

Prologue

The night sky afforded little light, and the cool air sent a thrill through the body of one who stood in the shadow of a building's alleyway alcove. One block away, an apartment building with a carpenter's workshop waited silently for two of its residents. The figure waited too.

If only I had come in time for them to leave, the stranger thought. *I could have followed them to their headquarters*. Instead, the wait would only confirm an inconsequential hunch.

No matter, the waiting figure concluded. *There would be plenty more nights of this to come*.

Step, step, step. Step, step, step.

There you are, the stranger smiled. From the security of darkness, the visitor watched two silhouettes approach. The shadow in the front was smaller, but not by much. As they approached, a patch of moonlight confirmed the identities of father and son.

Patiently, the stranger took in the movements of these two Messengers, watching their pattern of surveillance and stealth. The long wait was rewarded, and it took every ounce of willpower for the visitor to stay silent in the shadows.

Sure enough, the two turned to the side of the building. The figure moved quickly but with painstaking care to reach the corner in time.

Perfect. As the stranger peered around the edge of the neighboring building, one figure helped the other through a portal four feet above the pavement.

The wait was worth it. For the one in the shadows, this was the start of something new.



The Messengers
CONCEALED

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This book is written in thankfulness to God for the Jacks,
Charitys, and Simons throughout the ages.



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Chapter One

—Two thousand years ago—

The world is going to hell. It's bad enough that we're surrounded by a hostile government, that we must bow to dogs, but now our own kind raves around like madmen. Rejecting all they know, all I've taught, they blindly wander after a corpse. Who do they think they are? Who do they think He is?! Well. If the tomb is where they want to go, I'll be happy to oblige.

...

—*Right about now, not far away*—

Simon's life was normal. Mind-numbingly normal. He went to school, he hurried home, he did his homework, he went to bed. Day. After. Day. Now, sitting in his bedroom, he drummed his fingers on his history book, which lay open on his desk. Empty words stared up from the page, and Simon's stare was equally blank as the monotony slowly dulled his senses.

Except, of course, life *wasn't* normal. Less than two weeks ago, his life had been on the line as he stood in the middle of the large public Arena, on trial for what he had done. No, that wasn't true. His actions had been a catalyst, but the trial had little to do with any temporary pranks or subversive crime. Simon had been on trial for *who* he was, for what he believed. Ignoring the unreliable, carefully censored propaganda in the textbook at his fingertips, Simon let his thoughts wander through the recent history of his own life.

Simon pictured the crowds that had filled the seats of the Arena, swelling the space with anticipation, watching as he endured one of the most difficult battles of his life. He remembered his leg stinging from poison and punishment, providing him with barely enough energy to stand, much less defend himself against the taunts of society that invaded the battleground around him. Simon clenched his jaw as he recalled Mr. Gerald Burroughs, cochairman of the Department of Security and puppet of New Morgan's authority, looming above him from an imposing podium. Burroughs, as the appointed judge

of the public trial, had been bent on fulfilling his duty to make an example of him—before eliminating him.

Simon scratched his head and let out a snort. By some turn of events that still baffled him, his testimony in front of Burroughs, the other government officials of New Morgan, and the assembled crowd had inspired a turn in momentum. The people watching from the stands of the Arena had an abrupt change of heart. The ringleader of the spectacle, at a loss for control and ideas, diverted attention to a different act. Within minutes, all evidence of the trial was whisked away, Simon was ignored, and the duel of massive Bots commenced. The crowd, now supportive of the brown-haired, olive-skinned teenager who had disrupted their government-controlled lives, still hungered for action and cheered as the Bots took the field.

Now, safe in his bedroom, Simon rubbed his knee, still sore from tumbling down a concrete stairway on the way to his trial. That day's Bot duel, he realized, was no more than a cowardly attempt to distract the crowd from the government's defeat. New Morgan's leaders would ignore this episode as if nothing had happened and restore the illusion of normalcy as quickly as possible.

With a shudder, Simon acknowledged that the government's need for normalcy was his current lifeline. If something were to happen to him, if he were suddenly to go missing, the absence of the now-infamous face of the Darkness would raise eyebrows from those who supported him during the duel. And so, he obliged in

creating a facade of status quo in an effort to keep Security at bay for as long as possible.

