

## Book One - The Bounty Hunter

### Chapter One - The Outlaw

He pulled the old hovercraft up to the edge of the crater. End of the line unless you had wings. He tugged the wineskin out of its holster and took a nip. Spicy. Without warning he threw it high. He drew and fired with lightning speed. It exploded like a tomato then left a trail of red as it floated down silently into the abyss. The echo of his gun shot was the only sound for miles. Everything else was swallowed up by the wind.

Come out come out wherever you are.

He pressed a button on the back of his helmet. The visor dropped into view and augmented his reality with new truths.

Don't make me ask twice.

Oyang was a patient man but he hated to repeat himself. He also hated to be watched. His augmented vision revealed the man clearly. The fugitive was hiding behind thick tumbleweeds. These guys were all the same. Did they really think some two bit cloaking device was going to save them? He leveled his phaser at the bushes and cocked the safety back slowly. It made an audible clicking sound that hung heavy in the air.

Give you to the count of three, he said.

Three.

He fired into the nearest bush. It left a perfectly round hole in the bramble before it burst into flames. That ought to give him a scare. A heavy piece of metal flew out from the tumbleweeds and landed at his feet. He picked it up and looked back.

Don't shoot brother!

That your piece?

Not anymore. I'm unarmed.

The outlaw stood up slowly, hands raised. Oyang trained his gun on the man's chest.

You know your sheet says dead or alive. I ain't contractually obligated to show you any mercy son.

I mean no harm sir.

Better not.

Try anything funny, he cocked his gun.

You know the drill.

The man came quietly. Three days later they rode into town without event. Oyang riding shotgun, his prisoner looking thoughtful as he sat on the passenger side with heavy hands in iron cuffs. It was a smooth journey. By the time they arrived, he had almost grown to like the outlaw. He turned out to be a man of few words. Not the kind to beg for his life with apologies, promises or idle threats. When they made camp the captive was careful not to make any sudden moves that would arouse suspicion. They kept their conversation to a minimum. They kept it professional. It was just how Oyang liked to play it.

The prisoner looked like a grizzled veteran of many wars. A heavy scar began above his left eye and chiseled a deep crescent down the side of his cheek. Oyang didn't ask. He didn't know what this man had done and he didn't intend to find out. Too much knowledge had a way of clouding a man's judgement. Too many a lawman had lent a sympathetic ear and gotten casual by the cookfire only to be found dead the next day with a knife in the back. Not this lawman. Oyang took his work too seriously to get soft. Besides, what was left to know? The story was as old as man himself. Folks who took to the sea were attacked by pirates. Folks who pushed west were terrorized by outlaws. Cain took his brother's life because he thought he could get away with it. The dark side of human nature had a way of rearing it's ugly head when it thought no one was watching. We had left our mother planet for parts unknown. That spawned the next frontier in need of civilization. Those who were called upon to tame the wilderness in the heart of man had an unspoken duty to hold the line between good and evil.

## Chapter Two - The Hoosegow

Apollo was an abandoned mining planet on the outskirts of the Tetara galaxy. Once the center of a thriving plutonium trade, it became a popular outpost for smugglers, thieves and ne'er do wells. By the time its plutonium veins dried out, the prison was at capacity. The Recidivist Apollo Penitentiary, TRAP for short, housed over thirty thousand convicts on three hundred acres of barren wasteland. Inmates eventually outnumbered the civilians and Apollo was officially reclassified as a penal colony. Apollotraz, as it was affectionately known to its indigenous population, opened its doors to inmate transfers in 3016. Only the most dangerous criminals were sent there to serve out violent lives on the edge of space. Oyang had orchestrated several of these exchanges himself and he always made sure to approach with caution.

Shuttle: Oscar Yankee Alpha November Golf requesting clearance to land.

State your business Oyang.

Transporting prisoner: Whisky Tango Foxtrot Niner Seven Alpha for lockup.

Hang on. We're putting out a fire.

Putting out a fire was prison code for suppressing a riot. The TRAP had at least one outburst a week. Oyang waited patiently for the fire to be extinguished. Sometimes it took all night for the day's festivities to draw to an end. He thought about the time he ran low on fuel and had to execute an emergency landing.

I would not advise that, came the voice of the dispatcher.

Advise this, he had said, flipping the bird as his ship whistled past the control tower.

He landed into total chaos. There was pandemonium wherever he looked. Guards fired taser rifles into an unstoppable wave of blood lust and savagery. Prisoners raped and pillaged everything in sight like a rabid zombie horde. His passenger found a steak knife on the ship which he planted into the back of Oyang's shoulder as a token of his affection. Before there was time to react, a fiery blast laid waste to the assailant who stared lifelessly at the sky, knife still in hand.

