

Exchange of Debts
Chapter 1 - Welcome to Defiance

Note - this story begins between the time period established in Episodes 6 and 7 of the TV show.

The glow of the rising sun filtered through the slight haze of the morning dust and mist as it rose over the hills and plateaus surrounding a small valley. In that valley was situated a rugged town reminiscent of the frontier towns of the Old West. Dominating the sky line however, was a large metal arch that gleamed slightly in the late dawn. Around one side of the arch, about three quarters of the way up its length was scaffolding surrounding several holes in the structure. Silhouettes of several people could be seen working around the surrounding plates, attempting to finish the last bit of construction on the arch. Visitors to the town who were old enough to remember Old Earth the way it was, the way it looked before the change would still recognize the arch and remember the city it used to represent. That city was now long gone, buried beneath tons of terra-formed rock. Gone too was the name. As the land and the town were reshaped, so was the will of the people who lived there and they choose a name befitting that will – this was Defiance.

William Cassidy glanced up at the arch watching the figures of his fellow townsfolk as they worked. It looked like it would turn out to be one of those nice mid-Spring days that wouldn't be too hot nor too cold. No, it would be just right for standing around for half the day watching the valley where the stasis net once stood to protect Defiance. The net was a product of the alien technology, and needed to protect the inhabitants of the town from not only the mutated wildlife out in the Badlands, but from the humans and aliens who made a living off of preying on the unsuspecting and weak. The net had been sabotaged by one of the Votan aliens a few weeks back in an attempt to allow an army of Volge to attack the town. There were seven known races who had come to Earth, but most of the dealings were with only five, not including the Volge, who weren't favored among the Votan either and had originally been thought to have been left behind in their dying star system centuries ago. Defiance was able to survive that battle, but the town was still left without their primary means of protection, so it was decided to maintain the patrols that the old Lawkeeper performed and maintain a watch on the valley. There were a dozen or so people from the town who volunteered their time to be on the watch, and earn at least a bit of scrip on the side thanks to a fund set up by the Mayor. The repairs to the net were going to take a long time – the control room was pretty much blown to pieces and getting all the parts and equipment needed to effect repairs was not the easiest thing to do out here in the new frontier of what used to be the United States.

As Cassidy began his trek down the road towards Bissel Pass, he tried to remember where on the watch rotation the day fell so he could figure out who would be on duty with him today. After a moment he grimaced and missed a slight step in his stride. It was Wednesday and by his recollection, that would mean today's duty would not be as pleasant as he had hoped. One of his fellow watchmen would be a Castithan. The Castithan, or Casties as they were often referred to were another one of the Votan races in addition to the Volge. While not as large in stature or as warlike as the Volge, the Casties were nonetheless not one of the races favored by most humans. They were the most human looking of the races, but distinguishable by their pale skin and white hair and eyes, giving them an albino appearance. Castithan society operated on a caste based system, and that gave many of them from the upper castes a rather stuck up and snobbish attitude. The one that Cassidy would be working with today was from one of the lower castes, but nonetheless, he was one of Datak Tarr's cronies and those were generally not trustworthy regardless of the caste into which they were born. The Tarr family was one of the two most prominent in the town, but their status and wealth often came from exploiting the dregs of the town rather than through honest hard work, like the McCawley family.

The McCawley's were originally from the city when it was once known as Saint Louis. They had made a name for themselves with a family run business, but after the Pale Wars and the terraforming

that changed the face of the planet as a result, the current patriarch of the family, Rafe, was able to remake their fortunes by mining the gulanite that was formed under the town as a result. Cassidy worked as one of the miners normally, but after the Volge attack, Rafe asked him to be part of the volunteer corps that would help protect the town until the stasis net was rebuilt. It was a request that Cassidy felt honored to have accepted.

Despite the setback to his mood at the realization that the next few hours wouldn't be a pleasant as the day was making out to be, Cassidy wasn't going to let his disappointment get the better of him. He was simply going to keep as far away from the alien as possible. However, it didn't look like he was going to be that lucky. Just as he was rounding the last bend that lead to the pass, his hailer started beeping. He pulled the device out and noticed it was from the lead watchman on the current shift, who he was due to relieve. Cassidy hoped that this was just the routine check-in, but it seemed it would still be a few minutes too early for that.

"This is Cassidy, go ahead," he answered into the device.

A male voiced replied from the other end of the channel. "We got something coming towards the pass from Handor," a voice replied from the other end of the channel. "The patrol said it was a blue roller – could be a modified Duni. They said that the guy behind the wheel took down a pack of Saber Wolves - alone."

Cassidy stopped in his tracks. Saber Wolves were another gift from the terraforming. Like the Earth itself, most of the original wildlife on the planet was transformed or mutated to adapt to the new world. Saber Wolves were a particularly nasty creature that resembled the wolves of Old Earth only slightly. They traveled in packs and their viciousness was enhanced by elongated legs that ended in a razor sharp spike. They generally hunted out in the Badlands, but more and more packs could be seen running through the Handor Forest which was just north of the pass. One on its own was enough to give a couple of well-armed men cause for concern. For a lone individual, an entire pack would normally mean a grisly end.

"Roger that," Cassidy replied. "Hail the Lawkeeper and make a report. I will be there in a few minutes."

He found it hard to believe that one lone stranger would have been able to survive a Saber Wolf attack and worried that this might be a group of Bandits on their way to wreak havoc. It wasn't all that long ago that a group of rogue miners, called 99ers, had attacked the mines and killed several of Cassidy's co-workers and friends. If this was a precursor to another attack, they would have to prepare their defenses quickly. As he neared the pass, Cassidy pulled the strap of his hunting rifle that kept the weapon slung across his back over his head and slipped a cartridge into the chamber. Though there were a few military assault rifles and machine guns kept at the guard house for general use by the watch, Cassidy preferred to have his own rifle by his side. It was the same gun his father had used and taught the young "Billy" to hunt with. It was an extension of him and if trouble was in the works, he was going to end it.

As he approached the guard shack, the lead watchmen who had hailed him stepped out, assault rifle at the ready. The dark-skinned man was younger than Cassidy and ran a small shop with his wife in the Hollows selling hand woven clothing and trinkets. He nodded in greeting to Cassidy as the two men met up.

"The patrol's on their way back now. Hector's up at the pass now with Naliss," the watchmen told Cassidy. Hector Gonzales was another miner who worked with Cassidy, Naliss was the Casty.

"So what's the story, Darrell? No one in their right mind is going to take on Saber Wolves. This has got to be a pack of Bandits," Cassidy said.

Darrell shook his head. "They saw only one roller and one guy. Their description didn't sound like the usual Bandit, though they didn't get too close to really get a good look."

"Something's not right here," Cassidy replied. "There's no way one man can survive –"

He was cut off by the sound of Darrell's hailer. The watchman pulled the device out of a pocket and responded, "Go ahead."

"The roller is heading this way," the voice, belonging to Hector, came from the device.

Cassidy looked towards the entrance to the pass which was a few hundred meters further down the road. He could see Hector and the Casty at the opening and in the distance beyond them was a cloud of dust that appeared to be getting closer at a rapid pace.

Darrell looked at Cassidy, who just nodded once in return. He spoke into the hailer, "Stop him there and find out what we are dealing with." He released the talk button on the hailer and turned back to Cassidy. "Lawkeeper Nolan said that he was on his way."

"Then let's see what kind of man can supposedly take down a pack of Saber Wolves, while we wait," Cassidy said as he released the safety on his rifle and headed towards the checkpoint at the gap between the ridge.

After a few moments, they could make out the roller moving towards them at a rapid pace. There were hints of a blue paint job showing below the layer of dust and grime. Though the vehicle looked to be sturdy enough to withstand more than a few shots from one of the watchmen's weapons, it was heavily dinged and dented in spots, almost as if it had been driven off of a cliff. Hector took a couple of steps forward and raised his hand as the vehicle neared the pass, indicating that the driver should stop. However, the roller showed no signs of slowing down. Cassidy heard the click of the safety on Naliss' weapon, and heard him mutter a worried comment under his breath. Hector gave a worried glance back at his comrades.

