

# FORAGER

Forager Series: Book One

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# *Chapter One*

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The Custodian G-Wagon was the last thing I expected to see when I strolled into the Recycling-Works yard. As usual, I was a couple of minutes late for my shift. My boss, a tall, balding guy whose once-impressive muscles were slowly turning to flab, was talking – more like bowing and scraping – to the Custodian sergeant. Three privates stood beside the G-Wagon with their Austeyr assault-rifles slung over their shoulders. The Custodians wore their usual camo-pattern fatigues, bulletproof vests, and helmets.

Panic surged through me with such intensity that I had to fight the urge to flee. They could be here for one reason and one reason only, and that was me. I must have slipped up somehow. A slip up that allowed them to discover the secret I had gone to such lengths to hide my entire life. Now they would haul me away to the town's Genetics Laboratory, where the geneticists would cut me apart to study the mutation I carried thanks to nuclear fallout. Whether they would euthanize me before or after

they dismembered me I didn't know, and that's what worried me. That and the whole dying part.

It occurred to me that I could try to make a run for it, but in a walled-off town canvassed by ceaseless Custodian patrols, where would I go?

I glanced about frantically for my workmates and spotted them slouching beside our battered old truck, their eyes darting about nervously. They were unnerved by the unexpected arrival of the Custodians too. Despite their ignorance, I'm sure a whole host of minor misdemeanours they had committed were flying through their minds as they wondered if they were the reason for the visit.

Custodians, the paramilitary police force tasked with protecting the town from internal and external threats, were hardly the guardians their name implied. In reality, they spent most of their time curtailing the people's freedoms and enforcing the Chancellor's strict laws.

Noticing I had arrived, my boss, Trajan Barclay, nodded deferentially to the sergeant and hurried over to me, puffing from the effort. "There you are, Ethan."

"What's going on, Boss?" I asked, unable to stop the quiver in my voice. "Why are they here?"

"Beginning today, they'll be accompanying you on your foraging trips," Trajan explained as he glanced back at them nervously.

"For what reason?" I demanded.

"Due to increased Skel attacks on our foraging parties, Custodian Command has decreed that all foraging teams will be accompanied by Custodian squads from now on."

I shuddered. Just the thought of the demented Skel nomads was disconcerting, and encountering them out there in the abandoned ruins of the city of Melbourne gave me recurring nightmares. Nightmares of their mad eyes, fetid breath and body odour that reeked of decaying flesh, and of their suits of armour made from the bones of the dead.

The disgusting savages did not work themselves, but constantly raided civilised towns and settlements to steal supplies, food and livestock, and abduct captives to be their slaves. It was from the bodies of the slaves – none of which lasted long – that they took the bones to make their armour.

On the few occasions they ambushed my workmates and I, we always managed to drive them off or slay them, using prohibited weapons we found while foraging. Weapons that were at this moment hidden in our truck. Lucky for us the Custodians never inspected the truck; otherwise, it would be a prison sentence for us all.

"Boss, we don't need Custodians to keep us safe, we're more than capable of looking after ourselves," I protested as a profound sense of relief flooded through me – the Custodians were not here for me! My secret had not been discovered.

"This ain't negotiable, Ethan," he snapped, glaring at me from beneath bushy eyebrows, "And don't give them attitude or lip. Custodians ain't known for their patience. Now come, let me introduce you."

Fuming inwardly, I followed my boss over to the Custodian sergeant.

"Ah, excuse me, Sergeant King, this is Ethan Jones, the leader of this foraging team," Trajan said.

The sergeant had about five years on me, I reckoned, and was one mean piece of work. He had a six-foot tall, well-proportioned, muscular body (unlike mine – I was still in the lanky stage.) His face was pockmarked and leered at me as though I had just been dredged up from the gutter. "As I'm sure your boss has informed you, Jones, we'll be accompanying your team on your foraging missions from now on. But don't mind us, just go about your business as usual. Our purpose is to keep you boys safe out there, not to get in your way."

I bit back the first dozen retorts that popped into my head, like: *what a load of a baloney! What do you take me for? I wasn't born yesterday*, and a selection of one or two word responses that normally never graced my lips. I finally settled upon, "Understood, Sergeant."

"I trust you have some system for determining where to forage each day?"

