

LBRIS

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books

TO CAGE A WILD BIRD

BROOKE FAST



I

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SEVEN.

That was the number of lives I'd traded for a full belly over the years.

Today would make one hundred twenty-eight.

I'd been holed up in the shadowed alcove of the alley since midday, the reek of piss and rotting trash making my eyes water.

My muscles were stiff, begging to be stretched, but I resisted, keeping my gaze fastened to the entrance of the safe house.

The ramshackle townhouse was tucked between two crumbling apartment buildings, its front door worn enough that it might have crumpled from its hinges with a well-aimed kick.

What was taking so long?

Typically, before the sun dipped below the tops of the skyscrapers and continued its descent toward the horizon, I'd have a fugitive cuffed, dragging their feet as I pulled them toward the city jail. From there, the fugitive would be transported to End-lock, the prison that lay over a hundred miles from the city border.

At Endlock, they would await their fate – death at the hands of Dividium citizens.

But even though Aggie's informant had said the fugitive would move from the safe house before dark, there had been no sign of him, and at this time of evening the Lower Sector buzzed with activity. Vendors shouted and pushed rickety carts through the streets as they attempted to make their final sales to the day-shift laborers rushing to spend a bit of their meager wages, while dark-hooded figures skulked through the crowds, hoping to overhear information they could trade to the authorities for extra credits.

Wary pedestrians shot fleeting glances my way as they slipped by my hiding place, likely mistaking me for a patrolling guard.

I was worse.

A bounty hunter – a traitor.

The safe-house door creaked open an inch. I pressed myself farther into the alcove, breath caught in my throat, for fear that the slightest sound would send me home empty-handed.

A heartbeat later, the door yawned wide, and a finely clothed figure ventured out, braving the alley in hopes of blending into the wave of Lower Sector commuters.

I abandoned my hiding spot, and a grim smile spread across my face as I stepped toward the retreating form.

This would all be over soon. I could already imagine the credits on my wristband creeping from a few dozen into the thousands. Enough for several months' rent and a pantry full of rations to get my brother, Jed, and me through the winter. Maybe even enough for a new pair of boots to replace the ones falling apart on my feet, and a winter coat for Jed.

'Torin Bond,' I called.

The figure halted mid-stride, craning his neck. His hood slid back to expose a mop of brown hair streaked with gray. His weary eyes were underscored with deep purple and lined with faint wrinkles.

'Stop,' I commanded as he took another step, my hand reaching for the set of handcuffs secured at the belt of my black cargo pants. 'I don't want to hurt you.'

A half-lie. There would be some small satisfaction in getting into a fistfight with a citizen from the Upper Sector – one of the wealthy who took and took, even as they watched us starve.

'Then don't.'

With that, Torin vanished into the bustling crowd of commuters, a shadow swallowed by a river of moving bodies.

Shit.

I'd lose my advantage if he made it to the border checkpoint that controlled the flow of movement between the Lower and Middle Sectors. Thousands of commuters were lined up on either side of the checkpoint, waiting for the patrol guards to scan their wristbands to verify their identities and confirm they had the correct permissions to cross the sector border. If Torin got there, I would either lose him in the masses, or one of the guards would recognize him and wind up with *my* credits.

The boundary dividing the two sectors was unmistakable – the structures in the Lower Sector stood as crumbling remnants of the world before, unchanged since the Council partitioned the city into three sectors after the second Civil War.

A few blocks from where I was positioned, on the other side of the checkpoint, the Middle Sector was full of newly constructed buildings and well-dressed citizens. Their pressed suits and flowing dresses were only the beginning of the divide between us and them.

I caught sight of Torin among the stream of commuters. He elbowed through the masses, but the throng of bodies slowed his progress.

I raced along the outskirts of the crowd, pushing myself to move faster.

The cuffs at my waist clanged against my thigh with each stride,

nearly drowned out by the soles of my boots slapping against the packed dirt.

Glancing over his shoulder, Torin exhaled in apparent relief when he didn't see me behind him.

Just like I planned.

I chose that moment to step directly into his path.

His jaw went slack, and I might have laughed at the look on his face had he not pulled back his fist and swung it at my nose.

I ducked, charging into his legs, sending him crashing forward onto the gritty street. Some of the commuters jumped back, gasping, while others merely glared and stepped around us.