"He'll stop – one way or the other," Cassidy assured him.

All four men raised their weapons, ready to fire upon the oncoming roller when it suddenly skidded to a halt a few dozen meters from where they stood, kicking up a cloud of dust and stone, causing the men to turn and shield their faces. The roller sat there for a few moments, the hum of the engine the only sound that could be heard, interspersed with an occasional knock and ping. Darrell jumped slightly when the door to the roller cracked open. Though he had taken part in the Battle of the Volge, he was by no means a fighter in any sense of the word known to Cassidy. As the dust settled, they could see the figure of a man sitting behind the wheel. He wore a black, brimmed cap which appeared to have the letters EREP stitched in yellow on the side. He wore what could be some kind of woven military uniform – it was olive green with silver metal plating around the chest area. The stranger sat perfectly still and just looked at Cassidy and the others silently.

"Wait here," Cassidy told his companions as he slowly approached the roller, rifle at the ready.

The stranger remained still, and his eyes remained fixed on Cassidy as he approached. The stranger's face had a weathered and worn look, and a shadowed scruff of a moustache and beard. Short brown hair stuck out from beneath the cap. The front of the cap looked like it had a faded yellow silhouette of a hellbug on it. The stranger's uniform didn't look like that of any of the Earth Republic goons that had been in Defiance in the recent weeks, but Cassidy could see a holstered pistol on the side of the stranger's leg and what looked to be a bolt action rifle, not unlike Cassidy's, in the seat next to him. There was a sheathed dagger on the front of the stranger's worn metal chestplate.

"Keep both hands on the wheel and don't move unless I tell you," Cassidy told him.

The stranger seemed to relax a bit and it almost looked like a small smile – almost a smirk – crossed his face. "This is not quite the welcome I expected in Saint Louis," he said.

"This isn't Saint Louis anymore," Cassidy told him. "Who are you and what's your business here?"

"For the first part, I guess that all depends on who you ask," the man replied. "As for the last part, I am on here on business from Paradise."

Cassidy was slightly stunned at that. "And how did you manage to cross the Storm Divide and the Badlands in that and alone?"

“Well, it was not the most pleasant of trips that I have had the opportunity of taking, but certainly one of the more interesting,” the stranger replied.

Cassidy had his doubts. The stranger is not look like the typical Raider, but that didn't mean he wasn't trouble and wasn't alone. “Who sent you and what exactly is this business from Paradise that brings you out this way?” Cassidy asked.

“I am told there may be someone here that I was hoping to find,” the stranger answered. “I'm sure you've probably heard this before, but I'm not here to cause any problems. I just wanted to catch up with an old friend, you might say.”

“Who, exactly are you looking for?” Cassidy asked.

The stranger smiled. “An old Ark hunting buddy of mine. Usually goes by the name of Josh Nolan. He might have a young Irathient by the name of Irisa with him, too.”

“Well, stranger, you're in luck. Nolan is our Lawkeeper and he's already on his way to meet you. He should be here any moment.”

The stranger tilted his head slightly, as if trying to hear to some faint sound, but Cassidy heard nothing out of the ordinary. “Ahh, well that's even better,” the stranger said after a moment.

Cassidy lifted his rifle slightly. “Now if you can just step out of the roller and tell me your name, we can let Nolan know his old friend is in town to see him. Just keep your hands where I can see them.”

“Certainly,” the stranger replied. He lifted his hands from the wheel, showing Cassidy that he had nothing else to hide. He then reached his left hand up to grab the top of the door frame of the roller to lift himself out of the seat. As he began to rise and put one foot on the ground, the stranger suddenly rose up and dashed off past Cassidy.

“Hey!” Cassidy shouted at the stranger.

Naliss raised his assault rifle and let a burst loose at the stranger. He didn't get far enough for the Casty to miss, but there was no reaction from the stranger other than coming to a complete stop and standing several meters away from the men.

“What the Hell?” Cassidy said as he began to head towards the stranger, but stopped when he caught movement coming from the roller out of the corner of his eye.

He had just enough time to turn his head and see the stranger back in the driver seat before the door suddenly slammed shut. He turned back to where the stranger had been standing and saw a bluish silhouette fading away. The roller's engine revved up, spinning the wheels and once again kicking up a cloud of dirt and rocks. Before any of the watchmen could react, the vehicle peeled out and bounded in the direction of the town. It had already rounded the bend before Cassidy could even raise his rifle to fire a parting shot. It was at that point that the blue Duni roared past an old Dodge Charger with a large Lawkeeper's badge attached to the doors on both sides, and a pickup truck-like roller that followed. Both vehicles slid to a stop as the Duni continued on. The truck then spun around and began to give chase while the Charger continued on towards the pass.

The Charger pulled up next to the guard shack where the four watchmen stood waiting. Lawkeeper Joshua Nolan stepped out of the roller and approached the men. He was tall and sported the same 5 o'clock shadow look that the stranger had. His short dark hair ruffled slightly in the breeze, and he wore a blue neckerchief tied around his neck and tucked into a blue denim shirt that was covered by a short leather jacket. Cassidy stepped forward to give a report on what had just transpired, including a description of the stranger and the incident surrounding his escape.

“Do you know this guy?” Cassidy asked him, as he finished his report.

“Maybe, but I won't be sure until I see him.” Nolan replied. He was about to say something else when his hailer beeped. “Go ahead,” he said into the device.

A male voice came from the other end. “We lost him outside of town. I don't know what that it has under the hood, but that roller is faster than anything I've ever seen.”

“Understood,” Nolan replied. “Stay where you are, I’ll meet you there shortly to begin a search.” He turned to Cassidy. “Get back to your posts and let me know if anyone else comes through the pass.

Cassidy nodded in acknowledgement as Nolan got back in the Charger and headed back towards the town to meet up with his two Deputies who were in the other roller. One was a dark-skinned human male named Tommy who had been deputy to the previous Lawkeeper prior to Nolan taking over the job. The other was a young Irathient woman whom Nolan had adopted as his own daughter during the Pale Wars. The Irathients were another of the five main races of the Votan. Unlike the Castithan, their culture was more nomadic and tribal, similar to the American Indian culture of Old Earth. They too were humanoid, but unlike the Castithan, their skin color varied between brown and a rust red and was had white birthmarks of various shapes and sizes. Their faces were dominated by large yellowish eyes, and their hair generally varied among shades of orange. When the three met up at the place where Irisa and Tommy had last seen the blue Duni, Nolan had Irisa join him in the Charger while Tommy would continue the search in the roller. And so the hunt for the mysterious stranger began.

“There it is.” Defiance Lawkeeper Joshua Nolan pointed at the blue Duni obscured by some brush on the outskirts of the town. They were on the Garna Trail which led off the left side of the main road leading into the center of town. He stopped the Dodge Charger a dozen meters away from the hiding spot and he and Irisa got out and began to approach the vehicle, slowly, guns at the ready. “Call Tommy, let him know where we are.”

They circled the roller, trying to see if anyone may still be inside, but there were no apparent signs of the driver. Nolan approached the driver side door and nodded to Irisa to cover him. As she got into position, he opened the door with one hand, while keeping the pistol in the other hand aimed for the perfect shot. In the distance, they heard the truck approaching with Tommy. As the door swung open, they were greeted by an empty roller. Nolan pressed down on both the driver’s side and the passenger’s side seats to ensure that they were truly empty.

“I think we’re clear,” Nolan said, continuing to search the vehicle.

“Do you believe what the guard said?” Irisa asked, her tone indicating that she had more than just doubts.

