'mail,' as you call it, will arrive soon. We must wait."

"Wait? For how long?" Amos spoke with more heat than he intended. "Garr sent us because he thought you had valuable intel. We need a way inside those gates. The Hoarders won't stop Implanting people unless we do something about it."

He paused to take a deep breath. "We need to be gone before nightfall. Can you help us or not?"

Mateo's penetrating gaze was now focused on him. Amos tried to put a name to Mateo's expression. *Like he's categorizing me. Filing me away for future reference.*

"While you're waiting, perhaps I could interest you in a brief tour." Mateo's expression remained benign, as if their close proximity to the Enclave was of no consequence. "We're rather proud of the community we've built here. In difficult circumstances, I remind you."

"A 'brief tour'?" Amos repeated in amazement. He struggled to keep his voice down. "Didn't you hear what I just said? We don't have time for sightseeing. Can you help us, or not?"

Don laid a cautionary hand on his shoulder.

"We'll wait as long as necessary," he said to Mateo, who transferred his gaze from Amos to Don without comment. "And now that you mention it, I wouldn't mind taking a closer look at the Enclave. With an experienced tour guide, of course."

"Very good," Mateo replied, dipping his head in a slight bow. He gestured to the dirt path outside, trodden into hardness by the passage of many feet. "I trust your 'mail' will arrive by the time we return. And please, take advantage of my wares before we depart. As a merchant, I must make sales here in the 'shadow,' as you call it."

He crossed between them into his shop, returning with a pair of caps similar to the one he wore. "These are some of my most popular items. They provide excellent protection from overexposure to the sun's rays."

He gave the caps to Amos, his peculiar gaze unchanged. Amos handed one to Don, and put on his own.

Not just protection from the sun. He recognized—belatedly—Mateo's subtle strategy. *Protection from prying eyes on the wall. No one can suspect we're anything more than anonymous hopefuls, looking for work.*

CHAPTER TWO

“How many of them know the truth?” Aubrey gave voice to a question she’d had on her mind for some time. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say most of the Mission’s workers have no idea we exist.”

“They don’t,” Garr replied easily. His casual response surprised Aubrey.

The Mission was visible just ahead, a block farther down the street. The unremarkable gray building was situated on the opposite corner of the intersection.

The usual gathering of clients congregated outside the weathered doors, chatting with some of the staff. The sharp bite of approaching autumn, noticeably acute overnight, was held at bay by the sun.

“The manager—we call him Uncle John—is the only one who knows the whole picture.” Garr’s pace slowed as he studied the benign scene across the street. “It’s safer this way. The staff do their charitable work, but they have no idea a subbasement exists under the building. John’s one of us, but his role is to run the Mission, not assist in our operations.”

That’s taking “hidden in plain sight” to a whole new level. Aubrey couldn’t help but be impressed. What better way to camouflage our Hub’s location than to surround the Mission—inside and out—with people who don’t know what’s going on?

A cool breeze pushed against them as they crossed the street. Aubrey brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face, the scars on her hand visible for a brief moment.

Her determination to regain full use of her arm, coupled with weeks of intensive rehabilitation, had paid off. The scars, stretching from just above her elbow and down to encompass her hand, were permanent reminders of her ordeal.

At first, she found the scars repulsive, but as the weeks passed, they became a part of her. The only time she made a point of concealing them was when she went out in public. Not because she was self-conscious or embarrassed. No, she was just being pragmatic—hidden in plain sight.

Most people weren’t bold or rude enough to ask awkward questions, but if asked later, might recall the young woman with the badly-scarred arm. She wore her favorite sweatshirt as much for camouflage as for warmth.

They continued their circuitous journey, losing themselves in the anonymity of the crowd. They each carried a small bag of fresh produce, purchased from one of the nearby shops.

Unless someone already knew Garr for what he was—the former Colonel—he might pass for a tradesman or a day laborer. Anything but a leader in their ragtag underground resistance.

They made another turn, to all outward appearances away from the Mission. They had one additional stop to make. Aubrey bottled her curiosity for the moment. She'd heard stories about their destination more than once, but had never visited it in person.