Let's go, advised the dispatcher as smoke rose slowly from his smoldering pistol. He wore a look like he'd seen a thing or two.

Oyang listened this time and went.

After that incident Oyang made sure to come prepared. He equipped his ship with a backup generator and charged it with enough juice to take them to the nearest fuel station. He also kept a twelve inch buck knife in the heel of his left boot. It's amazing what a man is capable of when you take away his dignity. Oyang rubbed his shoulder thoughtfully as he pondered the human condition.

All's well that ends well I suppose, said the warden.

The warden received his prisoner and loaded him onto a transport shuttle. Oyang watched as the man with the scar on his cheek disappeared quietly into the night. Now he was a ward of the state and Oyang was ninety thousand coin richer. The job rewarded him handsomely but it barely covered his expenses. As an independent contractor Oyang was personally responsible for medical, dental, and life insurance. Not to mention a 401k. What would he do if his unborn child needed braces?

Hell if I know. The money's already spent, he observed as he lost it all on a poker hand.

So much for that 401k.

It wasn't easy for a degenerate gambler to make a decent living these days. Oyang picked up his next job the following morning. By afternoon he was tracking a different man with a guilty face on a sheet that read "wanted".

Guess that trip to Tahiti will just have to wait.

He fired up his engines and took to the sky.

### Chapter Three - The Barkeep

His ship unfolded its landing gear as it dropped into the translucent airlock. The airlock sealed its outer gate behind him before the inner gate slid open. This planet did not have an atmosphere. Titanic icebergs had been shipped in and embedded in craters as an effort to kickstart things. But the atmospheric process could take centuries. In the meantime there was the dome.

The dome was a massive sphere with an artificial sky that housed the people of this world. The walls of its glass surface were heavily tinted. What the planet lacked in atmosphere, it more than made up for in sunlight. Instead of a moon it boasted a second sun. Twin stars burned their eternal sunshine across the endless day. The sweet relief of nightfall had to be simulated by the walls of the dome itself which dimmed from tinted to opaque every night. By night the city was filled with thieves. Bands of motherless delinquents whose parents had died in the fires formed ruthless gangs. They preyed upon hapless travelers who had stopped there to refuel their ships and try their luck with cards and women in houses of ill repute.

The dome had a sheriff once. But the sheriff went missing so the constable replaced him. After the constable vanished the deputies took over. When the last of the deputies disappeared, the justice system was simply relieved of its duties. The desert planet belonged to its underworld. Folks in the dome just had a way of not showing up anymore when they crossed the wrong people. The desolate badlands on the other side of the airlock held unspeakable secrets. It was not uncommon for two men to leave the dome and only one man to return. This was not a place for second chances. Oyang himself had personally escorted several men off of this planet to their rightful new domiciles on Apollo. Men like the confused young man on this wanted sheet who had given himself a tattoo of the twin stars on his neck. A regrettable life choice if ever there was one.

The dusty town was dry and hot. It made a man long for something to drink. Oyang removed his helmet as he entered the saloon and hung it from the rack. He saddled up to the bar and waited patiently. The barkeep took his sweet time coming over. Not that he was busy mind you, they were the only ones in the tavern.

Whiskey, neat, he ordered.

Oyang had his sheet out when the barkeep returned with his drink.

You seen this man?

Why should I tell you?

Because we're friends, he said, casually opening his coat to reveal the gun in his waistband. And friends don't shoot each other in the back.

I like the cut of your jib, said the barkeep with an amiable smile. But you ain't my friend, he clarified as the smile fell from his face.

He dropped behind the bar and resurfaced with astonishing quickness. Now he was pointing a double barrel shotgun at Oyang's face.

Get out of my bar, he said.

Oyang raised his whiskey glass slowly then paused for dramatic effect. He held it there.

This the good stuff?

Top shelf.

Too bad.

He threw his whiskey into the barkeep's eyes. The man screamed and stumbled backward. Oyang yanked the shotgun away and jumped over the bar in a single swift motion. The barkeep fell to the ground as he raised his hands to his eyes.

Next time you threaten a man's life, you'll want to take the safety off first, like this. He cocked the gun. Too bad there won't be a next time.

Don't shoot! Don't shoot! said the barkeep holding his hands up.

Thats up to you. Can we go back to being friends?

Y-yes.

Then let's start over.

He dropped the gun and knelt down. He held out the sheet again. Take another look at this face, friend. Have you seen this man?

The barkeep shook his head. Oyang pointed the shotgun back at him.

Friends don't lie to each other.