“No reason not to,” Nolan replied, as he began to search the interior of the roller. “He could be one of Von Bach’s Ark hunters, implanted with that EGO device.”

“EGO device?” Tommy asked. He had jogged up to the pair just in time to catch Nolan’s comment.

The Lawkeeper stopped his search and came back out of the roller to look at his deputy. “Environmental Guardian Online, it’s a bionetic implant that was used on some Ark hunters hired by Von Bach Industries.” Nolan scanned the area around them with his eyes, looking for signs of where the mystery visitor might have gone.

“Do you think it’s the hunter from the New Freedom?” Irisa asked him.

“I believe so,” Nolan replied. He gave Irisa a look that indicated she shouldn’t say anything else in front of Tommy.

“What’s the New Freedom?” Tommy asked.

Nolan gave a little sigh. “It was a stratocarrier that Irisa and I hitched a ride on when we were out in the Bay Area a while back.” He looked back at the roller, then at Tommy. “Let’s finish searching this thing, then tow it back to town. We’ll bring you up to speed once we get back.”

Irisa and Tommy began to go through the roller, looking for clues left behind, while Nolan began to search the brush and ground around the area, looking for the Ark hunter’s tracks. Even with an EGO device, the hunter will have left tracks that Nolan, thanks to his military training, would have no problem finding.

“There’s nothing much here,” Tommy said when they finished the search. “Some changes of clothes, but nothing that tells us who this guy is.”

Nolan nodded. “I’m not surprised. It looks like our Ark hunter headed off in that direction.” He pointed at a small path that led into the forest that covered the nearby foothills. He looked at his deputy, “Are you OK getting this back to town, while Irisa and I follow the tracks?”

Tommy nodded. “I’ll handle it.”

“Good. Irisa, you’re with me.” Nolan said, marching off towards the path.

Once they were in the woods out of earshot of Tommy, Irisa turned towards the man she had known as an adoptive father for most of her life. “You look worried.”

“Do I?” Nolan kept his eyes ahead.

“You think it’s the Ark hunter who helped us find the gem, don’t you?”

Nolan nodded his head slightly. “Cassidy’s description does sound familiar.” He stopped to examine the ground around them, a puzzled look on his face as he read the signs that the trail provided.

Irisa not yet ready to give up on the conversation, pressed him further, “Do you think he came here just to get it back?”

Nolan didn’t answer for a moment. Thanks to some information imparted to him by an old war buddy who been in town not too long ago, there could be more than one reason for the Ark hunter to have come looking for them. It was not a conversation he was ready to have with his adopted daughter just yet. Varus Soleptor had put a price on both his and Irisa’s heads because of the Libera Nova Gem they had been hired to retrieve for the Liberata, and subsequently made off with after the Ark hunter had helped them find it.

“It’s possible,” he finally replied. “Varus did offer a good bit of scrip for us to find it, and I am sure he was not too happy to have us skip town with it.”

“How do you think he knew to come to Defiance?” Irisa asked him.

Nolan let out a breath. There were only three people that came to mind that would be able to provide that information to someone coming from Paradise. Two of them at least he still trusted not divulge that to anyone else. The other, however ... “I have my suspicions,” he said, and looked at Irisa to indicate he didn’t want to go into it any further for the moment.

They spent the next hour searching around the foothills and eventually the plateau, but found what Nolan already suspected. The Ark hunter had been there, but was already gone – the trail leading back down into the town itself. They hailed Tommy to let them know that they would meet him back at the jail. On the way back, Nolan could see Irisa staring at him, waiting for him to say something. He must have looked more worried than he wanted to let on. He was hoping to avoid the inevitable, but it looked like he was going to have to tell her what he learned from his friend, Eddie Braddock. Eddie was one of the three people who knew where he and Irisa had gone after they left the Bay Area. And he was one of the two he could trust not to reveal that information, the other being Jon Cooper, the Lawkeeper of Paradise. All three men were a part of a group known as the Defiant Few. The Battle of Defiance was the last fight of the Pale Wars and it resulted in the destruction of San Francisco. Many lives were lost on that day, but it was because of the Defiant Few that the war was ended, saving countless more lives in return. It was something that the members rarely talked about, even with each other. As for the third person, Nolan had just received a message from Cooper asking for more information about her. She had apparently been able to cross the Storm Divide and make it to the Bay Area. No doubt her information managed to find its way to the Ark hunter.

The decoy had worked just as he hoped. It was a risky move, but one that he thought he could pull off. He had debated just cloaking himself, but the trigger happy look on the Castithan’s face indicated that the Votan would have just as likely emptied his clip into the roller the moment he

vanished. As he began to enter the bend in the road leading from Bissel Pass, a familiar voice popped into his head.

"I'm detecting two rollers approaching ahead. They're closing fast," EGO informed the Ark hunter in a female voice.

He pushed the accelerator to the floor and as he came around the bend, saw the Charger and the truck entering the turn from the other side. The Ark Hunter kept the gas pedal pressed to the floor with his right foot, while he pressed down on a large button on the floorboard with his left foot. A hissing sound emerged from either side of the Duni and the Ark hunter was pressed back into his seat by a sudden burst of additional speed. He tore past the two rollers, and noticed the Lawkeeper's insignia on the side of the Charger.

"I'm picking up a transmission," EGO told him. "The Lawkeeper is continuing towards the pass. He told his deputies to follow us."

The Ark Hunter released the button as the hissing of the boost stopped. He would have to wait a few seconds for it to recharge before using it again. He looked at a screen embedded in the dashboard. Through the cloud of dust showing on the screen, he could see the truck turning around to follow him. He pressed a button under the screen and it changed to bring up an overhead map of the area. He noticed a grove of trees that lined the road ahead off to the right, and further up on the left of the road, a trail that lead off into a forest located on some foothills that eventually lead to a plateau.

A light on the dashboard lit up, indicating that the boost had recharged, but he didn't press down on the button again. He pressed another button underneath the screen to return it to the rear view camera. He could see he was starting to outpace the truck. He lifted off the accelerator slightly, ensuring that the Duni wouldn't lose the deputies' roller just yet. He kept his pace steady with the roller behind him until he saw the grove of trees coming up on the right. He then jammed the accelerator back to the floor and turned to head into the grove.

"Uhh, I don't think that's such a good idea!" EGO said, her voice sounding more alarmed than usual.

The Ark hunter smiled as he entered the grove. "You're probably right."

While the outskirts of the grove weren't thick, allowing enough room for the Duni to weave back and forth among the trees, he could see that he would be running out of room soon enough. Checking the rear view, he could no longer see the deputies' roller behind him. The vehicle had probably slowed enough to avoid the recklessness of entering the grove at full speed. The Ark Hunter released the gas pedal slightly and began to weave his way back out of the grove, near the south-eastern part of its edge, far enough away where the deputies would not be able to see him come out. Once free, he turned to the left and continued to follow the outer line of trees on the other side from where he had entered to the north and eventually back to the main road. He stopped and performed a quick scan up and down both sides of the road with his eyes. There was no one else in sight. He then started up the road again, to the right, heading towards the town. About half a kilometer later, instead of continuing towards Defiance, the Ark hunter turned left down the trail.

He followed the trail almost to its end in the forested foothills. There he found some brush on the outskirts of the forest. He parked the Duni there, not bothering to hide it any further. He knew he left enough of a trail that the Lawkeeper and his deputies would find it soon enough anyway. He grabbed the bolt action sniper rifle from the passenger seat and reached around behind the seat to grab a satchel, a backpack, and a black military assault rifle. He closed the door to the roller and scanned the horizon beyond the trees. He could just make out the top of the plateau in the distance. He slung the backpack over one shoulder and the sniper rifle over the other, and jogged into the forest, carrying the satchel and assault rifle in his hands. The first order of business was to find a place to hide everything but the assault rifle. That would be the only weapon he would take with him into town, aside from the pistol in the holster on his leg and the knife sheathed on his chestplate. That would be no easy task. He

knew he wouldn't have enough time to hide his trail in the woods, and for a military veteran like the Lawkeeper, tracking him would be of little difficulty. However, the Ark hunter himself was a trained survivalist and woodsman, so while he did not worry about the trail he would be leaving behind, went about his business ensuring that his belongings were not found.

