

CHAPTER THREE

Bounty Hunter

Holt lay at the edge of the treeline, staring through a pair of small binoculars. Night had fallen, thick and dark over the forest, and the woods were filled with the impatient buzzings of locusts. Max sat next to him, chewing on a piece of cherry flavored taffy from Holt's pack. Max had a wicked sweet tooth, and when Holt needed to keep him quiet, he gave him a snack to focus on.

Through the binoculars, Holt spied what was once a farmhouse beyond the trees. For the most part, it was still in one piece, though some of its windows were broken out and it had graffiti on its doors.

Holt watched each window on the bottom floor light up with flickering orange light as something moved through the

house. A lantern, Holt guessed, held by the very person he had been tracking.

He smiled. The bounty on this one would solve a lot of problems for him, but he'd have to be cautious, have to do this strategically. The person in there was supposed to be very clever.

Holt and Max moved for the farmhouse, closing the distance quick and quiet, keeping low. He could see the lantern light flickering from an upstairs window now, which meant the bottom floor should be clear. Unless his target had set up traps or alarms, of course. It was a distinct possibility.

Holt opened the door and slipped in.

The farmhouse was dark, probably hadn't had electricity since the invasion. It had also been ransacked by looters many times over. What was left of the furniture was smashed on the floor, the cabinets and shelves all turned over and emptied.

Holt and Max moved through it all slowly, careful about tripping or breaking something, all the while scanning for traps. So far, Holt hadn't seen any.

They moved towards the stairs at the other end of the room. As they did, Holt noticed the walls. There were still a few pictures hanging on them. Family portraits, a picture of a

man on a tractor, two boys and a dog, a girl dressed in a high school graduation gown. They were glimpses of a world that no longer existed, and in all of them was something that gave Holt pause.

Images of adults. Parents. Friends of friends. Smiling, standing tall over their children, strong and capable.

Holt couldn't help but stop and stare. It had been almost a decade since he had seen anyone older than twenty-one or twenty-two. To him, the figures within those pictures seemed...alien. And even though they made him uncomfortable, he couldn't look away.

The ceiling above him groaned as somebody moved upstairs. It was enough to break the spell. Max stared up at the ceiling, sniffing the air curiously and growling low.

Holt silenced him with a gesture, moved away from the pictures and started up the stairs, taking them nice and easy in case they were squeaky. As he moved, he drew his shotgun from his back, a faded, camouflaged Ithaca 17 he had found at an old army base and restored back to health. He used it almost as much as the Sig. They were two of his best friends.

At the end of the stairs stretched a dark hallway, wallpaper peeling from it and littering the floor. The hall moved between several different bedroom doors, but only one of

them had light spilling out of the doorway onto the floor and wall. The same flickering orange light he'd seen outside.

Holt and Max crept towards the door quietly, and reached it in about six slow steps. Holt pushed himself gently against the edge of the doorframe, listening and waiting. No sounds, no indication of who or what might be waiting.

It was now or never, he figured. Holt took a deep breath, gripped the shotgun and spun around the side, raising the weapon as he did. He aimed down the barrel and moved quickly into what used to be a bathroom.

The lantern sat on a shelf, bathing everything in wavering hues of orange and yellow. In the center of the room was a large, porcelain clawed bathtub, full of water and soap suds, all of which covered a lone figure resting contentedly inside. The person didn't so much as flinch.

"Get out of the tub," Holt ordered firmly, keeping the shotgun leveled at the figure. "No quick movements, I know who you are."

Inside the tub was a girl, a little younger than Holt, eighteen or so. A cucumber slice covered each eye and her hair was tied behind her head as she lay relaxed against the opposite end.

"I said out," Holt demanded louder when she still

failed to move. Max growled low beside him, as if he were eager to leap in after the girl. He probably was, Holt guessed. The dog loved it when people resisted.

With a frown, the girl slowly plucked one of the cucumbers off an eye, and leveled an annoyed look at Holt.

"Do you have any idea how long it took to make this bath?" she asked in agitation. "Here's a clue: I had to use a tea kettle for the hot water, so, yeah, it took me a long time."

"I'm not sure it would be possible for me to care less," Holt said, growing impatient. "The only thing I care about is the price on your head, and I want you out right now." He kept the gun leveled on her. She seemed remarkably calm for her predicament, which in his experience was a bad sign.

The girl removed the second cucumber and stared at him evenly. Unlike his eyes, hers were laced with the black veins of the Tone, and the ratio of white to black had shifted dramatically to the darker side. They were pretty eyes nonetheless, Holt noted, flashing green in the candle light. Up close, they probably sparkled...

Holt quickly shook his head to clear out that thought. He had a job to do, he needed to stay focused.

"Another bounty hunter," she said, making no move to exit the water. "I've already left three of your friends in my

dust, what makes you think you'll be any different?"

"Because I'm better than them," Holt said. "And I doubt they were my friends. Get out of the water, or I'll have my actual friend here pull you out." Max barked in anticipation.

"He looks like he could use a bath too," she said. "No reason to be grumpy. Mind turning around while I find my clothes?"

Now that was a new one. "You're...naked?"

The girl smiled now. "That's typically how a bath works."

Holt hesitated, a bevy of images flashing through his mind as he looked at the bubbles lying like a blanket on top of her. He shook his head to clear those away, too, then concentrated on the issue at hand. She had a point, he had to admit. What was the harm? They were on the second floor, there was nowhere for her to go, and she was too far away to reach him if she tried. Besides, Max had no qualms about looking away, it was all the same to the dog.

"Fine," he said gruffly, turning around, but keeping the shotgun close. "But make it quick."

"Totally quick," the girl pleasantly assured him.

