

Chapter 1

They said the only folk who belonged in Deadshot after dark were the ones who were up to no good. I wasn't up to no good. Then again, I wasn't exactly up to no bad, neither.

I slid from Blue's saddle and tethered her to a post behind some bar called the Dusty Mouth. The kid sitting against the fence was sizing me up suspiciously. Or maybe that was just his two black eyes. I tugged the wide brim of my hat lower as I stepped out of the yard. I'd stolen the hat from my uncle, along with the horse. Well, borrowed, more like. Everything I owned belonged to my uncle anyway, according to law, down to the clothes on my back.

The doors of the bar banged open, spilling out light and noise and a fat drunk with his arm around a pretty girl. My hand snapped to my sheema before I could think better of it, checking it was still tightly

fastened so the better part of my face was covered. I was wrapped up to my eyes, and even hours after sunset I was sweating under the padding like a sinner at prayers. I figured I looked more like some lost nomad than a real sharpshooter, but so long as I didn't look like a girl it didn't much matter. Tonight I was getting out of here with at least my life. All the better if I got out with a few coins in my pocket, too.

It wasn't hard to spot the pistol pit on the other side of Deadshot. It was the noisiest building in town, and that wasn't saying nothing. A great big gutted-out barn at the end of the dusty street, it was swarming with bodies and blazing with light, propped up against a half-collapsed prayer house with a boarded-up door. Might be that once upon a time the barn had served some honest horse trader, but that was years ago by the look of things.

The crowd thickened the closer I got. Like buzzards swarming to a fresh carcass.

A man with a bloody nose was pinned up against a wall by two others while another drove his fist into the man's face over and over. A girl called out from a window with words that'd make an iron dragger blush. A group of factory workers still in their uniforms huddled around a nomad in a beaten-up wagon who was shouting about selling Djinni blood that'd grant good folk their hearts' desires. His wide grin looked

desperate in the oily lamplight, and no wonder. It'd been years since anyone round these parts had seen a real live First Being, let alone a Djinni. Besides, he should've known better than to think desert dwellers would believe Djinn bled anything other than pure fire – or that anyone in Deadshot would believe themselves good folk. Everybody in the Last County went to prayers enough to know better on both counts.

I tried to keep my eyes forward, like I'd seen it all before.

If I climbed past the buildings, I'd be able to look across the sand and scrub all the way home to Dustwalk, though there'd be nothing but dark houses. Dustwalk got up and went down with the sun. Good honest behaviour didn't belong to the dark hours of the night. If it were possible to die of boredom, everyone in Dustwalk would be corpses in the sand.

But Deadshot was alive and kicking.

No one paid me much mind as I slid into the barn. A big crowd was already gathered in the pistol pit. Lines of huge oil lamps hung from the eaves, giving the gawkers' faces a greasy glow. Scrawny kids were setting up targets and dodging a big man's blows as he shouted at them to move faster. Orphans, by the look of them. Likely kids whose fathers had worked in the hulking weapons factory on the outskirts of Dustwalk until they'd got

blown to bits by faulty machinery. Or until the day they'd gone to work drunk and burned themselves too badly to live. Gunpowder wasn't hardly safe work.

I was so busy staring that I nearly walked straight into the giant of a man at the door. 'Front or back?' he demanded, his hands resting carelessly on a scimitar on his left hip and a gun on his right.

'What?' I remembered just in time to pitch my voice lower. I'd been practising imitating my friend Tamid all week, but I still sounded like a boy instead of a man. The hired muscle at the door didn't seem to care.

'It's three fouza to stand at the back, five to stand at the front. Betting starts at ten.'

'How much to stand in the middle?' Damn. I hadn't meant to say that. Aunt Farrah had been trying to smack the smart mouth off me for a year now with no luck. I got the feeling it would hurt more if this man tried.

But he just frowned like he thought I might be simple. 'Front or back. There's no middle, boy.'

'I'm not here to watch,' I said before I could lose the last of my nerve. 'I'm here to shoot.'

'What are you doing wasting my time, then? You want Hasan.' He shoved me towards a heavysset man with billowing, bright red trousers and a dark beard slicked to his chin, standing behind a low table piled with coins that bounced as he drummed his fingers.

I took a deep breath through my sheema and tried to look like my stomach wasn't trying to escape through my mouth. 'How much to enter?'

The scar on Hasan's lip made it look like it curled up in a sneer. 'Fifty fouza.'

Fifty? That was almost everything I had. Everything I'd been saving up in the last year to escape to Izman, the capital of Miraji.

Even with my face covered from the nose down, Hasan must've seen the hesitation. His attention was already wandering past me, like he figured I was about to walk away.

That was what did it. I dropped the money on the table in a jangling handful of louzi and half-louzi that I'd scrimped one by one over the past year. Aunt Farrah always said I didn't seem to mind proving myself dumb if it meant proving someone else wrong. So maybe Aunt Farrah was right.