Was it worth the trouble? The age-old question Simon's dad often asked echoed in his thoughts as he realized that his rogue acts of courage and rebellion were the reason he was separated from his newfound family, the Messengers. Swallowing back a lump in his throat, he closed his history book and walked into the open living space that comprised the living room, dining room, and kitchen he shared with his dad and the long-faded memory of his mom.

"How's it going?" The salt-and-pepper hair of Simon's dad lifted above the table, where he had been checking the stability of the four legs. A carpenter to the unassuming eye, Jonathan Clay had his own collection of secrets to conceal.

"I feel trapped," Simon said as he walked over to the couch facing the east wall of the apartment building and stretched himself across the length of it. He stared up at the tiled ceiling and exhaled. He knew his dad's question had more to do with homework than anything, but Simon was tired of holding back.

"I can't stand this, Dad." Simon struggled to summarize the past several months. There were other places he would rather be tonight; the couch served as a poor alternative. "I've always thought there was something out there, something more than New Morgan wants people to know. Then, as soon as I know the truth, I try to tell others—because that's what we're supposed

to do, right? Then *bam!*”—he slammed a fist into his hand—“I’m locked out.”

Simon kept his focus on the ceiling as he heard his dad’s footsteps approach, but a quick glance confirmed that Jonathan had taken a seat on the smaller couch against the wall separating the living room from Simon’s bedroom.

“It’s a good thing we went to the City when we did,” Simon admitted, thinking about his visits to the underground community that had provided a new world for him over the course of several months. His thoughts took him to the last worship service he was able to attend, just hours after he won his duel with Westbend. His chest tightened as he realized there was no way he could go back anytime soon. Grateful he and his dad had been able to make it to the City that night, Simon knew it was now too dangerous for them to leave the building after dark.

“Simon, do you remember Mark chapter eight?”

Simon had learned a lot about the Word over the past few months, and this room had become a classroom as his dad unpacked passages from a book the government did everything to suppress.

“Yeah, Peter had some crazy ups and downs at that point.”

Weeks ago, Simon read Mark 8 under a tent in the middle of an underground marketplace, his friends Micah and Charity nearby. On that night, Micah had pointed out that Peter’s testament of faith was met with Jesus’ approval as well as His warning.

“Dad, that one part didn’t make sense,” Simon added, pulling himself to a sitting position on the couch. “Peter knows Jesus is the Son of God. But then Jesus tells His disciples not to say anything. Why would He do that?! I mean, how will people know of Jesus unless they have heard?” Placing this narrative from Mark in comparison to a passage in Romans 10, Simon was confused. It was Romans 10 that motivated Simon to take action and spread the light of God’s Word in the darkness, beginning an exhilarating adventure just a month ago.

Simon watched as Jonathan leaned forward from his spot on the sofa and folded his hands. His dad’s green-gray eyes were steady, reassuring, earnest.

“This wasn’t the only time Jesus told people to stay quiet. You’ve been learning about His miracles. Often Jesus would heal someone and then tell them not to tell anyone.”

“Why, Dad? I don’t get it.”

His dad smiled and sat back, folding his arms. “Okay, Simon. Tell me your story. Going out on any missions tonight? any big adventures?”

Simon knew his dad was going somewhere with this, but he smarted from the sting of reality. His only answer was a frown.

Jonathan didn’t let up. “No plans, then? Why not?”

Now Simon could see where his dad was headed. “But Dad, I can’t just do *nothing* while so many people are clueless to the truth.”

The smile on his dad’s face was small and knowing. “Nothing. You mean like what you’re doing right now?”

Ouch. Point made. Simon's eagerness to spread the truth may have actually hindered his mission to do so, and maybe even hurt the mission of the Messengers. His stomach churned at the thought, and he rested his forearms on his knees as he bore the weight of his actions. *What have I done?*

"Simon, Jesus taught. He healed. He rested. He was never *not* working on our behalf. Even now, everything He does is out of love for us. But He knew that His most important mission held precedence over anything else that might distract, even other good things."

Simon began to ache with the truth that was setting in. "I really messed up, didn't I?" He looked directly at his dad.

Jonathan looked across the apartment, out the windows along the north wall. He shook his head slowly.

"Oh, I don't know about that. There is a time and season for everything. Your time of adventure sure sparked a lot of events, and I imagine we're still waiting to see how it all plays out. But we know that God works all things for the good of those who love Him. Maybe your actions ultimately left you in this time of waiting, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Seasons come and go."

