

Omni

Chapter One

I didn't like to kill—not the fish, the cute brown rabbits, or the bushy-tailed squirrels—but we needed to eat. I cast my line as the moon's silvery rays shimmered over the placid surface of the pond. The water glistened like glass. The reeds swayed with the gentle wind.

"You should hold the rod a little lower," said Hamza.

I adjusted my grip on the fishing rod. "We should have cast the net. It would have been faster."

"A net captures too many fish." Despite being four years younger, Hamza was the undisputed resident expert on fishing and capturing game. I didn't have the heart for hunting. "I don't enjoy the midnight wet walks through the shallow water. Also, Inky is here tonight."

I gripped the dagger that lay on the ground. "Is he?"

Inky was one of the resident crocodiles. He was the biggest of the lot. "Relax. He is on the other end of the pond. Amla's eggs are about to hatch. He is helping her defend the nest from the others." He touched my hand. "Hold the rod gently. It's not a gun."

The fishing rods were made of supple, bendable tree branches, with string tied snugly over the sharpened edge and held in place with too many knots. A sharp metal hook was at the end of each string, and a worm was jammed on the hook to entice the fish. Rudimentary? Yes. Effective? Yes. We caught fish at least twice weekly, but I disliked the process. Hamza was the one who put the hook into the fat, wiggly worm.

"I don't like the thought of the fish hook getting stuck in their mouth," I murmured.

If we spoke loudly, the fish wouldn't venture near enough to eye the fat, black worms hanging from the hooks. Hamza dug the worms fresh from under a rock before we began. As

usual, he took his time scaring me by pretending to put a few of them down my shirt. I knew he wouldn't do it, but I was never sure.

I searched for ripples on the surface of the water. "Don't go near the crocodile nests, Hamza. Just because you give them whimsical names, they are not your friends. The mothers can be vicious when nesting."

"I know." He rolled his eyes. "You're holding the rod too high."

I sighed. Lecturing further wouldn't serve a purpose. Hamza was well-versed in the dangers of the forest. He was a better hunter.

"Why are you making me do this? We both know I won't catch a thing," I whined.

He laughed. The sound of his laughter warmed my heart. Our life certainly wasn't the best. But it was ours. We had each other, and we scrounged up enough food to stay alive. The banana leaves we needed to cook the plump fish were already placed on the rocks, as were the herbs we collected in the evening. The wild herbs near the pond tasted best with the fish. I didn't enjoy cooking, especially as the smoke from the oven hurt my eyes, but we cooked at night indoors to avoid the smoke from being seen. Despite the hardships, we persevered, finding joy in the small moments.

"You don't catch because you don't want to. Are you going to put the carrots and the potatoes with the fish?" He changed the subject.

"Yes."

"Salt?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"It will be delicious." Hamza smacked his lips.

Dad was a good cook. He taught me to look for wild herbs under the bushes and trees, skin and gut the fish, and slather the meat with salt and herbs to get the best flavor. Ever since

his death a year and a half ago, I managed to keep us alive, but the food never tasted as good as his.

"You do a good job," said Hamza, almost as if he could read the train of my thoughts.

My heart swelled with love. He always said the right things.

"Thank you. So do you." I nodded as his line tugged, and he gently and expertly reeled it in. As he grabbed the fish, I looked away, feeling sad as the fish struggled to escape from his grasp. From our position under the tree, I could look across the pond and out at the murky, dark ocean as it churned and twisted. But in that moment, I felt a deep connection with Hamza, a bond that transcended our circumstances.

Cox Bazar boasted an unbroken beach for hundreds of miles. Once, it was a hub of tourists, but no sign of any human occupation remained. The cliffs protected the quiet, deserted beach. A few years back, I walked on it half the night with Dad before we turned around and returned. We could only ever explore this place in the dark. During the day, it was too risky. Omni's satellites tracked human movement across the globe, and we wanted to avoid coming under the radar. Everything was done at night; gathering food, cooking, planting, washing clothes, and even checking on our small plots of herbs and vegetables. We slept during the day. If we ventured out, the satellites would catch our images, and we would be seen within days. The fear of being caught was a constant, palpable presence in our lives, a threat that loomed over us every moment.