The way he accentuated the word 'system' sent thrills of fear surging through me again. Perhaps I had been too quick to think the danger had passed. "Ah, yes, past experience has given us a pretty good indication of where to look." This was true to a limited degree. "But today we're gonna continue stripping out the apartment block we hit in Carlton yesterday."

"Alright then, lead the way," the sergeant ordered before he strode back to the G-Wagon.

My workmates met me before I reached our truck, their faces full of questions and complaints. I held up my hands to forestall them. "Stow it, guys. We'll just have to get used to it, 'cause there's nothing we can do about it. Now hop in the truck."

Michal, our driver and my best friend, clambered into the truck first. He had to duck his head just to get through the door since he easily topped six-foot-four – and at nineteen, I suspected he hadn't finished growing yet.

Shorty and Leigh climbed into the backseat behind him, chattering away like a pair of old women.

David reached up to pull himself into the cab after them, but hesitated, glancing back at the Custodians. Of Chinese ancestry, David was our Mr. Fix-it, an absolute whiz with anything mechanical, whether putting them together or pulling them apart. Like me, he'd deliberately flunked year eleven so he didn't have to get a job in North End – the town's walled off upper-class district. He'd tried his hand at a number of jobs until I asked him to join my foraging team a couple of years ago. After one day out in the ruins with Michal, Leigh, and me, he claimed he'd found his life's calling. Not because of the job, but because of the various 'extra-curricular' activities we engaged in out there. Sadly, now that the Custodians were going to accompany us, we would have to curtail those activities.

"Go on, get in!" I hissed at David. He nodded and climbed into the back with Shorty and Leigh, while I jumped in and sat beside Michal in the front.

Michal looked down at me, clearly displeased about something. "You gotta be more careful, Ethan."

"Me?" I asked, not having the slightest inkling of what he was referring to.

"Yes, Ethan, you." He turned the key in the ignition and pumped the accelerator gently to get the engine started. The truck was pretty old and I doubted it had a

single part that hadn't been replaced or refurbished at some point. "I'd wager my bottom dollar they're here 'cause they want to find out why our team brings in more metals than the others."

Our team was one of many that foraged in the ruins outside for non-corrosive metals – gold, platinum, copper, bronze and lead – that had survived the decades since the Apocalypse. We would take them back to the Recycling-Works where they would be sorted, melted down, and handed over to the factories.

"What do you mean?" I feigned ignorance.

"Them other three goons." He jerked his head back to indicate our workmates in the back seat. "They ain't too bright. They think you just know the best spots to look, but not me. I've seen you."

That sent icy tendrils of dread creeping back into my gut. "Seen me what?"

"You can drop your act with me, okay?" he said softly as he shifted the truck into gear and drove out of the Recycling-Works yard towards the town gates. "I've heard about people like you, and your secret's safe with me. Just don't keep hitting pay dirt every day from now on. Those Custodians aren't here to protect us from the Skel like they claim – or they'd have brought a Bushmaster instead of that G-Wagon."

He was right, and I knew it. The Custodians always rode in their Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicles when entering situations they perceived as potentially dangerous. That they came in an unarmoured G-Wagon today proved they were not expecting to encounter Skel as they claimed. That was just a smokescreen to cover their true intention – which was to find out which of us

had my aberrant, mutant ability, which I used to locate the metals we were looking for. Personally, I thought of the ability as a gift, something everyone could benefit from it.

What was wrong with me? How had I convinced myself I could get away with bringing back a load of non-corrosive metals every time? Never once coming back empty-handed. We told the boss we just knew where to look and were extraordinarily lucky. But that kind of naivety really showed just how out of touch I was with reality – or was it typical thinking for teenagers, thinking we could get away with anything? The Custodians were relentless in hunting down those with genetic mutations. Ninety-nine percent were detected before birth and resulted in a terminated pregnancy. Anyone who survived with mutations like mine were taken away and never seen again.

These ruminations triggered one of my strongest childhood memories. I was five years old, making my own way to school, feeling proud of myself for my independence. I wasn't really alone, I was following some of the other boys who lived near my flat. I hummed merrily to myself, thinking of the long day ahead when unfamiliar arms grabbed me and pulled me into the shadows. I looked up into the face of an elderly Chinese man. He knelt down and forced me to meet his gaze.

"You must hide your ability, child," he said. "Hide it from everyone, even your family. Do not trust anyone! If the Custodians find out you have it, they will haul you away to the Genetics Laboratory to be dissected like a frog. You understand me, child? Like a frog!"