Once he squared away the backpack, satchel, and sniper rifle, the Ark hunter continued through the forest, and up the foothills towards the plateau that overlooked the town of Defiance. He peered down into the heart of Defiance – an amalgamation of hodge podge buildings put together in a slightly haphazard way mixed with a sparse selection of larger, older buildings that appeared to have survived the terraforming. All was overshadowed by the iconic metallic arch gleaming in the morning sun. It was the only landmark that would connect this location to that of the metropolis of Old Earth as it existed sixteen years ago.

He had been born three years after the Votan made their appearance in the skies of Old Earth in 2013, and though his parents had traveled much of the country in their youth, they never had the opportunity to take their son on their travels before the Arkfalls, before the terraforming, changed everything they had known. He remembered descriptions of the area from his parents and old textbooks, nothing of which resembled what he looked down upon now, except perhaps for the river that flowed through the landscape farther past the center of the town to the East. The current path the river flowed was further east than the original path it had carved out in the terrain for centuries before the land had changed.

Defiance was nestled into a valley, surrounded by a natural defense of mountains and plateaus, with only a few pathways that were passable scattered throughout, including the main Bissel Pass from whence he had come. Even with the river in the distance, the land around the valley tended toward the arid side, though there was still more than enough plant life dotting the landscape – much of it alien and fantastical in look and nature. The valley itself still maintained a temperate climate and was lush with vegetation and farms. The only real recognizable foliage around the area was that of the trees, one of the few things that managed to survive the terraforming and adapt to the new landscape laid out before the Ark hunter.

As he continued to watch the movement of the townsfolk below, only the size of insects from his vantage point, the voice of EGO interrupted his thoughts. "I have pinpointed the locations of the Mayor's office and the Lawkeeper's jail. We are good to go."

The Ark hunter nodded to himself. With the black assault rifle firmly in his grasp, he rose and began to make his way down the plateau, towards the town.

After they had gotten back to town and were walking up to the Lawkeeper's office, which also hosted the local jail, Irisa finally broke the silence. "So what are we going to do now?"

Nolan paused with his hand on the door handle to one of the twin red painted doors in the front of the building and looked back at her. "We wait. I'm sure our Ark Hunter will come to us sooner rather than later."

Tommy had hailed them not too long ago to let them know he had returned to town with the Ark hunter's roller and was awaiting them at the office. They had followed the tracks down into the town, but quickly lost them amidst the hustle and bustle of the townsfolk. Not even an experienced tracker like Nolan would be able to find the Ark hunters trail now. They would have to begin an organized search and hoped that someone in Defiance had seen the stranger and knew of his whereabouts.

As Nolan pulled the door open, his military instincts kicked in and he immediately sensed something was wrong. He held his other hand back to warn Irisa to stay where she was as he drew his pistol out of its holster. It was only a moment before his eyes caught up with his senses and he saw Tommy unconscious on the floor inside the jail cell. Irisa also drew her pistol and ignoring Nolan's silent

warning, following him as he entered the room. They looked around, but saw nothing else out of place. But they both could sense something else in the room with them. They strained, listening as their eyes scanned around as they made their way to the jail cell to check on Tommy, but could see nothing.

“Ahh, just the two people I was hoping to find,” a voice said out of the air.

Nolan and Irisa both spun around and looked in the direction of the desk that sat in the middle of the room. As they did, they saw a form fade into existence in the chair on the opposite side, with legs outstretched on the table. The form turned out to be a man, with a cap and outfit that matched the description that Cassidy had provided for them. In his hands was a black XAR-22 Assault Rifle which was now pointing in their direction. It wasn't the same type of rifle that Cassidy had seen in the roller at the Pass, however, so Nolan assumed that was safely stashed elsewhere for the moment. The clothes the Ark hunter wore were different from their last encounter several weeks before, but the face and the voice were familiar. It was indeed the Ark hunter from the New Freedom.

“Nolan and Irisa. It's so good to see you again,” the Ark hunter said. “Please drop your weapons.”

Nolan gave Irisa a look to make sure she knew that he wanted her to comply. After engaging the safeties on their weapons, they carefully dropped their pistols to the floor. Then, they raised their hands above their heads without being asked indicating that they would not attempt anything against the Ark hunter, for the moment anyway.

“I wish I could say the same,” Nolan replied. “I don't think we ever did get your name.”

The Ark Hunter smiled. “Indeed you did not. The name is James Wyler.

“Now that we have that out of the way, could you please kick your weapons towards me.”

After Nolan and Irisa complied, Wyler picked up the pistols and placed them on the table next to him, without taking his eyes, or rifle, off of the pair.

“You can relax and put your arms down,” Wyler told them. “No need to be so formal.” Nolan and Irisa lowered their arms, but remained wary and at the ready, unsure of what to make of the Ark hunter.

Wyler looked at Nolan and twisted the assault rifle slightly, as if to give him a better look. “I don't suppose you recognize this little beauty do you?”

The weapon seemed vaguely familiar and Nolan's mind raced through the events back in Paradise, trying to remember why the Ark hunter would ask him about the rifle. Realization dawned on him as he recalled their last encounter. They had just finished dispatching a group of Raiders who had made off with the Libera Nova Gem they were hired to retrieve for Varus Soleptor. At that point, Nolan felt that the gem was more significant than Varus was letting on, and had decided to take the first opportunity to take it for himself and Irisa.

Nolan nodded his head slightly. “I suppose it's a little late to apologize for that,” Nolan replied.

Wyler dismissed the notion with a slight wave of his hand. “My own fault, really. That was a good story – I have to admit you got me with that one. But nevertheless, this has turned out to be a pretty nice addition to my collection. Though you did cost me a nice pile of scrip ... and made Varus a very unhappy Liberata.”

“So I heard. What did you do to my deputy?” Nolan asked, looking over his shoulder at Tommy, who lay unmoving in the jail cell. He wanted to get off the subject of Varus for the moment, especially since Irisa did not yet know about the bounty on both their heads.

“He'll be fine, he's just taking a much needed rest,” Wyler replied.

Irisa shifted slightly, clearly agitated about the current situation and looking for an opening in which to turn the tables on the Ark Hunter. “How did you find us?”

“Let's just say a mutual acquaintance provided some helpful information on your whereabouts,” Wyler replied. “It took a while to get her to open up – she's not really the talkative sort, but fortunately, I have a way with Irathients.”

“Rynn,” Irisa said. She looked at Nolan. “You never should have let her go.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Nolan replied.

Rynn was a member of the Irathient race of Votans, the same as Irisa. She was from a clan that called themselves the Spirit Riders. They were all Irathients who made a home out in the Badlands. Many had come from Defiance years ago, but left due to the mistrust of the human population, among other things. Most of town’s populace saw them as no better than scavengers or Raiders themselves, and in fact, Nolan and Irisa had a less than pleasant encounter with them right before coming to Defiance.

They were in the process of just reintegrating themselves in the town, in their own way, when it was discovered that Rynn had been responsible for causing the deaths of two of the inhabitants and nearly killing a half dozen more using pheromones to attract the young skitterlings of a local Hellbug nest as her weapon. Hellbugs, like the Saber Wolves, were another gift of the Votan terraforming technology. They were equally vicious creatures without eyes, but large round mouths ringed with razor sharp teeth. Though they might seem to be an insect-like species, the skitterlings were half the size of a man. The larger Warriors were similar in size to the brown bear of old Earth, and even they weren’t the worst or the largest of the breed. With the help of Rynn’s adopted father, and leader of the Spirit Riders, they managed to catch her before she had unleashed the full nest upon the town. She was arrested and found guilty for her crimes. She was sentenced to spend the next three years of her life at the prison that had been erected in what used to be known as the City of Sin – Las Vegas, now transformed into something wholly different, like the rest of the planet.