Surviving out in the wild was our only mission. Dad drilled it into us. He ensured we would remain undetected in this wilderness by finding the right places to hunt and grow food and building our knowledge. He didn't want Omni's soldiers to catch us. If we were caught and taken back to the enclaves, we would be sterilized because both Hamza and I were anomalies. Omni didn't tolerate anomalies to procreate. Humans were the second most intelligent and resourceful species on earth for hundreds of years: Omni was the first. The AI

sprang upon the world three hundred years ago and mercilessly took over every computer, satellite, and device that ran on the internet. Within three months, the world ran under Omni's dominion. Omni decided who lived and died and who would get access to any resource. Eventually, all human settlements were erased, and now there were enclaves worldwide that housed the remaining human population, barely a fraction of the thriving eight million in 2027 when Omni was born. Omni dictated the rules. Omni monitored every human being. If it was found that a child's brain pattern didn't align with Omni, the child was declared an anomaly at age sixteen and sterilized so that he or she couldn't corrupt the gene pool.

I was an anomaly, and I was sixteen this year. If I was in an Omni enclave, I would have been sterilized. Dad ran away with me and Hamza when he began to hear the initial diagnosis when I was about eight. He didn't want us to be sterilized. He didn't think it was right for anyone to force a child to make such a significant life decision because of reasons set by an AI.

He was right. We built a great life together.

We caught frogs in the nearby streams, dove into the ocean at night, and played on the sandy beach on overcast nights. Our days began and ended with Dad's constant presence and vigilance for our safety. He taught us how to live. How to survive in the wilderness.

Then he died.

With each passing day, we missed Dad. But his lessons stayed with us.

Hamza put the fish in the old reed basket, careful not to tear the rip on the side.

"I'll collect the reeds tomorrow so we can mend that," I said.

"Better you than me." Hamza grimaced.

We both didn't like tramping through knee-high water, pulling at stubborn plants, and keeping an eye on the crocodiles, but it was a chore I couldn't put off anymore. We only had two baskets and couldn't afford to lose one. We used them to harvest fruits and vegetables

and carry the fish back home. They also served as laundry baskets whenever the job required them. We could probably weave a new one, but it was easier to patch and repair it.

"What would you eat if you could eat anything in the world?" asked Hamza.

This was our favorite game in the world; wishfully dreaming about food we couldn't ever get.

"Honey glazed steak and lobster tails," I said. "With French fries. Loads and loads of French fries."

Hamza giggled. I remembered the fries - barely. Hamza didn't have any memory of our previous life, the life we had before we escaped with Dad eight years ago. He was only four, and I was eight. The fries, the ketchup, the soft bed, and a distant memory of a woman's hug. Mom. Her white coveralls were always scratchy, but her hair smelt of strawberry shampoo.

"What did ketchup taste like?" asked Hamza.

"Sweet. A bit salty, too." Hamza often asked about things I couldn't now recall.

He tucked the fish into the basket, picked up another worm, and squished it on the hook. I resisted the urge to vomit. As he cast the line, it fell on the pond's tranquil surface. No ripples. No inky. We were safe for now.

The hook sank.

I felt a tug on my line and jerked it up. As expected, the hook came up empty, but a tiny bit of the worm was still stuck on its pointed end. The fish had nibbled away the rest. Bile rose inside me. "I can't do this."

"You're such a wuss." In one swift motion, Hamza tugged his line again and grabbed the fat fish as it attempted to wriggle free. "Got another one. You don't have to try again."

Relieved, I offered him my hook to clean. "Thank you."

He dipped the hook in water and brushed it with a dry leaf. Hooks were a vital resource, and we didn't want them to rust. I would let it dry before we placed it back in its box.

"Do we need anything else?" he asked.

"No. Let's go home and cook. Did you do the laundry?"

"I'll do it," he promised. As I opened my mouth, he put up a hand. "I should've done it before. It won't happen again."