Torin cried out, scooping up a handful of dirt and gravel and hurling it at me.

I yelped, shielding my eyes, but felt the sting of the debris nicking my cheeks.

The move gave Torin enough time to scramble to his hands and knees, but I launched myself onto his back before he could stand, sending both of us tumbling to the ground in a heap.

Torin rolled until he was on top of me, subjecting me to heaving gasps of putrid breath. I rammed my head into his face before he could work out his next move, his yell muffled as his teeth cut into my forehead.

'Fucking bitch!' he screamed, spitting out a tooth and a mouthful of blood, a glob landing on my cheek.

'Original,' I muttered, grimacing as the blood trickled across my skin. 'If only credits could buy wit.'

I entertained the thought of pocketing Torin's tooth. It was customary for hunters who visited Endlock to collect the teeth from their kills and wear them on chains around their necks, or shaved into strings of pearls. I'd seen teeth worn as cufflinks or as the centerpiece of extravagant, diamond-encrusted rings. They were morbid trophies – status symbols. Those who weren't skilled in hunting went so far as to buy teeth from vendors in back-alley

markets to fit in with their peers – I'd seen my neighbors pull their own teeth to sell to the wealthy during especially harsh winters when they couldn't make rent or afford rations for their children.

Torin's hands clamped around my throat, cutting off my air supply and any coherent thought. I flailed about, seeking a weapon, but my fingers found only dirt. On instinct, I kneed him between the legs before delivering a pointed jab to his throat. I shoved him off me, forcing him onto his stomach, and pressed my knee into his back, gasping in lungfuls of air as I caught my breath.

I unfastened the handcuffs from my belt and secured them tightly around Torin's wrists.

He spluttered but still managed to twist his neck until his eyes found my face. I didn't meet his gaze.

Never make eye contact.

That was the first rule of bounty hunting.

'I have children,' he whimpered.

I swallowed.

So did my parents when the Council sent them to Endlock.

Dividium was ruled by a Council that had formed in the aftermath of the war – three leaders elected by a board of officials from each sector.

Each Councilor was assigned to a sector to enforce regulations: Councilor Elder to the Lower Sector, Councilor Baskan to the Middle Sector, and Councilor Peña to the Upper Sector.

They all resided in the Upper Sector in homes that were vast enough to house dozens of people.

'Please. I don't want to die.' Torin's words were a mere whisper.

He overestimated my character if he thought begging for mercy would help him.

'Neither do I,' I murmured. Empathy wouldn't keep Jed alive.

The mass of pedestrians continued to weave around us, unfazed, a testament to the number of people arrested and sent to Endlock every day.

Many of the most frequent visitors to Endlock paid to hunt the lower-level criminals – that was typically all they could afford. But the wealthy loved nothing more than the chance to stick it to one of their own. And a prisoner like Torin? The hunters from the Upper Sector would be itching to take a shot at him.

My heart had nearly stopped when I'd checked the criminal database that morning using the ancient tablet I'd scraped up enough credits to purchase second-hand a few years prior. An advertisement had popped up, urging me to visit the Lower Sector's Endlock Experience office to discuss booking a budget-friendly hunting package featuring a meal plan and two nights' accommodation at a campground within view of Endlock's grounds.

Book now for a free photo package and weapons upgrade!

I'd snorted as the text scrolled across the screen, and swiped the ad away to reveal an updated list of bounties. Next to a grainy picture of Torin, the reward for his capture was set at ten thousand credits.

It was the highest reward I'd seen for a criminal, and the prison would make at least twice that from selling his life to a hunter.

I'd never had the funds or the desire to partake in a hunt, though I'd sent enough people to the prison to hold myself responsible for signing their death sentences.

I figured hunting was an addiction, like gambling or spirits. It gave people a sense of power, a perception of control in a society that constrained us with unending rules. Rules for the times of day we were allowed outside our homes. Rules that dictated where we could step foot within Dividium – we weren't permitted above the Lower Sector without documented authorization.

I exhaled, hauling Torin to his feet and shoving him toward the city jail.

‘What have you got for me today, Raven?’ Captain Flint asked, his voice gruff and unfeeling as the concrete walls that surrounded us.