A few days after her capture, Nolan and the mayor of Defiance were on a transport that would be taking Rynn to the prison. Shortly after they had left the town and entered the Badlands, the transport was hijacked by bandits. During the course of those events, Rynn had aided the humans in stopping the hijacking and was subsequently left to go her own way by Nolan and the mayor. Obviously that journey had taken her across the Storm Divide and into the company of Cooper and the Ark hunter.

Wylar nodded in confirmation. “Indeed it was, and I’m glad you did. I am sure you can imagine my joy at hearing the good news that my two good comrades in arms were still alive and kicking. In fact, all the way here I had this Old Earth song running through my head. You know, the one that goes ‘I shot the Lawkeeper.’”

In the blink of an eye Irisa had pulled one of her daggers from its sheath on her back, and sent it flying directly towards Wylar’s head. A blink was all the Ark Hunter needed however. Moving faster than any human possibly could, Wylar dove to his left out of the chair, then was back up on his feet, gun at the ready. The dagger plunged harmlessly into the door of the office behind him.

“Irisa, no!” Nolan shouted. He reached out and grabbed her arm to prevent her from doing something else and getting them both killed.

Much to the surprise of both Nolan and Irisa, the Ark Hunter cracked a wry smile. “Perhaps I should start with the deputy.”

“What do you want from us,” Nolan asked. While he tried to maintain an air of calm, there was clearly a worried tone to his voice.

“That is a good question,” Wylar replied. “I could ask for the gem back, but I already know you let that slip through your fingers.”

Nolan grimaced slightly. That first encounter with the Spirit Riders had cost them the gem.

“I could ask you scrip in the amount of what Varus promised us for getting the gem, but I doubt that a couple of Lawkeepers would have that much lying around, especially when they were so intent on getting to Antarctica when we had last met.”

“So are you just going to kill us?” Irisa asked, her voice full of defiance.

“That would appear to be the only other option, wouldn’t it?” the Ark hunter replied.

Wylar raised the rifle slightly and Nolan could see an orange glow begin to emanate from the Ark hunter's forearms and work its way down to the wrists and then engulf his hands and the rifle itself. This was the fourth and final power granted by the EGO device. Cassidy had witnessed the first – the ability to project a likeness of the Ark Hunter to disorient and distract those around him. They had just witnessed two of the others, one being the ability to turn oneself practically invisible – a cloak used to hide in plain sight, and the ability to speed up the human's reflexes to move at incredible speeds turning him into a blur of motion when active. This final power imparted the ability to transfer additional energy to whatever weapon the Ark hunter was holding, making the damage from that weapon more deadly and devastating. This one was called Overcharge.

Both Nolan and Irisa had witnessed each of these powers before when they were with the Ark hunter, searching for the gem. With them he was able to make short work of the Raiders, even though they were vastly outnumbered at the time. Here, in the small room of the Lawkeeper's office, they could do nothing to stop the Ark hunter from cutting them down.

While he continued to point the glowing assault rifle at Nolan and Irisa, Wylar reached into one of his belt pouches and pulled out a holographic badge, tossing it on the desk.

"No need to worry, though. It appears we're still all on the same side for the time being." It was a Deputy Lawmaker badge from Paradise.

Nolan looked at the badge, and then back at the Ark hunter, watching as the orange glow faded away, unsure of what to do next. He could feel Irisa fuming next to him, ready to pounce as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

"Thank you for providing me with a bit of entertaining revenge," Wylar said as he placed the assault rifle on the table and walked back to the double doors of the entrance to retrieve the dagger. As he turned back towards the Lawkeepers, he picked up the pistols and walked over to Irisa, handing the weapons back to her.

"I see you are still as charming as ever," Wylar said as she took the knife and pistol.

She said nothing, but the look from her eyes indicated she was just as likely to try with the dagger again, and not miss this time, despite the EGO powers. Wylar then turned to Nolan.

"Cooper sends his love by the way." He handed Nolan his pistol and dug a vial of blue fluid and an injector out of another belt pouch. "This is for your deputy. He'll wake up with a bit of a headache, but he'll be no worse for the wear."

Nolan handed Irisa the vial and injector. "Take care of Tommy and get him checked out by the Doc. I need to have a talk with Wylar here."

Irisa was about to protest but Nolan gave her a look that told her he meant business. She unlocked the cell and knelt next to Tommy while Nolan and Wylar looked on. She attached the vial to the injector and placed the hypo against Tommy's neck, pulling the trigger. There was a slight hiss and the fluid drained from the vial. In a moment, the dark-skinned deputy began to move and groan slightly. Irisa helped him to his feet and put one arm around her neck to help support him. Tommy was still too groggy to talk as Irisa led him out of the cell, and then towards the doors. Nolan watched in silence until they were gone and the doors shut behind them.

He turned to the Ark hunter. "I suppose we had that coming," he said. "I know Varus has a bounty out on us, and it's worth more than what he was offering us for the gem. Can I take it that you're not here to collect, or are you still playing games?"

Wylar sighed and thought for a moment. "It is a nice pile of scrip," he agreed. "However, as much as a part of me wanted to shoot the both of you at one point, I actually came for a different reason, though I hope you learned a lesson about messing with a man who has an EGO."

Nolan gestured at the desk and chair, while pulling up another chair for himself. "I think we have. Why don't we sit down and see what we can do for each other, then," he said.

As they did so, Wyler took the deputy badge from the table and attached it to his shirt. He was no longer the Ark Hunter, but a Deputy Lawkeeper. Nolan drew attention to the assault rifle. "How much of your collection do we have to look forward to seeing?"

Wyler smiled. "I have a bit hidden away. I assume you searched my roller?" Nolan indicated that they did. "I will have to gather it back up at some point, but it should be safe from prying hands for now. The arsenal certainly did come in handy on the trek here."

"I can imagine," Nolan said, remembering his and Irisa's own journey from the Bay Area. "Our patrol said you had a run in with a local pack of Saber Wolves."

Wyler leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "Is that what they were?" He looked back at Nolan. "Those things can give an adult Hellbug a run for its scrip."

"Yeah they can," Nolan replied. The Saber Wolves had almost done more than that when he and Irisa had arrived to the area. "Now, about why you are here. Irisa doesn't know about the bounty. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention it to her or anyone else."

Wyler nodded. "That's OK by me. But you must know that there will be plenty of others looking to collect on that pay day. Like I said, Varus was not very happy to say the least, and he's not going to let up until he has both your heads on a platter."

Nolan sat back, for the first time that Wyler noticed he had a look of genuine concern, if not fear, on his face. Somehow, though, Wyler suspected the look was not for himself, but for Irisa. "I know," he said finally.

"Which gets back to why I'm here," Wyler said, leaning forward. "Fortunately for you, as I said, Rynn is not really the talkative sort, but one wrong thing said or overheard ... plus there still is trade across the Divide. At some point, word is going to get back to Varus."

"I suppose you are bringing this up because you can offer some kind of protection?"

"Of a sort." Wyler sat back again, hands spread on the table in front of him. "I can't stop the flow of information, but I am in the good graces of our Mr. Soleptor, shall we say. I may not be able to make him completely forget, or forgive, your transgression, but I can convince him that he owes me enough of a favor in return to easing up on his revenge."

"If you can do that, you really must have some pull with Varus," Nolan said, surprised. "I'm not sure if I could pay your price though."

Wyler shrugged. "I have had a hand in helping him resolve a few issues which saved him more than a little scrip. It won't be easy, but I will eventually be able to make him see reason. As for price, I don't think I mentioned anything about that yet."