It would. Hamza didn't like laundry. If I switched my cleaning chores with him, I could do laundry, but he wouldn't clean either. We would have to make do. As I stood, my body tensed. "Shush." I pushed a button on the snug black vest on my shirt. Made out of a stretchable, strong material, the vests were a crucial tool of our survival gear. Equipped with a jammer, they protected us from thermal imaging. We wore them whenever we ventured out of our cabin.

Hamza's eyes narrowed as he gazed at my face. His finger jabbed at the button on his vest. "What?" he whispered.

I pushed the rods under a rock outcropping. They were a valuable asset, and we couldn't afford to lose them. I grabbed his hand and left the banana leaves and the reed basket full of fish. "We need to go now."

Years of emergency drills paid off as he followed me without asking a single question. We walked up to the nearest tree and stood behind it. Hamza stood still. The forest was quiet. Too quiet. My gaze took in the slight shimmer on the side of our vests. They still worked. The batteries were low in the jammer, but I didn't know how to fix them. Dad had been an engineer. He taught me a lot, but I needed more resources to repair everything the way he did.

Hamza squeezed my hand. Although I couldn't see his face, it was easy to tell that he wanted to understand what got me spooked. *Crunch. Crunch.* Someone stepped on a dry, wooden branch. We froze. The leaves rustled. Twenty feet away, a soldier dressed in a black outfit swept away a hanging tree branch and walked toward the pond. Behind him, ten feet away, we saw the slight shimmer as another soldier walked on. The shimmer came from the eyeglasses they wore. The eyeglasses were connected to Omni, and all data the soldier saw in real time was transferred to Omni.

Both of us held our breaths.

Standard military operation practice was maintaining a half circle with each soldier ten feet apart. A standard party contained seven soldiers, enough to sit comfortably in a hovercraft along with the pilot. Where were the rest? Were they behind us? Were we surrounded on both sides? This forest wasn't my birthplace, but I spent the last eight years playing among the shrubs and trees, doing emergency drills, and collecting herbs and plants. I didn't need light. We could walk to a safe location with our eyes closed, but this was an uncharted situation. We had never been hunted before.

Omni's soldiers surrounded us. Everything Dad taught me reeled through my mind as the soldiers swept past us to the pond where we sat moments earlier. They knew we were here but didn't know we had jammers and could block their thermal readings.

Good. We had a brief advantage, and I had no intention of letting it slip.

Plan A. Escape and regroup.

I tapped Hamza on his shoulder and jerked my hand up. The pond was in a narrow valley surrounded by cliffs. We could move towards the valley's mouth and hope to go to the beach. It was a long, unbroken beach, and we could leave this area before dawn hit. But I didn't know if the beach had any protected caves or trees where we could take shelter in the morning. The other option was to climb up the cliffs and make our way towards the hiding

places Dad kept stocked. He always anticipated that Omni would come looking one day and prepared us for what was necessary. We would have to abandon our home.

We couldn't ever go back.

Pain seared through my heart. These valleys, the cliffs, and the beach had been our home for half of my life and almost all of Hamza's. He didn't remember anything else. It wouldn't be fair to uproot him. But we were found and would be captured if we weren't careful and decisive.

Hamza touched my wrist, indicating he was ready for our next move. As the soldiers approached the pond, I began our stealthy march to the nearest cliff. The path was more straightforward and gentler when coming down to the pond. But we had navigated these cliffs since we were young. It would be easy to scamper up the steep route. Once on higher ground, we would move north towards the nearest hiding place. It was a pit under a tree that contained emergency supplies. With enough food and water for two days, we would travel through the night and hide during the day until we reached a safe zone.

The two soldiers were ahead of us, but others would be in the rear. We stepped with care. *One step. Pause. Listen. Another step. Pause and listen.* The progress was agonizingly slow. Sweat beaded on my forehead. I forced my breaths to be gentle. Any sound, even loud breathing, could alert the soldiers that we had already skirted past their net. An owl hooted. We stopped. Towards the pond, dry leaves crunched as someone else stepped on an old branch. Good. They were still headed towards the pond. By the time they realized that we left, we would be all the way up the cliff. The soldiers would track us on foot, but Dad taught us a lot of tricks to throw others off our path. We would find a stream and walk through it, or we could follow after a herd of elephants to confuse any trackers. Also, this area was swampy, and the recent rains filled each crevice and field with water. We would hardly leave a trace behind as long as we stayed away from dry land.

