

## CHAPTER ONE

A gust of cool wind rustled the leaves underfoot, a reminder of the impending change of seasons. Towering evergreens kept watch over the rocky hillside, like sentinels on patrol. The idyllic scene was cloaked in silence, broken at rare intervals by an occasional birdcall.

Amos stood over his brother's grave, hands shoved into his pockets.

He heard the wind, the creak of the needle-laden pines, and the infrequent cry of birds. He felt the warm sunlight filtering through the branches overhead, falling in uneven patterns across his shoulders. He tasted the cool air as he breathed—inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale—the steady rhythm which should have had a calming effect on him.

He was also acutely aware of the tension in his clenched fists, the tingling alarm knotted between his shoulder blades, and the accompanying ache spreading up the back of his neck.

*I hate this place. Yet I keep coming back.* The hollow sensation in his gut threatened to overwhelm him. *It's like a dark magnet, pulling on me.*

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes ranging up the sharp incline. The entrance to the cave was unremarkable, the moss-covered boulders overshadowed by tough pine trees growing around and between them.

Dried leaves and pine needles from countless seasons carpeted the ground. The hillside was littered with dozens of similar outcroppings, each one a minor variation on the others.

This cave was unique.

Amos squared his shoulders, turning his back on the grave as he faced the somber entrance.

*The last place I saw my brother alive.* He steeled himself against the resurgent guilt. *I left him here, wounded, and I said I was going for help. But that wasn't all of it. I was scared the Hoarders would find us.*

*And I was right. They did, and they killed Trey. Amos the coward goes on living, and what's left of Trey is buried in an unmarked grave.*

He knew it wasn't his fault, if and when he thought about it logically. The Hoarders who'd chased the two young boys, shooting at them for sport—as if they were wild animals—were the real killers. The Hoarders ...

Amos lurched into motion, forcing himself up the steep hillside. He hadn't come back to relive his brother's murder. Nor was he here to reminisce about hiding his Implant in the dark recesses of the underground burrow.

He crouched, peering into the shadowy cave. *Hoarders. It always comes back to the Hoarders.*

He felt the muscles in his jaw tighten as the thought festered in his mind. *Hoarders killed Trey. Hoarders created the Implants. Hoarders send Trackers to hunt us down.*

He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing that was enough to keep his memories at bay. He didn't want to think about the three Hoarders they'd met the day before.

The ones Mateo insisted they partner with against the alien Givers. The Hoarders who freely—proudly—admitted they invented the cursed Implants.

And Darcy, their leader, taunting Aubrey, insinuating he was responsible for her Implant. *What about mine, too? How could Mateo—let alone Garr—honestly expect us to work with any Hoarder, especially him?*

Amos crawled into the cave, rolling over on his back to stare at the rough stone overhead.

*There's something very dysfunctional about coming here.* His lips curved into a wry smile. *Doc would have a field day psychoanalyzing me over it. But I need time to think. And this is where it all started for me. If you look at it that way, coming here makes perfect sense.*

He was stalling, and he knew it. Darcy was only part of the reason he'd fled the City. Yes, his reaction to the Hoarders was connected to Trey's murder and his own Implant. But that wasn't all of it—there was something else troubling him.

His faint smile vanished as a memory surged to the forefront of his mind. He'd held it at bay for almost twenty-four hours, but the recollection was crouching at the door of his consciousness, waiting to pounce.

He was tempted to bury it, but he knew this was why he'd sought refuge in the cave. Yes, to sort things out. But even more, to answer one burning question.

*Trackers couldn't have known where to find us, yet they did. We were betrayed. But by who?*

## CHAPTER TWO

Aubrey shivered in the damp tunnel, huddled in her threadbare blanket against a rough cinderblock wall. She massaged her scarred hand absent-mindedly, imitating Doc's careful kneading, acutely aware of her newest bruises.

*Megan's enhancements may not work like they used to, but she's still got some of her Tracker grip. I'm lucky she didn't break my hand.*

"Here, you need to keep your strength up." Don's gruff voice interrupted her thoughts. He handed her some dried trail rations—some kind of salted meat and leathery fruit. "It's some of Sheila's gourmet best. I'll be sure to send her chef's compliments on your behalf."

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Aubrey smiled as she accepted the rations. *His jokes aren't as funny as he thinks they are. But I appreciate him trying to keep our morale up.*

“Go easy, though.” Jane ran a hand through her dark hair in a futile attempt to loosen some of the tangled knots. “It’s not going to last much longer. When they stocked this hidey-hole with provisions, nobody expected we’d be staying here more than one night.”