Hasan eyed the coins sceptically, but when he counted them with the speed of a professional money-grubber he couldn't deny it was all there. For a brief moment the satisfaction tamped down on my nerves.

He shoved a piece of wood at me that dangled from a loop of string like a pendant. The number twenty-seven was painted in black on it. 'Had much practice with a gun, twenty-seven?' Hasan asked as I put the

string over my head. The tag bounced off the wraps I had forced over my chest to flatten it.

‘Some,’ I hedged. We were wanting for almost everything in Dustwalk, in the whole Last County for that matter. Food. Water. Clothes. There were only two things we had too much of: sand and guns.

Hasan snorted. ‘Then you ought to know enough to keep your hands from shaking.’

I pressed my hands close to my body to still them as I walked into the pit. If I couldn’t hold a gun steady it wouldn’t much matter that I’d learned to aim before I learned to read. I lined up in the sand next to a man who looked like he was mostly bones under his grubby factory uniform. Another man came to stand on my other side with a twenty-eight around his thick neck.

All around us the stands filled. The bet wranglers shouted out odds and numbers. If I were betting, I’d wager I didn’t have any odds. No one in their right mind would put money on some skinny boy without the guts to even lower his sheema and show his face. Maybe I could win some crazy drunk a poor man’s fortune by proving the right-minded ones wrong.

‘Good evening, gents!’ Hasan’s voice carried over the crowd, quietening them down. Dozens of kids ran among us handing out the pistols. A girl with braids and bare feet passed me mine. The weight was

instantly comforting in my palm. I quickly flicked open the chamber; there were six bullets neatly lined up. 'Everyone knows the rules. So you'd better play by them or, God help me, I'll break your cheating faces myself.' A laugh erupted from the stands, and a few whoops. Bottles were being passed around already and men were pointing at us in that way I knew from watching my uncle trade horses. 'Round one: you got six bullets, six bottles. If you've got any bottles left at the end, you're out. First ten line up.'

The rest of us stayed still as numbers one to ten shuffled into place, their toes on a painted white line in the dirt. I judged it about twelve feet between them and the bottles.

A kid could make that.

Two men still managed to miss with their very first bullets. In the end only half the men hit all their marks.

One of them was twice the size of any other competitor. He was wearing what might once have been an army uniform, though it was too worn to tell for sure whether it used to be gleaming army gold or if it was just dirty with desert dust. He wore the number one painted in a bold slash across the piece of wood on his chest. He got the biggest cheer of all. There were cries of 'Dahmad! Dahmad! Champion!' as he turned away, grabbing one of the kids scurrying around to collect

broken glass. Dahmad spoke too low for me to hear, then shoved the child off. The kid came back with a bottle of brown liquor. Dahmad started chugging, lounging against the bars that separated the pit from the stands. He wouldn't stay champion long if he was going to wind up sloshed.

The next round was even more dismal. Just one of the shooters hit all his targets. As the losers shuffled off, I got a clear view of the winner's face. Whatever I'd been expecting, this boy wasn't it. He wasn't from around here, no doubt about it; that was the first thing I noticed. Everybody around here was from around here. Nobody in their right mind would choose to be in the Last County otherwise.

He was young, maybe a few years older than I was, and dressed like one of us, wearing a green sheema carelessly round his neck and desert clothes loose enough that it was hard to tell if he was really as broad as he seemed. His hair was as black as any Mirajin boy's; even his skin was dark enough that he might've passed for one of us. But he just wasn't. He had strange sharp features I'd never seen before, with high-angled cheekbones, a straight square jaw, and eyebrows that made dark slashes above the uncanniest eyes I'd ever seen. He wasn't bad-looking either, at that. A few of the men he'd beaten spat at his feet. The young foreigner's

mouth pulled up in one corner like he was trying to keep from laughing. Then, as if sensing my eyes on him, he glanced at me. I looked away fast.

There were eleven of us left and we were jostling for space along the line with the extra body, even with me being half the size of every man here.

‘Move, twenty-seven!’ An elbow jammed into my side. My head shot up with a retort on my tongue. The retort died there as I recognised Fazim Al’Motem sidling up next to me.

I fought the urge to curse. Fazim had taught me every curse word I knew, back when he was eight and I was six. When we were caught using them, I got my mouth scrubbed out with sand and he blamed it all on me. Dustwalk was a small town. I’d known Fazim my whole life and hated him since I grew into some sense. These days he spent most of his time in my uncle’s house, where I was stuck living, too, trying to get his hands under my cousin Shira’s clothes. Every so often he’d make a grab at a piece of me, too, when Shira wasn’t looking.

What the hell was he doing here? Actually, with the gun in his hand, I could sort of figure.

Dammit.

It was one thing if I got myself spotted as a girl. It was a whole other thing if Fazim recognised me. I’d

been in trouble plenty since I was caught cursing, but I'd only been beaten within an inch of my life once. It'd been right after my mother died, when I'd tried to borrow one of my uncle's horses all the way out of Dustwalk. I made it halfway to Juniper City before they caught me. I couldn't sit on a horse for a month when Aunt Farrah and her switch were done with me. If Aunt Farrah found out I was in Deadshot gambling stolen money, she'd beat me until that inch felt like it had been a mile.