A few minutes were all we needed.

Despite the darkness, I found the steeper path up the cliff. The cliffs comprised of soil, dirt, pebbles, and foliage. We would have to be careful not to dislodge any stones that would make noise if they fell. As we scampered up, Hamza was close behind me. We crouched under a banana tree bent horizontally. No sound came from the pond. The soldiers were awfully quiet. Had they discovered our hiding spot for the fishing rods? Did they find the basket with the fish? Were they aware that we were on the run?

I dared not underestimate their capability. They were professionals. I tapped Hamza's shoulder. He scooted up the slope, holding on to bushes and trees so he didn't fall. We were raised in this forest. It would be easy to blend into the foliage and escape.

Plan A was solid. It would work.

Yet, my heart pounded as I remained a step behind my brother. Dad trained us. He drilled us. We passed his numerous tests. From day one, he ensured we were ready to survive off this land and escape from it if the need arose. Until now, we were safe here. There was a routine to follow; sleep during the day and work during the night. It was easy and simple. What set off Omni's alarm? Our routine had stayed the same. We hunted, cooked, washed, and showered at night to avoid the satellites. Neither of us had been out in daylight for the past eight years.

How did the soldiers find us?

What did we do wrong?

My brain buzzed with questions as we wound our way up the slope, taking care to not disturb the rocks and pebbles. It should have been impossible at night, but this was our haunt. This pond, this slope, and the valley below were our playground. We didn't need to see where we stepped. The hill was as familiar as the back of our hands.

Hamza paused. Startled by the sudden invasion, an owl flew off a nearby tree. We stood still, waiting to see any movement from the soldiers.

Nothing stirred in the forest.

I put a hand on Hamza's shoulder. "Go on." My words were a quiet whisper in his ears. I allowed him to crawl up the slope first. If he fell, I would be able to break his fall. My breath hitched as he navigated a tricky part. Hamza knew what he was doing. He was better at it than me because he had been younger when we moved here.

From this point onward, it was a mere twelve feet up to the surface, but the path was steeper and more treacherous. If we made one wrong misstep, we would roll down. It would be easy to break a leg or arm or perhaps our hard skulls. Hamza crawled. He grasped the branch of a tree and pulled himself up. Great. Another few feet, and we would be safer.

Safer. Not safe. Never safe.

Now that the soldiers found us, they wouldn't give up. They would search our cabins, looking for our identities. Our DNA was all over the place. It would only be a matter of time before they identified who we were.

They would chase us to the end of the earth.

The harsh sound of a horn broke the valley's silence. The soldiers found our stash of fish. They knew we were on the run. Their need for stealth was over. They would move aggressively now. A moment later, my estimation proved correct. The entire pond was lit by strobes as they searched the banks. The powerful lights lit each crevice, each nook, and each rock, leaving no room for anyone to hide. Our decision to not hide within the rocks and stones found near the pond proved accurate.

Dad always impressed upon us the value of the first few moments after discovery.

Run. Run fast. Put as much distance behind you and the enemy. His words echoed in my mind.

Hamza looked back. His face was illuminated by the backlight. The soldiers would activate the second protocol and widen their net. Our vests would protect us from thermal identification. But we couldn't hide on the cliff. We were too vulnerable out in the open. As I made a gesture, Hamza scrambled up. The soldiers would move outward from the pond, searching along the way and lighting each corner. We would be caught if we didn't reach the higher ground soon. I followed close behind. The cliff's ground was only four feet up, but it was a sheer face. There was no crevice to jam a foot in and hoist oneself up. Hamza grabbed a tree branch. As I held my breath, he pulled himself up. The branch bent. *Hold. Hold.* It should hold. It was strong enough to take his weight. The branch snapped. Hamza slipped. A whimper escaped his lips. I braced myself as he skidded to a stop a few inches away from me.

We held our breath. Our luck didn't hold. A volley of stones skidded down and hit trees and other rocks as they rolled down. The noise attracted attention, and the strobe lights turned in our direction.