"So what's it going to cost us?" Nolan asked.

Wyler smiled. "Not much, just a favor," he replied.

Nolan looked at him, his face indicating disbelief that it would be as simple as that. "That would have to be one heck of a favor, I imagine."

"I'm sure it will be, when the time comes" Wyler replied. "For now, you can help me with a small favor."

"And what would that be?" Nolan asked.

This time the Ark hunter leaned forward in a conspiratorial type of way, his voice lowering, even though there was no one else around to overhear his next words. "Have you ever heard of Project Piper?"

"The name doesn't sound familiar," Nolan replied. "Is it an Earth Republic project?"

"EMC," Wyler replied.

The EMC was the Earth Military Coalition. A multi-national army formed by several governments after the Votan had been first detected to be approaching earth. Nolan had joined up when the Pale Wars began, but had not risen in to a high enough rank to be privy to all the goings-on of the EMC, and some things he was privy to, he wished he could forget.

“We were more of a front line division,” Nolan told the Ark hunter, referring to the Iron Demons, the division he, Cooper, and Braddock were a part of during the war. “I’m sure Cooper could have told you this. After the Battle of Defiance, we were kind of left to rot.”

“Well then, let me tell you a little story about our friend Rynn and the EMC.”

As Wyler finished relating the events surrounding his discovery of Project Piper, and the final showdown in the Angel Island bunker with a group of rogue Earth Republic soldiers to shut down the project, he leaned back in his chair, and pushed his cap back up on his head. From the look on Nolan’s face, his storytelling abilities had the effect he desired.

Nolan took a moment to soak in what he had just heard before responding. “That was one hell of a story. I’ve seen some strange things in my time with the EMC, but that ranks right up at the top.”

Wyler nodded. “If there’s one thing that I have found to be a constant throughout the evolution of the human race, it’s stupidity.”

“The EMC trying to militarize hellbugs,” Nolan said, almost as if he needed to hear again to really believe it. “And the E-Rep hoping to finish the job. Somehow I don’t think this small favor you want is going to be all that small.”

Wyler rubbed his hand across his mouth and chin, almost as if debating if he wanted to go through with it after all. “Well, your part is small, hence why you will still owe me a big favor later. As for the small favor, officially, as a duly appointed representative of Paradise Territory Law Enforcement, I want Rynn released into our custody.”

“You’re joking,” Nolan said, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. However, the look on Wyler’s face indicated otherwise. “For what reason, exactly?”

Wyler took a breath, gathering his thoughts. “I could say that she helped to save countless lives by providing us with information and assistance in shutting down Piper, but that would only be a partial reason.”

“You still have my undivided attention,” Nolan said after Wyler paused. Up until this point, the Ark Hunter seemed quite sure of himself. Now, however, he appeared reluctant to continue.

“I know what the official reports say about the murders, and despite her reluctance, I was able to wrestle some of her side of the story out of her,” Wyler said.

“I should congratulate you on getting that much,” Nolan replied.

Wyler nodded his head slightly, a slight grimace crossing his face. “It helped that I have a certain empathy for her situation,” he said. “There is some family history that I have that proves history does indeed have a way of repeating itself. While I don’t necessarily agree with her methods, I do understand her motivations.”

“I can’t say I entirely disagree,” Nolan said. The events out in the Badlands that led to his letting Rynn go flashed through his mind. “But I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

“I figured as much. However, as much as it would be for personal reasons, there is also the practical matter in that her knowledge of hellbugs still poses a threat.”

“How so?” Nolan asked.

“As I said before, information has a way of spreading. Project Piper may be out of commission, but that doesn’t mean someone else can’t pick up where the EMC and this E-Rep group left off, and Rynn would be a valuable asset for anyone who wants that information. I would feel safer keeping her under our watchful eye rather than ending up at Las Vegas.”

“There aren’t many who would be able to get to her in Vegas,” Nolan said.

Wyler gave him a look, as if to say they both already knew where he was going with this. “It’s the ones who can get to her there that I am worried about.”

“The Earth Republic?” Nolan asked in confirmation.

Wyler nodded. He could see Nolan glance at the EREP patches on the side of his cap. “As the Old Earth saying goes, I wear many hats,” he said. “It depends on what the situation calls for. This one just

happens to be my favorite. I received some information from contacts I made in the E-Rep that gives me reason to believe that what Gretch knew of the project didn't extend too far out from his circle of supporters. However, that doesn't mean that others wouldn't have a keen interest in learning more about Project Piper, given the chance."

Colonel Hampton Gretch was a former EMC member and had led the group of Earth Republic soldiers to the Bay Area in hopes of restarting Project Piper. He wasn't favored among most of the E-Rep's leadership, but there were many factions inside the organization, all with their own agendas.

"That wouldn't surprise me," Nolan said. He pushed away from the table and stood up, turning around before finally settling himself up against a row of filing cabinets. "How much do you know about Pol Madis?"

Wyler shifted slightly, as if he was going to stand as well, but elected to remain in his chair. "War Criminal. One that the E-Rep has a vested interest in bringing to justice, though my contacts have heard some other rumors."

"Like they actually want him in order to use his expertise for building more WMDs?"

This time Wyler did decide to stand, taking up residence against the jail cell, across the room from Nolan. "Sounds like you have some contacts of your own."

Nolan cracked a little smile. "I have my own story to tell. For now, let's just say it ends with me putting a bullet in Madis' head."

Wyler sighed and looked down at the floor. "Then it's more imperative than ever that we keep Rynn under our watchful eye. Both for her own safety as well as that for everyone else."

"Then let's take a walk, and I'll introduce you the mayor of our little town," Nolan said. Wyler straightened up and took a step towards the table. "But first, I will need you to turn over all your weapons."

Wyler was about to protest, but thought better of it. "Town Ordinance?" he asked, though, being a deputy himself, he already could guess the answer. Nolan nodded.

"Understood, though there will have to be an exception for ..." Wyler tapped the side of his head, indicating the EGO that was a part of his body.

"I think we can manage, as long as you keep the powers in check."

"I will do my utmost," Wyler replied. "However, if possible, I would like to freshen up a bit before our meeting. The trek across the Divide has left me a little worse for the wear, and I'd rather not meet your mayor smelling like a Raider."

"Can do. I can point you in the right direction if you can point me to the rest of your arsenal," Nolan said.

Wyler gave Nolan instructions on finding his hidden stash. After Nolan had collected the rest of Wyler's weaponry and the Ark Hunter cleaned himself up, they found themselves strolling through the Hollows on the way to the building that acted as the administrative offices for Defiance. Nolan had also checked in with Tommy, who after getting a clean bill of health, he told to wait with Irisa at the Mayor's office. Wyler looked around as they walked, taking in the sights and sounds, struck by how much the Hollows reminded him of bazaars of times long past he had seen in Old Earth movies. Of course, the one big difference were the people – there were an equal mix of the alien Votan races as well as the native human population going about their business as the Lawkeepers weaved their way through merchant booths.

"I expect you never have a dull moment around here, Wyler said.

Nolan laughed a bit at that. "It hasn't been boring, that's for sure. So how's old Coop been?"

Wyler shook his head in amusement. "Aside from telling me he's turning in his badge and heading for Antarctica once a week, he's hanging in there. Paradise is a big place, and it hasn't been easy keeping the order, but personally, I think he's having too much fun to quit, despite all his bitching."

Nolan shook his head slightly and smiled, "That sounds like Cooper."

Wylar watched as they walked past a couple of Castithans bartering for some tools with a human merchant. After a moment he said, "It's funny. I always wondered what it would be like to live in the Old West with the likes of Billy the Kid and Doc Holliday. Never thought I would have that chance."

Nolan grunted in agreement. "I remember playing Cowboys and Indians when I was a kid. Now they play Lawkeepers and Votans."

"Things certainly haven't come out the way we would have expected," Wylar replied. "At least it looks like you have a bit of harmony among the races here."