To Aubrey’s right, Megan chewed mechanically on a tough piece of meat. Her expression was unreadable, and the patch covering the ruin of her left eye obscured a portion of her face. She continued to be an enigma, a former Tracker who once pursued them with murderous intent. In a twist of fate none of them could have predicted, she was now a part of their Hub.

*The Hoarder kid—the blond one—seemed to recognize her. Aubrey pictured the stunned expression on the young man’s face. Is that good news or bad? How we can be sure whose side Megan is on?*

Her paranoid musings were cut short by Jane’s sharp voice. “Don, let me look at your arm. You’ve soaked through the bandages again. We’ve got to get the bleeding under control.”

For once, Don didn’t argue, upending his metal rod. It was just under two meters in length, well over Aubrey’s height, and raised a faint echo as he set it down. He slumped next to Aubrey, his massive bulk dwarfing her.

They’d lingered in this spot for a night and a day already. Wisdom dictated they bide their time before attempting to return to their Hub. No one balked when Don insisted on waiting. There was no telling whether or not their Hub, located in a sub-basement under the downtown Mission, was still secure. Not after the Trackers showed up.

“We make for the Hub tonight,” Don said as Jane loosened the bandages. The fabric was soaked in blood. Doc needed to treat the nasty gash on his forearm, soon. “I don’t think anybody—or any *thing*—is following us, but we’ll take it slow and careful. We don’t know if the Mission’s been compromised or not.”

“Deja vu,” Jane replied in a sour voice as she re-banded his wound. “Trackers attacked the Mission last spring, too, remember? Maybe they didn’t find the subbasement, but they were closer than they realized. Too close.”

“True enough.” Don’s easy-going voice was a welcome contrast to Jane’s stark pessimism. “But I don’t want to sleep another night in this stink-hole.”

*I couldn’t agree more.* Aubrey wrinkled her nose, weary of the oppressive reek. She’d been able to ignore the stench for the most part, until Don mentioned it.

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“Garr warned Uncle John to shut down the Mission for a few days.” She hoped the Mission’s manager had responded in time. “If Trackers are scouting around the area, there should be nothing to attract their attention.”

Don winced as Jane tightened the fresh bandage with a deft tug. “Plan for the worst and assume nothing. Megan, can you tell if other Trackers are nearby?”

Megan shook her head, still chewing. She swallowed with difficulty before replying.

“No more voices,” she said in her halting way, tapping two fingers against the side of her head. “No more Givers.”

She ducked her head and resumed eating. Conversation over.

Aubrey studied her covertly, unsure of her own feelings. A few months earlier, Megan had been just another nameless Tracker, obsessed with killing a child for his Implant.

At their first encounter, Aubrey was sure she was about to die, along with the young boy. She’d thrust an electric prod into the Tracker’s scanning eye in one final, desperate attempt at self-defense.

The resulting surge of energy had flattened the Tracker like a bolt of lightning. Garr insisted on bringing the crippled Tracker back to their Hub, although Doc’s diagnosis was that her wounds would prove fatal within a matter of days.

But the Tracker survived, and it was through her they first learned of the real enemy behind the Hoarders—the aliens who called themselves the Givers. In an unanticipated reversal, the damage caused by Aubrey’s impulsive action also triggered Megan’s awkward and incomplete journey of recovering her humanity.

*She’s gone from a mindless killing machine to something of an ally.* Aubrey examined her own damaged arm, hidden under the blanket she’d wrapped around herself. *I don’t regret what I did. I was protecting myself, and the boy.*

“That’ll have to do for now.” Jane twisted an improvised sling over Don’s shoulder to support his injured arm. “We can move out whenever you give the word.”

“The word, my friend, is given,” Don replied with a facetious grin. “I’ve always wanted to say that. Why should Garr have all the fun?”

Jane snorted as she handed him the metal rod—his sole weapon after their meeting with the Hoarders and the Tracker ambush. “Garr’s *never* said anything like that, even when he was still the Colonel.”

She paused, her eyes haunted. “I lost sight of them during the attack. Do you think they made it? We can’t be the only survivors.”

“We’re not.” Don exuded cheerful confidence. “Amos will go to ground and lay low. Once we know the Hub is secure, I know just where to find him.”

“What about Garr?” Aubrey got to her feet, pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “Everything happened so fast, I couldn’t see what happened to him.”

