

# Hunt for Blue Gold

The would-be thief was trying to stay low. Out of sight. But he was young, and wasn't very good at it yet. And I had been in his position often enough to know what to look for.

A flash of movement ahead, behind one of the ancient sand-covered solar arrays. A smile cracked my dry lips as I eyed the top of his head, poking out above the long-broken panels.

"Hey, kid," I called. A jerk of the head, shiny PVC hat catching the harsh desert sun. "Yeah, you," I said. "If you're going to steal my water, you need to find a better spot."

A moment's hesitation. Then the head rose above the solar array, and a pair of wide—and oh-so-young—eyes peeked out over the top. He was even younger than I thought; probably only ten or eleven. I felt an unexpected rush of sympathy as he stepped out from behind the array and I saw his ragged clothes and skinny frame.

I crushed that emotion right away. It didn't serve anyone, least of all me.

"Anyways, I haven't got water," I informed the kid, whose family probably didn't have the water credits for more than the state-mandated minimum. And it really was a minimum—I remember existing on that meagre allowance, and it had almost killed me. "Empty," I said, tapping the battered water trolley I was dragging, and the couple of barrels lashed to it.

"I... I wasn't... I didn't..." the kid stammered.

"Of course not," I said. Then that dangerous sympathy reared its head again, and before I knew what I was doing, I was parting with some of my hard-won knowledge. "Look," I said, already annoyed with myself. "Try Mx Jones, near the droplet collectors. They sometimes take pity on the waterless, if you're early."

The boy stood frozen for a moment, and then ran off, sandals flapping. I shook my head. What had come over me? It was everyone for themselves out here, away from the walled-off cities and their expensive water collecting spires. Out here, each drop was precious.

"Stupid," I muttered. "You need to stay focused."

Ahead, the great plastic domes of old Billy's farm rose like a filthy mirage from the desert, his dilapidated little hut looking oddly rustic next to them. I was soon banging on its door.

"Billy," I called. "I know you're in, you water-hoarding bastard! Billy!"

A creak from inside. Then the door opened a crack, and Billy's ancient face emerged from the shadows, customary frown etched in place, grey hair frizzed up like some sort of dirty halo. "Don't hassle, girl," he complained. "We're not all young and hydrated."

I snorted. “Hydrated. That’s rich. Everyone knows you have the biggest store in the village.”

Billy raised a wiry eyebrow. “Is that what they say?” he asked, eyeing my water trolley.

I glanced down at the trolley too. “I’m here to trade,” I provided.

“Well, I’m sorry you came all this way for nothing, girl, but I’m not trading today.” Then he slammed the door shut, and I heard a bolt rattle into place.

“Hey!” I shouted, taken aback. “We had a deal!” I banged on the door. “You promised—”

“I did no such thing,” came Billy’s muffled voice. “If I recall, I said I might be willing to trade if you found the right parts—”

“Which I did!”

“Try again next week,” Billy said, ignoring me. “Now go away and leave me in peace.”

I kept banging, but Billy stayed silent. “Bastard,” I muttered. He had plenty of water. He always did—everyone knew he had secret stores he guarded like a thirsty god. He was just playing power games, knowing I could do nothing about it.

A flash of sunlight on the nearest dome caught my eye, and I paused. Perhaps there was something I could do about it.

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Billy caught me siphoning water from the small reservoir, inside the biggest of the domes. He was furious, red-faced, and worst of all—holding an ancient shotgun. It was aimed right at my chest, and for such a frail-looking man, it was very steady. Not a waver of the barrel.

“I always knew there was something rotten about you, girl,” Billy growled. His eyes were icy pits, devoid of life, and suddenly, he didn’t look like a harmless old man any more.

I realised too late that I’d misjudged him.

“I think you dirty little thieves are due a lesson,” he muttered, more to himself than me. “Yes. Yes, I believe you are.”

The next moments were a blur. I saw the decision crystallising in Billy’s eyes, and behind him, motion in the open doorway. The young would-be thief, creeping up, clutching a too-large spanner in his shaking hand. My eyes met the boy’s, and a spark of understanding flashed between us. I looked back at Billy, and smiled, buying a moment.

Then the boy was behind old Billy. A pause, as if the world took a breath, and the young thief swung the spanner. I leapt to the side, and as I did, I heard a sickening crunch, and a deafening bang as the shotgun exploded, turning a patch of ground into a cratered pit.

There was a loud splash, and then rapid breathing from the boy.

It was a moment before I could bring myself to look. But I did.

Billy was collapsed over the edge of the small reservoir, head submerged, blood lazily spiralling into the once-pristine water.

I looked up at my nameless rescuer, then. He was staring, wide-eyed, at the lifeless body, spanner forgotten on the ground. Then he looked over at me. Some shared understanding of the horror passed between us. And then he turned and fled, out into the harsh, lifeless desert.

I could have called after him. But I didn't. After all, what could I possibly have said?