Nolan nodded again. "Everyone gets along for the most part, though we do have our troublemakers."

"My parents always hoped we could find a way to co-exist. There was always so much potential to become so much more. This is what my mother always hoped for, even if it's not exactly how we pictured it ... and what my father died for."

"Was your father military?" Nolan asked.

"No. My parents never thought a war with the Votanis Collective was one that we could win. They tried to keep the peace, but after the Denver area went all to hell, we headed out and eventually found our way to Yosemite Valley."

Nolan looked at the Ark Hunter. "You were there during the Massacre?"

"We were." Wylar got a faraway look in his eye, the memories still too fresh for his liking. He said no more as they arrived at their destination.

Nolan was about to say something else, but thought better of it. The Massacre of human and Votan alike in the peaceful settlement was one of the things he would have liked to forget. They stood in front of a tall tan colored brick building, green ivy clinging to and climbing its way up the walls. Above the door was a bronze plaque that read "Darby Building -1932-".

"Another survivor of the terraforming?" Wylar asked, as he glanced at the nearly repaired Arch in the distance.

"Sort of," Nolan replied. "Most of Old Saint Louis is a few kilometers beneath us."

Nolan opened the door and gestured for Wylar to enter. "After you." They entered and Nolan closed the door behind them.

When they reached the Mayor's office, a tall Castithan woman was there to greet them. "The Mayor is waiting for you inside, you can go right in," she told the men.

Nolan opened the door and again allowed Wylar to enter first. The Mayor was sitting at her desk, with Irisa and Tommy standing off to one side. The three were engaged in quiet conversation which ended when the Lawkeeper and the Ark hunter entered.

The Mayor stood and came around the desk towards Wylar, and held her hand out. "Hello, Mr. Wylar, I'm Amanda Rosewater. May I welcome you to our town of Defiance?"

The mayor was a tall attractive woman with long golden blonde hair that was braided into a pony-tail and draped over her left shoulder. She carried herself as someone who was in a position of power, but one who was not yet entirely comfortable in that position. Her handshake was firm and her smiling was warming. She appeared to be around Wylar's age, but had a look in her brown eyes that seemed to age her more than the early 30's that she appeared.

"Thank you Mayor Rosewater. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. Ara has mentioned you on several occasions," the Ark hunter replied, referring to the Castithan Ara Shondu, who was the Frontier Ambassador overseeing the territory of Paradise.

"Please, call me Amanda, we try to be a little more informal around here, please sit" the Mayor replied as she gestured at one of the chairs in front of her desk and turned to walk towards a table by one of the windows. "How is Paradise these days?"

“Well, between being up to our asses in hellbugs and dodging Arkfalls every few minutes, it’s our little slice of Heaven,” Wyler replied as he plopped down into the proffered leather covered chair, while removing his cap and scrunching it up in one hand. “And you can call me James.”

“Can I offer you something to drink, James?” Amanda said when she reached the table, holding up a carafe of brown liquor.

“Thank you, but no, I would rather just get down to business.” Wyler replied.

Amanda held up the bottle in the Lawkeeper’s direction, where he had taken up a position next to his deputies. “Nolan?”

Nolan shook his head, “Another time.”

“Very well,” Amanda said, returning to sit behind her desk. “I understand you’ve come to discuss the situation with Rynn Grisu.”

“Indeed I have,” Wyler replied. “Has Nolan filled you in on the details of our discussion?”

“Not the entire conversation,” Amanda replied, “but he did tell me that Rynn helped you and Lawkeeper Cooper with some Hellbug issues you were having relating to an old Earth Military Coalition project.”

“Project Piper,” Wyler nodded in confirmation. “As noted, Rynn was vital in helping us stop a group of E-Rep soldiers from re-starting the project. As far as I have been able to uncover, this wasn’t an officially sanctioned mission, and the rest of the E-Rep brass are unaware of the exact details of what was involved. I would like to keep it that way, and request that custody of Rynn be transferred over to Paradise Law Enforcement.”

“I see,” Amanda said, taking a breath. “As you are aware, Rynn murdered two of our citizens, and attempted to unleash a hive of hellbugs on Defiance. She was convicted and sentenced for her crimes. Even if I was inclined to do so, I don’t have full authority to release her to Paradise.”

Wyler shifted in the chair, the leather creaking quietly. “I understand your concerns, and your position,” he replied. “However, as I told Nolan, I think it is for everyone’s best interests that Rynn stay in protective custody and not remain a fugitive nor be transferred to Las Vegas.”

Amanda glanced over at the Lawkeeper and his deputies, before responding. “As I said, if I were inclined to grant this request, I don’t have the full authority to do so. I would have to bring this up with the town council, but the ultimate approval for the transfer would have to come from the Regional Governor, in a case like this.”

“I suspected as much, though the Regional Governor isn’t my main concern,” Wyler replied. “That will take some time anyway, and Ara has agreed to help where she can in regards to him. My concern is with ensuring your agreement and cooperation.”

This time Wyler looked over at Nolan, who shifted uncomfortably before speaking up. “He does have a good reason to go along with this plan.”

“Then, please convince me that this would be the right thing to do,” Amanda told the Ark hunter. “I’ll grant you that I agreed with Nolan’s decision to let Rynn go out in the Badlands, albeit reluctantly, but the citizens of Defiance, especially those who were directly threatened by Rynn’s actions, would expect justice to be served.”

Wyler stood up and wandered over to one of the windows that overlooked the town. He spent a moment looking down at the town and the activity of the people below before speaking. “You have a nice little community here, Votan and Human living in relative harmony. Just like our not so little Paradise. However, that isn’t the case everywhere, and it’s very likely that another war is right around the corner.”

“What makes you say that?” Tommy asked, finally speaking up.

Wyler turned to face the deputy Lawkeeper. “The Volge attack on Defiance is not a secret and word has traveled fast. It has quite a few people in high places worried. The Volge haven’t made a major

offensive like that since the Pale Wars.” Wyler looked around at the people in the room. “Tell me, has anyone figured out why they would make an unprovoked attack on Defiance?”

“We have our suspicions,” Nolan replied, “But we don’t have any concrete evidence that points to any particular group .”

“We can make the assumption it was because of the McCawley Mines,” Amanda said.

“While that can be a fair assumption, I doubt it is solely because of the gulanite your town is sitting on.” Wyler told her. He looked over at Nolan. “I’m sure your Pale Wars veteran here doesn’t believe that.”

Nolan didn’t answer and Wyler turned to look out of the window again, before facing the Mayor. “There are forces in both the Earth Republic and the remnants of the Earth Military Coalition who are convinced that the Votanis Collective is planning open warfare against humanity, and both groups are doing their utmost to ensure that a preemptive strike is made first. They believe the Volge attack was a potential first strike, but without hard evidence are reluctant to openly move against the VC at this point. I believe they are wrong.”

The Votanis Collective was the ruling body of the Votan races, similar in form to the Earth Republic. Their primary base of operations was in the territory that was once known as Brazil. Shortly after the Votan arrived on Earth, they were granted land in the South American country to use as a settlement while negotiations continued for full immigration.

“And what makes you believe that?” Amanda asked.

“It doesn’t make sense strategically,” Wyler replied. “At least not as an opening move.”

Wyler paused before continuing, gathering his thoughts, and giving another glance at the military veteran in the room. Nolan gave no indication of what he was thinking about the Ark hunter’s statement at this point. Gulanite was another product of the terraforming. As the earth began to change, not only on the surface, but also kilometers below, the fossil fuels of old were also lost or changed, causing a need for the human populace to find other means of energy consumption. Gulanite quickly became the oil and gasoline of the new age.

“It’s well known that the mines here are a primary source of gulanite for most of the country east of the Divide, and hence why E-Rep among others has had an interest in putting their banner on Defiance. To lose control of the mines would cripple any war effort we could mount against the VC.”