"Aren't you worried somebody might find the trapdoor in the basement?" Her thoughts returned to the Mission. She'd seen the make-shift blockage her fellow Runners had built at the top of the stairs. "What are the chances one of John's staff could stumble on it by accident?"

Garr chuckled as they rounded another corner. "Nobody likes paperwork, and nobody wants to disturb the boss when he's doing it. The trapdoor has always been in John's office. While they were renovating after the Tracker attack last spring, John insisted that his office stay where it was. Said it would bolster staff morale."

Garr's voice remained light, despite the somber events he alluded to. "While the Mission was being renovated, Don and I snuck in late one night. We poured a layer of concrete over the trapdoor, and guess where John's desk sits?"

"A-ha." Aubrey smiled.

Garr grinned at her. "By the time the Mission re-opened for business, there was no trace of our once-handy trapdoor into the sub-basement."

Aubrey shook her head. "It still amazes me that none of this seems to bother you. I mean, we live literally *one floor below* the Mission—which was attacked just five months ago—and we carry on as if nothing happened."

"You'll get used to it, sooner than you think," Garr replied. "The real trick is finding the balance between vigilance and not going crazy from the stress. We're lucky to have Doc. She keeps an eye on our mental health. The drop-box is just ahead. Next left."

Garr nudged her toward an alleyway with his elbow. It resembled the same kind of alley she'd avoided in the pounding rain during her first night in the City, all those months ago.

A lot has changed since then. Aubrey stuffed her hands into her pockets. An involuntary shiver ran down her spine. *Mostly me.*

Garr paused next to a nondescript doorway, roughly mid-point down the alley. Aubrey thought for a moment that he intended to enter the building, but then she realized the heavy wooden door had been nailed shut.

Curious, she watched with feigned nonchalance as Garr crouched down, one hand reaching for the lowest brick in the weathered wall.

She leaned against the doorframe, casually shielding Garr from view. Garr could be fumbling with a rusty lock, or so she hoped it would appear to any observer—casual or otherwise.

Garr eased the brick back and forth, his motions efficient but quiet. The brick came loose, and Aubrey spied a small package hidden in the wall.

Garr extracted the leather-wrapped bundle and stowed it without ceremony inside his coarse jacket. With the same agility, he worried the brick back into its former position, and rose to his full height.

They resumed their unhurried walk, exiting the alley at the far end.

Just taking a shortcut, if anyone asks. Aubrey rehearsed her imagined response. *Isn't that funny? I'm already concocting my alibi. It's good practice. When it really counts, I need to be able to lie with a straight face.*

If Garr was curious about the contents of the package, he hid it well. They veered left as they re-entered the street, casually joining the unhurried human traffic on the sidewalk and spilling into the street.

The tranquil atmosphere was shattered by the growling crescendo of an approaching vehicle. Aubrey's heart skipped a beat. Hoarders rarely drove through the Old City, preferring to avoid contact with anyone outside the Enclave. The break from routine didn't bode well.

The startled pedestrians bolted for the relative safety of the sidewalks. Aubrey felt Garr's strong grip on her elbow, urging her closer to the nearest brick wall. She caught herself against the building with her good arm, looking over her shoulder in hopes of spotting the vehicle.

She was taken aback by the intensity of her visceral reaction to the Hoarders. *They think nothing of Implanting children for their political games.* She swallowed hard against the rising bile in her throat. *Hoarders are less human than the Soul-less.*

An off-road truck raced past, its dark-tinted windows giving it an inhuman air, and careened with reckless abandon around the next corner. Panic-stricken people scattered in all directions, dodging out of its path. Screams erupted here and there, more from fear than actual injury, as far as Aubrey could tell.

Garr stepped into the street as the vehicle disappeared. His dark eyes were troubled. "I don't think they hit anyone. We got lucky. Reflexes are usually the first thing to go once panic sets in."

Aubrey was well aware of the Hoarders' callous disregard for those they considered inferior. Still, she was shaken by the sudden arrival and equally swift disappearance of the off-road vehicle. "Do you think they were looking for us?"