Simon had plenty to digest. His dad stood and walked over to pat him on the shoulder before leaving him to his thoughts.

Hours later, Simon still wasn't resolved on where he stood. After such an intense time of success and then failure, he now wavered during this eerily quiet aftermath.

He lay in bed, struggling to fall asleep. Finally he kicked off his sheets in a fit of frustration and stood to take his post at the window. Moving the shade just enough to peek outside, he inspected the side alley below.

Simon ached at the empty scene that greeted him. No nighttime visitors. No mysterious shadows. No calls to action. But just as he stepped back to return to bed, something caught his eye.

In the glow of the streetlight, Simon noticed a long shadow stretch from his street into the alley's north opening. His heart leaped to his throat, but Simon knew no Messenger would be so bold as to stroll down Merchant Street right now. His heart plummeted when a figure came into view, the light catching the brim of a hat and glinting off of a badge. Security.

Simon retreated from the window, saying a prayer for the safety of his fellow Messengers who might be out on the streets. It would be another hour before he was finally able to sleep. But as he began to drift off, he thought he heard faint sounds of hammering from somewhere far away.

The morning came, bringing with it the last day of the school week. Fatigued after a restless night, Simon started wishing the hours away even before reaching the steps of the West Sector Preparatory School. Students flocked up the wide stairway, greeting one another with waves and chatter. In a few minutes, the tone would pulse and the day of muted learning would begin.

Simon had never been particularly social, preferring to be on the fringe, safely observing the world. But the past two weeks at school had consisted of an especially confusing mix of targeted attacks and concentrated neglect. During lunch break, Simon used to be able to sit wherever without notice. But on two occasions since his trial, students had moved out of his way as soon as he approached, as if creating a bubble to protect themselves from whatever was wrong with him. That was tolerable enough. Other times, students took great pains to show “interest” in him. While washing his hands in the restroom the first day back at school after the trial, he was suddenly caught in pitch-black darkness. A voice called from the hallway outside the bathroom door: “Hey, Simon! Like the *Darkness*?!” After fifteen minutes of pushing against the door, Simon was able to squeeze through and see that an old teacher’s desk and a heap of chairs had been piled up as a barricade. He walked into the classroom, the lecture already begun, to the sound of muffled sneers.

Ms. Stetter made as much effort as possible to ignore Simon’s existence, going so far as to “forget” to hand him a test sheet as she passed them out to the students. After ten minutes, he had summoned enough courage to walk up to the front and take the test that sat precariously on the corner of her desk. She refused to look up as he approached, but he saw that her ears were red as she hovered over her grading. Simon’s own ears burned when he turned the test over to see that the space for the name was already filled out: *Nobody*.

Ben, a recently rediscovered friend, seemed to agree with Ms. Stetter. On three different afternoons, Simon called after Ben as they walked home from school to the same block. Ben only quickened his pace, putting space between them. In class, Simon would occasionally try to look back at Ben's desk when Ms. Stetter said something particularly ridiculous. Ben only looked down, freckles disappearing on his reddened cheeks.

One student, however, seemed more interested in him than before: Ella Maxon, who sat two desks to Simon's left. She offered a shy but encouraging smile every time he tried to capture Ben's attention. Her long hair was so blond it was almost white, and her blue eyes were cool and mild. Her friendliness caught Simon off guard at first, but after a while, he began to aim his glances at Ella instead of Ben.

During lunch break on Friday, Simon decided to preempt the inevitable neglect by sitting alone at a smaller table in a corner of the cafeteria. He poked at the processed meat of his sandwich and stared at the lunch tray.

"May I join you?"

Simon nearly fell off of the bench on his side of the table, but he braced himself against the wall behind him just in time. Ella tried her best to hide a small laugh, but she was not successful.

"Uh, yeah. I mean, if you want."

Simon attempted to drown his panic with a bite of bologna.

Ella sat opposite him and observed him carefully before taking a bite of her own sandwich. After a sip of water, she cleared her throat.

“I thought you were brave the other day.” Ella took another bite. She didn’t need to explain.

“Thanks.” That was it? That’s the best he could come up with? Simon’s mind filled with words, but none of them came out of his mouth.

“So what does it mean?”

Simon swallowed. “I’m sorry?”