And then he walked off, leaving me shaking in fear – of him and of what he had said. Even by that age, I knew I was different, and I most definitely did not want to die like that! How the man knew I had the mutation, I still don't know.

"So where are we heading today, Boss?" Michal asked, snapping me out of my reverie.

"Back to where we went yesterday. There's still plenty of copper we can strip out there." Normally there was not much to find in the way of useful metals that close to the CBD – Melbourne's Central Business District. That whole area had been stripped virtually clean by foragers over the decades. However, yesterday I struck pay dirt when I found an old apartment block that still had copper pipes rather than the plastic ones used in later years.

"Hey Jones?" Leigh piped up.

"Yeah, what?" I twisted the rear-view mirror so I could catch a look at him as I answered. Leigh was a wiry built individual with spiked auburn hair. He was twenty, like myself. He was a typical school dropout – not too bright and full of lip. We had to watch him near authority figures to keep him in line before he got himself into too much trouble. When Trajan asked me to form my own foraging team two years ago, he insisted I include his nephew, Leigh. He'd promised his sister he'd give him a job. I had seen Leigh at school, of course, but hadn't had much to do with him back then. Still, he was an okay bloke, and I was glad to have him on my team.

"Why do you reckon the Custodians are gonna accompany us on our trips from now on?" he asked.

"To keep us safe from Skel attacks. At least, that's their excuse," I replied.

"Oh come on, Skel? I'd bet my bottom dollar they're here to make sure we 'behave' out there. They just want to rob us of the only freedom we've got left!" Shorty retorted angrily.

Shorty was our youngest member – a recent school dropout. With long white-blond hair, he was a head shorter than me, but was as nimble as a monkey. He could climb anything and get through virtually any gap or hole. He was also quite the comedian, which was surprising really, when you considered his parents. His father was an automotive factory worker who never stopped cussing. Every time I saw him at Shorty's place, he was slumped in a chair in front of the TV with a stogie in one hand and a smoke in the other. He had a habit of launching into endless tirades about things that got on his goat. And everything got on his goat. Shorty's mother wasn't much better. To say she was a little rough around the edges would be the understatement of the century.

"They probably think we're doing drugs or having wild sex parties out there," Leigh suggested.

"I wish!" Shorty declared a little too enthusiastically.

"Which one?" David laughed.

"Both, of course." Leigh grinned.

"And where do you suppose they think we're finding the drugs and women?" Shorty asked.

"You'd be surprised," David answered from where he sat watching out the window. "Not long before you joined us, Shorty, we found a whole stack of tins packed with drugs in airtight bags."

"Fat lot of good that haul did us, Jones made us burn the lot," Leigh said.

"He what?" Shorty stared at me as though there was something seriously amiss with my head.

"That was for your own good!" I insisted, remembering the horrified expression on Leigh's face when I gave the order – and then stayed to make sure he followed it.

"But...but if you'd sold it you'd have been set for life! You know, I've got some contacts..." Shorty began. He was definitely on the same page as Leigh.

"Selling drugs is an automatic death sentence!" I shot back at him. "And don't get me started on how they can totally mess up your life."

"Custodians are a confounded waste of space, can't they find something useful to do with their lives apart from ruining ours?" Leigh moaned. "Hey Jones, let's introduce 'em to some real Skel today. Bet they soil themselves and go runnin' home to mummy."

"Yeah, that's the ticket! Do it, Jones, do it!" Shorty bounced in his seat.

"As attractive as that sounds, I wouldn't wish Skel on anyone, not even Custodians. We are supposed to be on the same side, remember?"

"Yeah, but do they know that?" David asked.

"Pipe it down guys, the gates are ahead," Michal announced as the massive metal gates loomed before us. A twelve-foot high, outwardly curving concrete wall, topped with spikes and barbed wire, ran the perimeter of the entire town. There were only three exits, each with two tall metal gates that rarely opened. The only people permitted to leave the town were foragers and

Custodians, and the latter rarely did so. There were also man-high secret exits with concrete doors that became flush with the walls when shut. I saw the Custodians using one when I was snooping with my binoculars one night.

We stopped at the gates so Michal could show the guards our papers. They examined them carefully and then strolled down to talk with the Custodian squad following us. Using the rear-view mirror, I watched them talk with Sergeant King for a few minutes, before they returned our papers to us. The gates swung slowly open on well-oiled hinges and Michal finally drove out of Newhome with the Custodians' G-Wagon close behind. We crossed the 250-metre wide no-man's land that surrounded Newhome. All of the buildings surrounding the town were demolished so that no one could approach without being seen from the guard towers on the walls.