Garr shook his head. "They didn't slow down long enough to notice us. Whatever their reason for being here, I don't think it was us."

He stared after vanished truck. "It doesn't make any sense. Hoarders have zero interest in this part of the Old City. Sure, they like the open country for trophy hunting, but that's the opposite direction."

The agitated pedestrians gathered in compact groups as the adrenaline of the moment passed. Hushed conversations ensued, and Aubrey overheard the resentful comments and curses directed at the now-distant Hoarders. The idyllic afternoon atmosphere was ruined, and the pedestrians sought shelter inside nearby buildings.

“Look at them.” Garr pointed with his chin, scowling. “Running for cover like scared rabbits. That’s life under the Hoarders. They were here for less than thirty seconds, and look at the effect they’ve had.”

He pivoted on his heel, tightening his grip on his bag of produce. “Now’s our chance. The streets will be deserted for a while, until people get over the shock. We can make good time to the tunnels while everyone’s hiding.”

Aubrey nodded, wincing at the cramps in her good hand. She shifted the grocery bag to her other hand, flexing her fingers to restore circulation.

Her heart was pounding, and she realized she was all but hyperventilating. She cringed, embarrassed by her reaction, until a calmer part of her mind intervened.

Your reaction’s perfectly normal, Aubs—a Hoarder almost ran you down. I’d really stand out if I didn’t look scared. She shoved her hand into her pocket, out of sight, stretching her stiff muscles.

“Back to the Hub,” Garr muttered under his breath. He touched the small bulge in his jacket. “I’ll feel better when our package is safely off the streets.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Tracker stared at the make-shift infirmary’s ceiling, unable to shift position. Restraints confined it to the gurney with cold efficiency. Unable to free itself, the fanatical creation of the Givers was reduced to a melancholy acceptance of its miserable fate.

Its scanning eye had been destroyed by the female bio-unit’s weapon. The electrical discharge had also crippled some of its other enhancements. These losses paled in comparison to one all-encompassing discovery: the Givers were silent.

The Tracker’s thoughts turned bleak. It had failed in its Quest. The Harvest had not been executed. The Givers were generous but they were not to be denied. Yet despite its wretched failure, the Givers had allowed it to live. But they no longer spoke. There could be no greater punishment. Death would have been preferred, understood, accepted.

The Givers’ silence was torture.

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Its physical enhancements continued to function, although not with their usual speed and efficiency. The wounds on its arm were slow in closing, as the damage repaired itself in halting fits and starts. Similar wounds on its face were undergoing repairs, despite its inability to directly observe the healing progress.

The Tracker was still in restraints—chained to a metal bed. Under normal operating parameters, the enhancements should have enabled it to break the restraints with little effort. It had tried, over and over, to no avail.

Its new-found weakness was another indication the enhancements no longer functioned at their peak efficiency. New data was required—the Givers must speak. Why were the enhancements no longer functioning as designed?

If the Givers had indeed spared its life, despite its failure, there must be a logical reason. Only the Givers could provide it with answers. And purpose.

But the Givers remained silent.

The Tracker's captors kept it imprisoned, but had not mistreated it. Perhaps it could appeal to them, persuade them to grant its freedom. Would they assist it in re-establishing contact with the Givers?

No, argued another part of its brain. The bio-forms were irrelevant. All that mattered was the Quest.

No. Inaccurate. The Quest was no more. The Givers were silent. Their displeasure over the failed Quest was the only logical explanation.

Despair threatened to overwhelm the Tracker. It failed to notice the teardrops leaking one-by-one from its remaining eye.

The Givers' silence was a gaping vacuum in its chest. They must be appeased. Perhaps it could yet regain their approval. Yes, yes, that must be its goal—to earn the Givers' favor once again.

The bio-forms. They were the key. It must listen, learn, and begin to plan. The bio-forms knew it could speak. It must enlist their aid, without betraying its true intent, and win back its freedom. Everything else was irrelevant.

All that mattered was ending the Givers' silence.

The Tracker seized eagerly on its new Quest—absolution from its gods.