Don chuckled, his baritone voice providing reassuring warmth in the dank atmosphere. “He had Sheila right beside him, and she’s a force to be reckoned with. You’ll see—they’ll have each other’s back.”

He paused, looking thoughtful “Y’know, we’ve got to give Mateo credit. He’s a slippery fish, but all his Tracker abilities were directed *against* the other Trackers, not for them.”

Megan’s tortured voice startled them. “Trackers ... for us? Or for them?”

All eyes were on her. The eye patch and its surrounding scars made her expression difficult to read, but her remaining eye seemed to hold a pleading look. Aubrey couldn’t tell if she was asking a legitimate question, or trying to warn them.

Don broke the prolonged silence, flexing one massive hand around the metal rod. “Were we the targets, or was it the Hoarders? That’s an excellent question, Megan.”

“And who told them where to find us?” Jane wondered aloud. “That’s what I want to know.”

## CHAPTER THREE

The Enclave’s bright lights would normally have cheered him, but Connor found no solace in them this evening. In the distance, a musical kaleidoscope emanated from the shops and concert halls, beckoning potential patrons or ticket-holders with the promise of an evening of entertainment and distraction.

Twenty floors above, Connor enjoyed a commanding view from the balcony of the villa he shared with his foster father. Here, on the Enclave’s historic eastern side, he usually found peace and a sense of security, despite their ongoing secret war against the alien Givers.

There were no such comfort tonight. Not after the events of the past few days.

His hands shook as memories of the previous night flashed through his mind. Their improbable meeting with Mateo and his band of so-called “Runners.” Darcy’s near-execution by a deranged savage—the girl with the disfigured arm. The ambush by a squad of Trackers.

And the most shocking of all ...

Connor’s gaze fastened on the locket and chain he held in his hands. He leaned on the balcony rail, opening the locket for the umpteenth time, staring in disbelief at the image inside.

His sister, Megan.

The authorities told him she'd been murdered by savages five years earlier, along with his parents. The Infomedia stoked the fires via their constant repetition of the story, and their deaths became a rallying point for increased border security. The Citizens, appalled by the brutal killings, were unanimous in their support of the Council's crackdown.

Yet he'd seen his sister—alive—the previous evening. Despite the disfiguring scars and a patch covering one eye, *it was Megan*. The picture inside the locket confirmed it. His sister was alive.

And held captive by the likes of Mateo and his brutal pack of savages.

"Connor? Did you hear what I just said?"

Darcy's voice was sharp, even more than usual. His stealthy approach startled Connor, and he clutched the locket in a desperate spasm, afraid of dropping it. He pivoted to face his foster father, his expression harder than he realized.

Darcy's mouth was open, about to issue his orders, until he caught sight of the silver chain dangling from Connor's hand. His lips tightened against his teeth, and he stood stock-still for several moments before speaking again.

"I've called for Tony," he said at last, his expression neutral but his eyes blazing with their usual fire. "We've got work to do, and very little time to do it in. I need you ..."

"She's alive," Connor interrupted, looking Darcy in the eye, his gaze unwavering. "Megan. The savages kept her alive, all this time."

Darcy's mouth closed again. The expression on his face didn't change. It was impossible for Connor to guess what his foster father was thinking.

"Yes," he said at last. "It appears so."

He stepped closer, his expression and voice softening. "I'm as shocked as you are, Connor. We had no idea anyone survived. There was so little left of the bodies—you know how the savages are. Everyone assumed all three of them had been killed."

He placed a comforting hand on Connor's shoulder.

Connor stiffened, unsure how to respond to his foster father's unexpected touch. Physical contact with Darcy was usually cloaked in the promise of menace.

"They tortured her, Darcy," he said, no louder than before. "You saw what they've done to her. She didn't even recognize me ..." His voice broke and his eyes burned with unshed tears.

Darcy's grip became a claw, matching the icy coldness in his eyes. "The savages will pay for that, Connor, I promise you. We have no idea what it was like for Megan, watching the savages

butcher your parents. In some ways, it would've been more merciful if they'd killed her. Keeping her prisoner all these years, tormenting her to the point where she does their bidding ...”

Darcy paused to take a deep breath. “Or Mateo’s.”

Connor stared at him, stunned. Darcy dropped his grip and stepped back. “The savages we met last night, every single one of them, will be Implanted as weapons against the Givers. They’ll destroy the aliens and their human puppets—the *collaborators*—and return control of the Enclave to us.”