“The words. You know, on the streets. And that thing you said in the Arena. Other people knew it too. What does it mean?”

Simon stared at her, eyes and mouth wide open.

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you, Simon.”

It was all Simon could do to keep from falling off the bench for sure this time. Ben stood two feet from the table, a huge grin plastered across his face.

“Is this a table for two, or may I join in the fun?”

Ella blushed and moved down the bench; Ben sat down directly where she had been and focused on Simon.

“Hey, I’ve been thinking. I’m getting behind on my studies again. What do you say to another afternoon at the library sometime soon?”

Simon’s pause clearly annoyed Ben, who frowned while Simon tried to string words together that would create an intelligible answer.

“Well, yeah, Ben. Sure. That’d be fine. Monday, maybe?”

Ben shrugged and looked off to his left, talking to the wall behind Simon.

“Well, I’ll have to take a look and see when works best. So, I’ve been reading this book on archaeology, and you won’t believe what it said . . .”

Simon turned his focus back to his bologna as Ben filled the rest of the lunch break with his newfound knowledge on fossils and ancient pottery. Occasionally, Simon would glance at Ella, but she seemed completely tuned out as she chewed mechanically, eyes fixed on the corner of the room.

The afternoon sped along as Simon contemplated his two strange encounters. When the tone pulsed to announce the end of the school day, Simon had to rouse himself from his thoughts and grab his belongings.

The springtime air warmed Simon’s skin as he walked out the school doors. He scanned the stairs for Ben’s light brown head of hair among the mass of students on their way home. Ben passed to his left, racing down the steps.

“Ben! Hey, Ben!” Simon’s voice felt strange in his throat as the message failed to reach its destination. Ben didn’t pause for a moment as he headed in the direction of his apartment building. Simon made his own descent down the stairs and began his trip alone.

“Simon. Simon! Did you hear that?”

Simon sat up with a start and scrambled to make sense of his surroundings. After a moment, the familiar walls of his sparse bedroom came into focus, and Simon’s eyes adjusted to the dark. His dad’s silhouette was framed in the doorway. Just then, he heard a muffled *tap, tap* coming from the air vent. Simon looked to his dad in alarm.

“Get dressed,” Jonathan said. “We need to take a look.”

Simon hopped up and found his stash of dark clothing from the back of his closet. He grabbed a navy pullover and black sweatpants, pulling them on as he made his way to the door of apartment 2A. Jonathan was already there. He carefully turned the doorknob and eased the door open with as little noise as possible.

Simon walked out first and led the way down the stairs, heading for the workshop door, his heart pounding. This was it! They had a visitor again. *It's about time.*

“*Simon!*” Jonathan cast his hushed voice after his son in warning. Just before unlocking the door to his dad’s carpentry and repair shop, Simon spun around to look at his dad.

“Not there. Keep going.” Jonathan reached the last step and curled around the bannister to walk to the back of the first-floor hallway. Parallel to the stairs from the first floor to the second, a stairway at the back of the hallway led down to the basement. The two walked down into the cool darkness.

The three-story building sat on a solid, stone-block foundation that formed the basement’s subterranean walls. The full basement was divided by wooden slat walls into six storage areas, one for each apartment. The Clays laid claim to the storage area in the southeast corner of the basement. While they stored very little in the fenced-off section they secured with a padlock, they kept a washer and dryer there for laundry. Both machines were older than Simon, but they remained useful with only occasional maintenance by Jonathan.

Tap, tap, tap. There it was again, much louder down here. Jonathan led the way, following the sounds to their corner. Jonathan shined the flashlight around the storage area. All was as it should be—

“Dad, look.”

—except for the small hill of dust that used to be mortar in the stone wall. Two feet above the floor, between two stones, a hole the diameter of Simon’s thumb glowed with artificial light. Simon drew near, but the hole went dark. Jonathan approached from behind and placed a wary hand on Simon’s shoulder. Simon obediently took a step back, making room for his dad.

“Hey! Simon? Jonathan?” The hoarse whisper was unidentifiable, but Jonathan took another step forward.

“Who is it?”

Simon couldn’t see a thing through the tiny hole, but he could easily picture the goofy grin behind the next words:

“Hey, guys! We’re busting you out.” After a satisfied chuckle, Jack added, “Welcome back to the Darkness.”