Behind him, she stood up in the water, keeping her eyes on Holt as she did. Max growled as she stepped out, but she

paid the dog no notice. Several necklaces hung from her neck, one of them a thin, gold chain with a pendant made of a very odd combination of objects. Two dimes, a glass vial full of dark grey powder, and a red marble, all tied together with copper wire. The moment she was free of the tub, her hands shot to the pendant and ripped it off her neck. She threw it hard at the floor where Holt stood.

The vial shattered. Splinters of light exploded in a sphere all around Holt and Max. Streaks of light streamed upwards inside it and brilliantly burst apart in the air.

Something ripped Holt and Max off the floor like they weighed nothing.

It yanked them straight upwards, left them floating in mid-air, weightless, feet off the floor, spinning around helplessly. In shock, Holt tried to reach a wall or the ceiling or anything to give him traction, but they were all too far away. He was stuck, hovering uselessly in space over the crumbling bathroom floor.

Max spun around as well. The difference was, he seemed to be having a great time. The dog barked excitedly as he rotated and twisted, enjoying the weightlessness.

The girl laughed, watching them. "Well, at least one of you's enjoying it." She moved to her clothes, slowly gathered

them up and put them on.

The girl was thin and lithe, with short red hair that ebbed and flowed somewhere around her neck line. Her eyes, just like Holt guessed, were green, and they flickered like emeralds behind the black of the Tone. She had the easy body language of someone capable, like most survivors these days. The ones who couldn't save themselves had long ago been weeded out, but there was more to her than just that. A polished savviness and lighthearted glint in her eyes that was only earned from numerous close calls and brushes with death.

Holt only caught glimpses of her as he spun, brief flashes of golden wet skin in the flickering lantern light. Any other time, it might have been a nice sight.

"Let me down!" he demanded, managing to twist around enough to aim the shotgun at her. She just laughed, studied him with amusement. Holt felt a rush of anger, both at his predicament and at being bested by a girl. "I don't want to, but if you make me shoot, I will!"

He had underestimated her, he knew. Big time. And he wondered how many others had made the same mistake.

The girl clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Shooting a gun inside a gravity void's the opposite of a smart idea," she replied, calmly tying her shoes. "And Midnight City wants me

alive. There's no reward for you if you shoot. And that means you won't."

The girl grabbed an over-stuffed backpack from the floor and opened the bathroom window, letting the cold night air float in. She put one foot through...then paused, looking back at him.

"My name's Mira, by the way. Mira Toombs," she said, smiling as she stepped all the way through the window. "Did you think I wouldn't make you work for it?"

Holt could only watch as she dropped from the window sill to the ground below and scampered quickly away, leaving him stranded in mid-air.

He cursed violently as he floated helplessly. A Strange Lands artifact. It must have been. The wanted poster had clearly said she was a Freebooter after all, an expert. He should have seen it coming. But he hadn't. And now he was trapped while all that reward money ran away from him.

But he wasn't going to lose it this easily.

Holt studied the room, noticed objects at the other end weren't floating like he and Max were. Whatever she had done to the gravity, she had only done it in close proximity to the two of them. It meant the "gravity void", or whatever she called it, didn't extend that far out. If he could just reach its

edge...

But he couldn't grab a wall or the ceiling, couldn't grab anything to pull himself through the air. There was one thing, however, he could reach.

Max yelped as Holt grabbed him. "Hold on, pal." Holt flung Max forward. The dog flew over the floor with relish, then passed through the edge of the void and back into normal gravity.

He fell to the floor with a thump, and Holt quickly grabbed a spool of rope from his belt, and tossed an end of it to Max. Half of it fell to the floor in front of Max as it passed through the edge of the zero-gravity. The rest still hovered weightless above.

"Pull!" Holt shouted. Max grabbed the rope and started pulling, growling with enthusiasm.

Holt held on, being towed through the air. When he reached the edge of the void and passed through, his eyes widened as he realized something. "Wait!" he shouted at Max, but it was too late. Gravity caught him again and he dropped directly into the bath tub.

Water sprayed everywhere, blowing suds and bubbles all over the room. Holt, wet and angry, burst from the tub and immediately leapt through the window.

He landed on the ground outside, looking for signs of the girl. He was in time to see her disappear into the trees a hundred yards ahead. Max landed on the ground next to him, and Holt clicked his tongue twice. The dog darted after her, barking furiously, a missile over the ground. Holt ran after him, watched Max disappear into the treeline, then burst through himself.

Holt rushed through the forest, dodging the hulking shadows of huge pine trees in the dark. Only the moonlight filtering in from above gave him light. Ahead, he could hear Max's frantic barking, and he followed it as fast as he could.

When he burst through a mass of shrubs, he skidded to a desperate stop right before careening off the edge of a steep cliff.

Only open air lay between him and a river bank hundreds of feet below, and he stared down at it with wide eyes. Max was to his left, barking furiously. The girl was there too, keeping the dog at bay with a tree branch.

Holt and the girl locked eyes. She smiled as she saw how drenched he was. "Guess you took a bath too."

Then she simply turned...and leapt straight off the edge of the cliff.

Holt gasped in shock, Max barked in frustration. They

both looked out over the dropoff, expecting to see her splattered on the rocks below. Instead, they saw something completely different. Mira floated gracefully through the air, light as a feather, like she was being carried by an invisible parachute.

Another artifact, Holt thought with disdain.

Maxed whined pitifully, barked once, desperate to pursue, but without a way to do so. Holt watched the figure of Mira Toombs land on the river bank and run towards the East. He stared after her, counting each footfall until she disappeared, becoming one more shadow among thousands in the dark.

He had to admit, she was good. No wonder her bounty was so high. But she was worth it, regardless. That reward was salvation, his ticket to the east, away from all his problems, and he didn't mind putting in a little overtime to get it.

<<<<>>>>