That's Martinez. He-

A shot rang out from somewhere above them. Oyang looked down to see a pool of blood spread across the barkeep's chest. He heard footsteps on the roof and he glanced up to follow the sound but the barkeep pulled him back. The dying man spoke slowly with great effort.

They're... Watching... You... Oyang...

He saw life abandon the barkeep's eyes as he crossed over to the next world. Oyang looked up at the ceiling.

You killed my friend, he said quietly.

#### Chapter Four - The Old Man

You did what?

It was an accident Pop! I was just trying to scare him.

Give me the gun, Juarez demanded. The boy complied sheepishly. Now go to your room.

But Pop! He's waiting out there to shoot us!

Strike two boy. I said go to your room.

But Pop!

Go to your room before I shoot you myself.

Juarez waited for his son to leave. Then he got up and walked over to the window. The bounty hunter was out there all right. His hovercraft was parked in plain sight. He thought about his son. Juarez wasn't much older than the boy when he did his first stretch. He'd been in and out of jail since the age of sixteen. If you made a flip book out of Benito Juarez's mugshots, you could spin the pages and watch the time-lapse film of a boy become a man. Benito was the product of a life that made him grow up too fast. When he was twelve his father went out for a pack of smokes and never came home. His mother disappeared into the bottle so Benito and his brother were handed over to the custody of the state.

At first the court showed mercy on the antics of the Juarez boys. The system had failed them. But when they wounded two guards in an armed robbery the judge's patience ran out. Rodrigo was doing forty to life on Apollo. Benito was separated from his brother and serving his time at a facility in the desert.

Benito spun the gun open and removed the shells. Then he aimed it at the door and fired. The hammer clicked harmlessly. Now Benito was the last person to discharge this weapon. He wasn't about to let them lock up his boy for involuntary manslaughter.

The old man was proud of his son but this wasn't his finest hour. Bill was serving his drinks at the great saloon in the sky now. He was a good man who might still be alive if his boy knew how to shoot straight. His son had also let a bounty hunter track him to the shipyard. He was only supposed to check on the situation. Now it was out of control.

That boy is his mother through and through, Benito thought with a sentimental smile.

Juanita had busted him out of prison fourteen years ago when the boy was just an infant. Said she didn't want him to grow up without a father. If Juanita was more careful she might still be alive today. She was only trying to be a good mother but the authorities didn't see it that way. A man in a guard tower gunned her down. Benito hated authority. He shot the man dead in his tower.

Benito tucked the gun into his waist and pulled a chesterfield out from behind his ear. He struck a match and lit it as he walked toward the door. Benito wasn't going to win father of the year. He had a tendency to be hard on the boy. But he wanted his son to walk the straight and narrow. Juan was a good kid who did well at school and had a bright future. Benito would like to have attributed this to his parenting skills but he knew it was a quality passed down from his mother.

Juarez had been posing as a harmless old mechanic for the last fourteen years. He'd taken the name Benny Martinez and he lived with his boy in the back of the shipyard. The thick grey beard that covered the old man's neck hid the faded tattoo from a previous life. The tattoo forever branded him like a scarlet letter that would follow him to the grave, a destination that he would arrive at shortly.

Daylight flooded the entryway as he swung the door wide and stepped out. It broke his heart that this tragic turn of events would have to become his legacy. His boy would have to grow up fast without a father. Guess that's one he'll get from his old man. He could feel the bounty hunter's rifle crawling over him and in his mind's eye he saw himself standing in the crosshairs of its scope. He'd seen his own wanted sheet before. It read "dead or alive". Juarez lifted his hands up and closed his eyes as he advanced. The cigarette dangled on the edge of his lip as he stood in the sunlight with his eyes shut like a man facing the firing squad.

The crack of the rifle rang out like a distant thunder clap. He fell to his side and collapsed to the ground. My leg! My leg! He shot me in the leg!

Benito processed this information with a mixture of pain and relief. The bounty hunter was taking him in alive.

## Chapter Five - The Reaper

Shuttle: Oscar Yankee Alpha November Golf requesting clearance to land.

Oyang, to what do we owe the pleasure?

Transporting prisoner: Whisky Tango Foxtrot Niner Sixty Bravo for lockup.

Ah, Benito Juarez, the infamous guard killer. Welcome home Oyang. We've been expecting you.

Oyang docked his ship and disembarked. He was lost in thought as he headed for the

tower. Something in the dispatcher's voice gave him pause. An unnatural exuberance that created unease. They're watching you Oyang, said the dying barkeep. We've been expecting you, said the dispatcher. The phrases flashed through his mind like the questions on a game show. Welcome home? The man who had once saved his life would never have joked of this deathtrap as their home. They shared a bond too grave to make light of.