Heading to Victoria Street, we entered North Melbourne's eerily quiet and empty streets. Slowly decaying buildings were in the process of being overgrown by shrubs, creepers, trees and wild grass. Wrecks of rusting vehicles littered the roads as well, but not in great numbers. Most of the city folk who survived the bomb fled to the country after the water, gas and electricity cut out. Sadly, most of them died of starvation, malnutrition and disease. The country towns that had not been bombed were unable to cope with the influx of over two million people.

The buildings in this part of the city were relatively intact, though for the most part their windows had been either blown out by the bomb, or smashed by vandals or foragers. The nuke that hit Melbourne a century ago must

have had the wrong co-ordinates, because it came down in the southeastern suburbs, leaving the city's Central Business District mostly untouched. I could see it now, dominating the skyline ahead of us, a motley assortment of skyscrapers of varying heights and designs. We'd only ventured in there a few times, for many of the buildings looked structurally unsafe. Not to mention there were 'things' in there. Things I hesitated to call people – they made the Skel seem friendly. Besides, there were still plenty of resources to scrounge up from the suburbs.

As we drove I pondered what Shorty said; that the Custodians were with us to curb the only freedom we had left. I wondered if he was right. Perhaps Michal and I were being paranoid. Yet if he was right, that meant I had spent years downplaying my intellect and abilities in school so I could flunk out and get a job as a forager – all for naught. Only foragers were allowed out of Newhome on a regular basis, and I needed that freedom. Foraging was the only time I felt free and alive. It was only out here that I could use my special abilities without the danger of getting caught. Alas, thanks to the Custodians, that was no longer the case.

Perhaps it was time to re-examine my original plan of going AWOL during one of these foraging outings, never to return. However, the situation that caused me to shelve the plan in the first place was still in effect – my kid sister was ill and I was the only one in our family willing to buck the system to help her. I was convinced her health would continue to decline if I didn't keep slipping nutritious lunches to her when the others weren't looking. Well, that's what I kept telling myself. The fact was she

didn't eat much of what I brought her. She didn't eat much of anything, period.

## *Chapter Two*

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With our truck in the lead, we eventually reached Victoria Street and headed east through a ghost city of eerily silent shops, hotels, and office blocks. We finally entered Carlton, where we found the ten story apartment building we raided yesterday. Michal drove around the rusting shell of a semi-trailer and turned into and parked in an extremely picturesque side street. Trees flourished down its length, casting it into shade. Sparrows fluttered about the ground and twittered in the branches, while crows cawed from rooftops. It was one of the most peaceful and tranquil spots we had encountered, though sadly, it was in appearance only. Skel could turn up anywhere in the ruins of Melbourne.

The G-Wagon pulled up beside our truck. Sergeant King and two of his goons climbed out, leaving the driver inside the vehicle. As they glanced about nervously at the trees and high-rise buildings that crowded around us,

their typical arrogance was absent. In fact, they weren't just uncomfortable, but nervous as well, and that gave me a great deal of pleasure. This trip was quite probably their first time outside the town.

"What next, Jones?" the sergeant demanded.

I picked up a crowbar and pointed at the ten-story apartment block to our right. "We worked the first two floors yesterday, so we'll be hitting the third and fourth today."

"Right."

"Will you be coming in with us?" I asked, and then as an afterthought added, "Hopefully we won't run across any Skel today."

King's eyes widened ever so slightly. "Ah, no, it is imperative that we remain out here to guard the vehicles."

*Guard the vehicles?* What a convenient excuse to stay outside where they felt safer – so much for their claims that they were here to protect us. Their choice to remain outside actually revealed their true intention, which was to determine which one of us was the mutant. I presumed there was a monitoring device in the G-Wagon that would squawk like a stuck pig if I used my ability.

Pondering the Custodians attempts to catch me out reminded me of the first time I saw them apprehend a mutant. It was my second day in first grade. I was in Class A with twenty-nine boys – Class B had thirty. I heard the Custodians standing outside the classroom, arguing amongst themselves. One asked why they couldn't just drag every kid in the school down to the hospital to have an MRI scan and physical examination to check for mutations. Another replied that there would be

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