The smart thing would be to turn around and get out of here. Except that would mean I'd be fifty fouza poorer. And money was in shorter supply than smarts.

I realised I was standing like a girl and straightened up before facing the targets. The kids were still racing around, lining up the bottles. Fazim tracked their movements with the barrel of his gun, calling out, 'Bang, bang, bang!' and laughing as they flinched. I wished his gun would backfire on him and shoot that smile off his face.

The kids cleared out fast, and it was just us shooters and our bottles. We were the last group before the end of the first round. Guns were already going off all around me. I focused on my six bottles straight ahead. I could make a shot like this blindfolded. But I was being careful. I checked my distance, lined up the barrel,

checked my sight. When I was satisfied, I pulled the trigger. The bottle furthest to the right exploded and my shoulders eased a little. The next three bottles went down in quick succession.

My finger pressed down on the trigger for the fifth time. A shout punctured my focus. I had no other warning before a body rammed into me.

My shot went wide.

Fazim had been shoved sideways by another shooter, ramming into me on his way to the ground, another one of the shooters on top of him. A boo went up from the crowd as Fazim scuffled in the sand with the other man. The big man from the door was already breaking up the fight. Fazim was dragged to the side by the scruff of his neck. Hasan watched them go, looking bored, then turned back to the crowd. ‘Winners from this round—’

‘Hey!’ I shouted without thinking. ‘I want another bullet.’

A laugh went up around me. So much for not drawing attention to myself. My neck was burning with all the eyes on me. But this was too important. Too important not to ask. Scorn was written all over Hasan’s face, and I felt the mix of humiliation and anger rise up in my throat in answer. ‘That’s not how it works, twenty-seven. Six bullets, six bottles. No second chances.’

‘But that’s not fair! He pushed me.’ I gestured at Fazim, who was nursing his jaw up against the wall.

‘And this isn’t a school yard, little boy. We don’t need to be fair. Now you can use your last bullet and lose or get out of line and forfeit.’

I was the only one with any bullets left. The crowd started jeering at me to get out of the way, and an angry flush rose in my hidden face.

Standing alone on the line, I raised my gun. I could feel the weight of the single bullet in the chamber. I let out one long breath that moved my sheema from where it was sticking to my lips.

One bullet. Two bottles.

I took two steps to my right and then half a step back. I twisted my body and tried to see it all in my mind. Dead centre and I’d never hit the second one. Clip it too far off and neither would break.

Fifty fouza.

I shut out the shouting and taunts around me. I ignored the fact that every eye in here was on me and that I’d blown all chances of being inconspicuous. Fear crept in in its place. The same fear that had crouched in my stomach for the past three days. Since the night I’d been crawling around my uncle’s house after dark, on my way to Tamid’s, and overheard Aunt Farrah say my name.

‘—Amani?’

I hadn’t caught whatever had come before my name, but it was enough to make me stop.

‘She’s needing of a husband.’ My uncle Asid’s voice carried more than his first wife’s. ‘A man could finally beat some sense into her. In less than a month, Zahia will have been dead a year, and Amani will be clean and allowed to wed.’ Since my mother was hanged, folk had slowly stopped saying her name like a curse. Now my uncle mentioned her death more like a matter of business.

‘It’s hard enough to find a husband for your daughters.’ Aunt Farrah sounded irritated. ‘Now you want me to find one for my sister’s brat, too?’ Aunt Farrah never said my mother’s name. Not since she’d been hanged.

‘I’ll take her as a wife, then.’ Uncle Asid said it like he was talking about trading a horse. My arms nearly buckled into the sand.

Aunt Farrah made a disdainful hissing noise at the back of her throat. ‘She’s too young.’ There was an impatient tone in her voice that normally ended a conversation.

‘No younger than Nida was. She’s living in my house anyway. Eating my food.’ Aunt Farrah normally ruled the house as first wife, but every so often her

husband would root his feet, and just now Uncle Asid was warming to this idea unnervingly fast. ‘She can either stay here as my wife or leave as someone else’s. I choose her to stay.’

I didn’t choose to stay.

I chose to get out or die trying.

And just like that, everything came into focus. Me and my target. Nothing mattered but the aim.

I pulled the trigger.

The first bottle broke instantly. The second teetered for a moment on the edge of the wooden bar. I could see the chip in the thick glass where I’d hit it. I held my breath as the bottle rocked back and forth.

Fifty fouza I might never see again.

Fifty fouza to lose and my only way out.

The bottle hit the ground and shattered.

The crowd roared. I let out a long breath.

When I turned around Hasan was looking like I was a snake who’d dodged a snare. Behind him the foreigner was watching me, eyebrows up. I couldn’t stop grinning behind my sheema. ‘How’d I do?’

Hasan’s lip curled. ‘Line up for round two.’