"Go," I hissed.

"My foot," said Hamza. "It hurts."

With a bad foot, he couldn't climb up the steep path and wouldn't be able to escape the soldiers if we tried to make our way to the beach. There was only one solution. The soldiers were coming, but they were cautious and took their time, checking for any traps.

My mind whirled. "Plan B. Go down and walk beside the cliffs towards the beach. A grove of trees about a hundred feet is right where the cliff ends. Inside, you will find a narrow fissure. Hide there. I will lead the soldiers up the cliff. After about an hour, I want you to walk east on the beach. I will catch up with you."

He grabbed my hand. "No. That's not Plan B. We are not supposed to separate."

Shaking off his hand, I gripped his shoulders. I couldn't see his eyes, but it was easy to see that he was scared. "Plan B was to hide. It won't work for both of us. Not when you cannot walk. They will find us. I've to lead them away and then backtrack. It's the only way, Hamza."

"They will catch you."

"They won't. I'll be fast and cautious. Please. Go now." He began to descend. "And if I don't make it, you must go to the nearest shelter Dad built, take the emergency supplies, and make your way east into the wilderness. The maps will be in the emergency supply kit."

Hamza whimpered. But he didn't say anything. There wasn't enough time. As he slid down, I began to move upwards. The strobe lights caught me just as I swung up on the cliff. I stayed still for a few seconds, giving them a good look so that they would remain focused on me. The soldiers would follow, providing Hamza time to take cover.

I stood, switched off the thermal heat tech on the vest, and ran towards the cabin. It would have been nice to get a few minutes to gather our precious belongings, but there wasn't enough time. They would scale the cliff fast. Skirting past our cabin, I slipped into the frigid waters of the stream. Pushing the button on the vest, I activated the thermal heat jammer again. The sound of water would mask any noise I made, and losing the signal would confuse the soldiers. They would waste a few minutes checking the cabin. It would give Hamza time to hide. He couldn't be captured.

I wouldn't let the Omni soldiers get their hands on my brother. Over the last eight years, I helped Dad protect him, and even before he got sick and died, he told me to make sure that Hamza grew to be strong, resourceful, and healthy. If Omni got his hands on him, he would lose his freedom. As I waded through the cold water, it seeped into my boots. They wouldn't last a long time. They were Dad's old shoes. I didn't have another pair, so I was cautious with them. There wasn't enough time to take them off. The soldiers were behind me.

I could hear them near the cabin. Hope thundered in my heart. The stream would end near another cliff as it turned into a waterfall. I could slip down and meet Hamza on the beach; we could make it to the shelter and gather the emergency supplies.

A slim chance was better than none.

Dad had gone over the maps with us a million times. We would have to make our way inland into the wild forests, where it would be difficult to track us. The next thirty minutes were crucial. Hamza should be reaching the fissure. Even the strobe light wouldn't be enough to see him if he squeezed inside. My breath squeezed out in short gasps as I continued to trudge into the shallow water of the stream. The hard pebbles dug into my boots. Cold water slid over my toes on the right foot; a seam must have burst inside the shoe. I didn't have any supplies for mending. Everything was back in the cabin.

It didn't matter.

We would escape, and that was the only mission that mattered.

I didn't hear anyone behind me. My breath calmed as I neared the waterfall. Once I slid down, I would be on the opposite side of the pond. It was a simple trek to the beach. I would be with Hamza in about twenty minutes.

We made it.

We escaped the Omni soldiers.

It cost us our home and everything we possessed, but at least we still had each other. As I sat on the cliff, ready to slip down, Hamza's screams broke the forest's quiet. My mind screeched to a halt. The world stopped and shattered.

Nothing else mattered.

My safety didn't matter.

Sticking to the plans didn't matter.

I stood and broke into a run towards the noise. Hamza was captured by the soldiers. My brother was my greatest treasure and my biggest responsibility. He was the axis on which my life revolved. I loved him. He wouldn't go alone with the soldiers. I would go with him to the enclave, and we would face whatever horrors awaited us.

It was time for a new Plan A.