The jail was the newest structure in the Lower Sector but also the least inviting. The front room was nothing but gray walls and barred windows, bare save for the desk occupying the middle of the space and the blood-red flag covering the wall behind it. In the center of the flag were three black interlocking circles – one on top, two below. Three circles. Three sectors. Three Councilors. The flag of Dividium.

The heavy entrance doors cut off the chatter of the streets, immersing us in a tense silence broken by the tinny voice emanating from the small screen of the tablet Captain Flint held.

‘We have a breaking update on the attack on the western quadrant of the crop fields that occurred nearly two weeks ago. After a tireless investigation by city guards, the Council has reported findings that Eris Cybin, known terrorist and leader of the rebel organization called the Collective, is the culprit behind a fire that destroyed a large portion of the city’s coming harvest and resulted in the death of several field workers, as well as the death of Silas V. Elder, the husband of Councilor Caltriona Elder.’

I squinted at the tablet.

That couldn’t be right.

Eris was the leader of the Upper Sector’s cell of the Collective. Though Eris had led dangerous rallies and attacks against the Council in the past, none had focused on the city’s harvest. Damaging the crops would hardly impact the Council – it was the Lower Sector that would suffer. The Collective’s responsibility for the death of Councilor Elder’s husband would mean more patrols and arrests in the Lower Sector, warranted or not.

‘Guards are still investigating what Elder was doing beyond Dividium’s border wall in the first place, with the leading theory being a

meticulously planned kidnapping and execution by the Collective. Eris Cybin remains at large.'

The news stream faded into a commercial for a Middle Sector jewelry shop that specialized in shaving teeth from Endlock into charm bracelets.

Flint's bulbous form hunched over the device, his eyes never lifting from the screen, even as I shoved Torin before me.

Torin had dragged his feet on the short walk to the jail, only relenting when I'd pulled out my dagger and threatened to remove his favorite appendage. After that, I could hardly keep up.

'Torin Bond,' I announced, handing him over to the guards beside Flint's ornate desk.

Flint's device fell, his attention fully captured by the man now in his custody.

'Council above, you went after a fugitive from the Upper Sector?' His blue eyes held mine, but I couldn't tell whether he admired my bravery or found humor in my stupidity.

'Flint, we're talking about ten thousand credits here.'

He scanned a piece of parchment, searching for Torin's name. 'What did he do?'

'His wife had an affair last year. When Torin caught her, he reported her lover to the guards – told them he'd stolen a valuable watch. The man was sent to Endlock for it. Killed. And then, a few weeks ago, Torin's wife found the watch hidden in his study and reported him.'

Flint let out a whistle. 'Juicy.'

'The bitch set me up,' Torin snarled, and the guards yanked at his arms until he quieted.

I curled my lip, addressing Flint but speaking loud enough for Torin to hear. 'Even if he hadn't done that, isn't watching children starve while having more food than he could ever eat crime enough?'

Perhaps that wasn't fair. Maybe I was a touch bitter that Torin

had been born into a family that knew nothing about the lengths most of us had to go to for survival.

But food wasn't the only thing that separated the Lower Sector from the Upper. In the Lower Sector, getting arrested was nearly as easy as breathing. But in the Upper Sector, most citizens got a slap on the wrist for anything other than the most heinous of crimes.

And what Torin had done was as good as murder.

Flint grunted, not keen to say anything untoward about the Upper Sector when one of the Council's spies might be listening.

The guards disappeared behind a door with Torin. They would lock him in a holding cell until the next transport to Endlock was ready.

Flint shook his head at me before swiping at his tablet, typing in a passcode to access the reward system. 'Slow day. You're the first to come in.'

He hit a final button, and my wristband vibrated. I tilted the face toward me and watched as the credits on the small screen steadily increased, relief flooding my body.

I'd been down to my last fifty credits, left from the bounty I'd turned in a month before. A woman named Perri.

There were plenty of illegal operations running rampant in the Lower Sector, but Perri's had been the most lucrative. Mostly because it preyed on desperation. She'd sold counterfeit medication. Antibiotics that failed to treat infection, knock-off heart medications – you name it, she sold it. Aggie had heard rumors that Perri's arrest had done little to end the business, and I was still working on tracking down the other people involved.

I narrowed my eyes as the screen on my wrist stopped at a number just north of eight thousand. I turned back to Flint. 'Eight? It's supposed to be ten.'

He shrugged, grimacing. 'You brought me damaged goods.'