It's a trap!, he finally understood. But the epiphany came too late and they fell upon him with ether and rope.

Oyang opened his eyes to the barrel of a gun. Now he was tied to a post. Hey tough guy, you remember me? Oyang never forgot a face on a sheet. The voice of the dispatcher belonged to a man that he had once apprehended by the name of Rodrigo Juarez.

You shot my brother, Rodrigo said.

Brought you both here for a family reunion, Oyang remarked.

Rodrigo cocked the gun. You think that's funny?

Hold on, said Benito. The Reaper wants to talk to him.

Rodrigo clicked the safety back. To be continued, he said as he holstered the pistol.

Oyang had a feeling that things were about to get a whole lot worse. People didn't just "talk" to The Reaper. The Reaper was not a man to be fucked with. Nobody knew where he came from but they all knew who he was. There wasn't a wanted sheet for The Reaper because no one knew his face. For most, it was the last face they ever saw. Legend had it The Reaper escaped from a distant planet where outlaws were banished to fight to the death in blood soaked gladiator pits. They say he had removed his own eye and replaced it with a nuclear device. He used this nuke to execute a death defying escape. Later The Reaper returned to the planet and killed everyone on it.

Bounty hunter, came a voice from behind. We meet again, said the man as he stepped into view. Oyang recognized the outlaw by the scar on his cheek. It started just above his left eye.

Thought I left you with the warden.

Once upon a time, the outlaw reminisced. But a lot has changed since then. The warden is no longer with us. He pointed to the star on his chest. You're looking at his replacement.

So you're The Reaper.

In a past life, he said with a smile. I'm the warden now, he corrected. He put a hand



over his left eye and removed it. Now the eye was staring up at Oyang from the palm of the man's hand. Do you know what this is?

Your fucking eyeball?

Not any more. Now it's where I keep radioactive material. An associate of mine found plutonium while he was trying to tunnel through this rock, he said as he dropped the eye into his pocket. We're gonna reopen the Apollo mine, and you're gonna help me staff it. The Reaper produced a paper and held it before Oyang's eyes. On it was a list of names. Tell me bounty hunter, he said as he folded the list up and tucked it away. Do you know the difference between a capture and a kidnapping?

Good and evil, Oyang replied.

The Reaper chuckled. That ain't it at all. Not in the eyes of the law. He tapped the star on his chest. The difference is whether a warden put the man's face on a wanted sheet. Now we're gonna do this list up real official-like. And you're gonna bring in your bounties.

And if I refuse? Oyang posited.

Then you don't get your eye back, The Reaper replied. That reminds me. He summoned Benito with a snap of his fingers. We need to take a deposit from you as an act of good faith.

The Reaper handed Benito a knife. Juarez, would you be so kind as to do the honors?

Gladly, Benito replied.

Don't worry. It's not as bad as you think, said The Reaper with a wink of his empty eye.

Benito held the knife up as he approached slowly. He rested it briefly on Oyang's cheek. Then he lifted it and inexplicably began to cut Oyang loose. Run, he said, then jumped with a bang and collapsed to the ground. The Reaper had shot Benito in the back. Oyang heard a second blast. He turned to see smoke rising from Rodrigo's gun. When he looked back he saw that The Reaper had fallen to the ground.

Rodrigo ran to his brother and knelt over him. Oyang shook off his rope and rushed to join them. A third blast knocked Rodrigo back. Oyang looked up to see that The Reaper was standing now. He held a gun in one hand and his wound with the other. He was still missing his left eye.

I ain't that easy to kill, said The Reaper. Now hold still. He pointed the gun at Oyang's leg. This'll only take a minute.

Oyang dropped and pulled the buck knife from the heel of his left boot. He grabbed it by the blade and threw it into The Reaper's chest. The Reaper staggered back then he

went down for good. His hand fell open and the eye rolled out flashing red. Oyang caught it and pressed down on the pupil. The eye stopped flashing. He exhaled a heavy sigh of relief. The nuclear device had been disarmed before it could detonate.

Oyang gazed out into the distance. It's amazing what a man is capable of when you take away- He felt a tug on his shirt. It was Benito. He looked into the old man's eyes.

Don't let my boy grow up like me, Benito said softly.

## Chapter Six - The Prodigal Father

Oyang watched the planet grow smaller as his ship pulled away. He picked up his beer and took a healthy swig.

Aaah. Breakfast of champions.

The bearded man slept in his hyperbaric chamber. His bandage moved rhythmically with the rise and fall of his chest.

To your health old man. Oyang tipped his beer at Benito with a smile.