Darcy’s eyes blazed with the fervor of his cause. And vengeance. “It’s the perfect punishment for what they’ve done to Megan. Your sister will be avenged.”

“It’s all the savages are good for, anyway.” Connor wiped his eyes with an impatient hand, a cold hatred settling into his chest. “They’re animals, nothing more.”

He paused, eyeing his foster father. “And Mateo—what about him?”

Darcy smiled, an expression Connor found more chilling than his fits of rage. “Mateo is *mine*. Once the Givers are dealt with, I’ll teach that arrogant Tracker some respect. It’ll be the last lesson he learns.”

The doorbell chimed. Connor followed Darcy into the gathering room. The door opened to admit Tony, their gray-haired chauffeur and newest recruit to the cause. He halted just inside the entrance, fiddling with his cap as if unsure of his welcome.

“I waited in the parking garage.” He spread his hands in a helpless, aimless gesture. “I thought we’d agreed on a time ...”

“No matter.” Darcy cut him off with a pre-emptive gesture. Tony was a good driver, but not the quickest thinker in their clandestine group. Connor found him more and more annoying as time went by. “Connor and I were having a father-son conversation. But now that you’re here, we should be on our way.”

Their walk down the hall, followed by the elevator descent to the garage level, was completed in absolute silence. The Enclave’s security—ever vigilant against possible incursions by the savages—had intensified in recent weeks.

Under the pretext of “security,” the Givers and their human stooges had accelerated the expansion of surveillance inside the Enclave. Darcy and his followers were too savvy to let casual words slip in an obvious place like an elevator.

Once inside their vehicle, engine running and windows closed, they dared to speak freely. Even so, they kept their voices down. Darcy leaned on the doorframe, resting his chin on his hand to shield the lower part of his face from exterior cameras.

“The clinic is prepped and ready.” Tony’s words were difficult to understand as he mumbled into his collar. “The team’s waiting for us.”

Connor edged forward in the back seat, his traditional spot. He would never presume to sit in the front. That was Darcy’s place, beside his subservient driver. “Darcy, I was wondering about the attack by those Trackers. How could they know where to find us?”

“Mateo, of course,” Darcy replied without hesitation, no hint of uncertainty in his voice. “It’s impossible to know where his loyalties lie. I’ve long suspected he was playing one side against the other. It was only *after* the Tracker ambush that I realized what game he’s playing.”

Darcy paused, clearly enjoying the drama of holding his listeners in spellbound thrall. Tony spoke first, his husky voice betraying his struggle between wariness and reckless curiosity. “What are you talking about?”

Darcy reward him with a freezing silence. Connor knew, without asking, Darcy was displeased by Tony’s over-eager query. Darcy would allow nothing to rob him of his moment of triumphant revelation. They cleared the exit ramp and entered the thoroughfare before he continued.

“Mateo serves the Givers,” he said with a cunning smile. “His plan was to gather everyone working against the Givers’ interests—savages *and* Citizens—into the same location. Then the Trackers could slaughter us easily, in one surgical strike. *Outside* the Enclave, where the average Citizen would never hear about it.”

Darcy leaned back in his seat, the leather creaking as he shifted position. “Mateo’s playing the Judas card, on both sides of the fence. He’s a puppet of the Givers, a collaborator in the worst sense of the word.”

He turned, catching Connor’s eye. “That’s why I’ll deal with Mateo when the time comes. I want to see the look on his smug Tracker face when he realizes he didn’t fool me. And then he’ll die.”

“And them?” Tony jerked his thumb over his shoulder, his attention still on the road. “What if they survive? Or figure out what you’re doing to them?”

*Now you’ve done it.* Connor smirked. *Never question Darcy’s strategy. Not if you know what’s good for you.*

“They won’t, on either count,” Darcy replied, his voice as icy as his expression. The ensuing silence was more threatening than anything else he might have added. Tony caught on, and concentrated on his driving.



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Connor glanced into the cargo area, reaching over to peel back a corner of the tarp. The two bodies lay side-by-side, unconscious. The tranquilizers were performing at the peak of efficiency. Two of the so-called “Runners,” unaware they would soon be Implanted. For the good of the Enclave.

Connor studied their faces. The leader of the savages, the one Mateo introduced as Garr. And a young woman. He couldn't recall her name. It didn't matter. By night's end, they'd simply be Implants Twenty-seven and Twenty-eight.

*Animals.* Connor's lip curled with disdain. *Darcy's right—this is justice after what you did to my sister. This is the only thing savages are good for.*