“Which is why it would make sense for them to attack,” Tommy said.

“Right you are,” Wyler told him. “However, it is also well known that Varus Soleptor’s mines have as much, if not more of a supply of gulanite than Rafe McCawley’s.”

“I think you might get some argument there,” Nolan finally chimed in, a slight grin on his face.

Wyler tilted his head in acknowledgement at Nolan. “I’m sure. Regardless, should war break out, there is no doubt that Varus will throw his hat in the ring on the side of the Collective. And despite her sympathies towards the human population, and her issues with the VC, Ara would back them up, of which I am sure the VC is well aware. At this point, there is no evidence or indication that the Collective has secured Varus’ cooperation or otherwise made any move into Paradise. Therefore, it doesn’t make sense that the VC was behind the Volge attack.”

“If that’s the case, then who was?” Tommy asked.

Wyler shrugged his shoulders. “That is still the big mystery. However, it still won’t stop the warmongers in the E-Rep from using it to get what they want, and that includes control of Defiance and the gulanite mines.”

“How does any of this involve Rynn?” Irisa finally spoke up. Despite all she had heard, she was still not convinced that anything should be done to help the Ark hunter who embarrassed her and Nolan, and her tone indicated as such.

“By making sure the E-Rep can’t get their hands on her and Project Piper again,” Wyler said. “Neither we nor the VC can afford another war, but if the E-Rep can turn hellbugs into a weapon, any war would be over before it could be started, and no one would be the wiser.”

“Who would think to question random hellbug attacks on Votan settlements until it was too late?” Tommy chimed in.

“Exactly, except for the handful who would actually know,” Wyler waved a hand, indicating those assembled in the room. “And those can be dealt with easily.”

“Regardless,” the Ark hunter continued, “if that is not convincing enough, let’s just call it a return favor for helping to save Defiance from the Volge.”

“What do you mean?” Amanda asked.

Wyler smiled and finally returned to sit in his chair. “Well, the way I see it, without the use of a piece of pretty powerful Arktech that wiped out the Volge army, the acquisition of which was only possible with a certain piece of tech that was ‘appropriated’ from the Bay Area, shall we say, by your Lawkeeper and his deputy, with my help of course, everyone here would be singing the Volge national anthem.”

Amanda looked at Nolan. “Is this true?”

Nolan shifted his stance, looking uncomfortable again. “I would have to say yes. We were able to salvage the Terrasphere using a Libera Nova Gem that Wyler helped us to obtain in the Bay Area.”

Irisa gave him a sidelong look.

The Mayor sighed and pushed herself up from her desk. “Then I suppose we are indebted to you as well, and offer our thanks.”

Wyler also rose. “It is appreciated. However, there is still the matter of custody.”

Amanda walked around to the front of the desk and half-sat, half-leaned against the edge. “Considering everything you have told us, I think I can agree, and secure the council’s agreement in transferring custody of Rynn over to you and Lawkeeper Cooper. I will also draft up the request to send to the Regional Governor.”

“Again, much appreciated,” Wyler said, shaking hands with the Mayor again.

“The question now is, can you handle her?” Nolan asked.

Wyler turned to him and grinned. “Well, I do have a close friend who agreed to help us out on that front, though I am not sure exactly what kind of role model she’ll end up being. She’ll keep Rynn out of trouble in any event.”

“Well, now that that’s settled, are you planning to stay long in Defiance?” Amanda asked.

“Unfortunately, as much as I would like to, I should be getting back. I’ve been gone long enough already, and I’m sure Cooper will have my ears ringing any minute.”

“In that case, have a safe trip back. I will be in contact with Ara to work out the details of the request to the Governor.”

“Thank you,” Wyler replied.

As the Lawkeepers began to file out of the Mayor’s office the Ark hunter stopped and turned back to Amanda. She had returned to some paperwork on her desk, but paused and looked up when she noticed Wyler looking at her. Nolan and his deputies likewise stopped and waited for him in the reception room.

“There’s one more thing,” Wyler said.

“Go ahead,” the Mayor replied.

“From what I understand from my contacts in the E-Rep, they want into Defiance ... badly.”

“We kind of figured that out already,” Tommy replied from the other room.

Wyler nodded slightly, turning his head to look at the deputy. “It’s more than that. It’s more than just the gulanite and the maglev line.”

“And what would that be?” Amanda asked.

Wylar turned back to address the mayor. "That I don't know. The E-Rep has gotten very good at keeping secrets, but I have friends in places that can usually get me any information I want to know. However, the determination the E-Rep is showing in taking over Defiance is unusual, and my contacts have not been able to find out why. That is troubling."

Amanda gave a look at Nolan, a quick flash of concern crossing her face. "Is there something we can do to help?"

Wylar shook his head. "Not really, not on that front." He looked at each of the four people who represented the authority in Defiance. "Just stay alert and watch your backs."

His gaze settled back on the Mayor.

"Defiance is the vanguard for the frontier, and the cooperation we have between you and Paradise is much needed for the survival of everyone," he said. "Unfortunately, there may be little we can do if the E-Rep gets a hold of Defiance or if the VC makes a move on Paradise. However, there are others than can provide help should something happen. I have some friends, and we call ourselves the Children of Gallifrey, who may be able to help when the Law can't. Our leader is called Daeminos. If you ever have a need, get a message to him or Sinnafae, and you'll get the help you need. While the VC may not be an immediate threat, there are still some mysteries that need an answer, and we are determined to find them."

"I will keep that in mind," Amanda replied, as the Ark hunter turned and joined Nolan and the others.

As they left the large office building and returned to the streets of the town, Nolan ordered Tommy to retrieve the Ark hunter's roller so he could get on his way. In the meantime, the other three headed towards the Lawkeeper's office to retrieve Wylar's weapons.

"Since you've been working for Coop, I take it that your Ark hunting days have ended?" Nolan asked Wylar

Wylar let out a short burst of amusement. "Hardly. You should have stuck around – there's plenty of Arkfalls to be had."

"Yeah, well, Irisa and I were never ones to really settle down into one place for long," Nolan replied.

Irisa shot him a look as if to say that she wished that was still the case.

"And yet, here you are," Wylar said.

"It's funny how things work out sometimes," Nolan said. "So how did your old boss take the news that you decided to become a frontier Lawkeeper?"

Wylar gave a single shake of his head. "Don't know. My change of employment sort of came about thanks to Von Bach taking a header off the Golden Gate, courtesy of Nim Shondu."

Nolan looked at the Ark hunter with a shocked expression on his face.

"Anyway," Wylar continued. "I thought that was a good a time as any for a change. At least this way, I can actually feel like I am helping to make things better."

"I know how you feel."

As they approached the Lawkeeper's office, Tommy pulled up in the blue Duni. They went inside to gather up the rest of the Ark hunter's belongings, after which the two deputies were called off to the Hollows to investigate one of the usual disturbances that emanated from that part of town. Wylar quickly packed up his belongings in the roller and was just about to get in when Nolan called for his attention.

"Are you sure I can't convince you to come over to the NeedWant for a departing drink?" He asked. "We can trade a story or two about Cooper and Torc."

Wylar smiled as he settled in behind the wheel and looked back up at the Lawkeeper. "Another time. Don't forget, you'll still owe me a favor once I get Varus off your back. I think that will be worth a few drinks at least."

Nolan could only nod in agreement. "That it would."

The Lawkeeper stepped back as Wyler swung the door shut and powered up the roller. He watched as the Duni swung around and headed off towards Bissel Pass in a cloud of dust. A look of concern passed across his face, which he quickly dismissed, though no one else around was watching. What the Ark hunter, now deputy Lawkeeper, had said back in Amanda's office troubled him, especially since he had his own theories about who may have been behind the Volge attack. Somehow, he thought, they would be seeing Wyler again, sooner rather than later.