

## Exchange of Debts Chapter 2 – A Chance Encounter

The sun breached the horizon and began to beat down upon the dusty, arid land of the Storm Divide. There was a haze hanging in the air, brushing the land in a sickly pale orange highlight. The Divide was a wild land that encompassed thousands of square miles of what used to be the Midwest of the United States of America. It was a mix of the desert like flatlands that used to be found in the Southwestern states of Arizona and New Mexico interspersed with thick alien foliage. Out of all of the country, this area was the most affected by the terraforming, and that wasn't just the land itself.

Here, the radiation in the lower atmosphere was at its worst, even posing issues for stratocarriers that weren't well protected and prepared for a journey across its expanse. Even that wasn't the deadliest that the Divide had to offer. Aside from regular bouts of Razor Rain – small, but deadly bits of the Votan Arks that fell from the upper atmosphere in huge dark clouds, this was the home of the Volge. Though many humans considered the Volge to be one of the seven Votan races, they were not native to that long dead system. They were invaders who long ago conquered the world of Omec in the Votanis system and often warred with the races on the other planets. They were tall creatures – most averaging at least a couple of feet taller than the typical human or Votan, though some were even taller. It seemed they were built for war - their skin was mostly dark grey or black, with some dark red highlights, and not only served as their natural source of armoring, but also produced a powerful energy weapon, often referred to as cold fire weapons. Though both human and Votan had been able to manufacture artificial cold fire weapons, their potency was still outmatched by the Volge's natural originals.

When it was discovered that the destruction of the Votanis System was inevitable due to an impending collision with another star system, the five primary races decided that the Volge would not receive an invitation to journey on the species saving Arks. However, after the Votan arrival on Earth, it was discovered that some of the Volge had managed to gain access to the Arks, and during the Pale Wars fought against both the human and Votan military forces. After the Wars had ended, it appeared the Volge made a retreat to the underground caverns found across the Storm Divide. Aside from occasional raiding parties that scavenged nearby Arkfalls, they all but withdrew from contact with the rest of the inhabitants of Earth – until the attack on Defiance.

Despite the presence of the Volge, there were communities that dotted the outskirts of the worst parts of the Divide. They were nothing like the established towns of Defiance and Paradise, and generally consisted of Bandits and Raiders. In the end, they only added to the danger and wildness that the land had become. This made it at best, a hazard for the trading and supply convoys that crossed between East and West, and at worst, made one hope for a quick death. To cross the Divide alone is considered suicide to all but the most hardy. Therefore it was fortunate that Wyler not only met that categorization naturally, but had it enhanced thanks to the EGO device.

The Deputy Lawkeeper awoke on the third morning of his trip back from Defiance with the sun glinting through the armor straps that covered the windows of his Duni Shetarru. At this point in the journey, there wasn't even a hint of the original blue color left to be seen beneath the layer of dust and dried mud that covered the roller. He had slept, as he had for the entire journey, in the driver's seat of the roller. Despite the hardness, the extra protection afforded by the vehicle was needed for crossing the region of the Divide. Though EGO would have alerted him to anyone in the nearby area, he still performed a quick scan of the surrounding area from the control panel set in the Duni's dashboard. He had found an outcropping of boulders and deformed fingers of land with which to hide and settle in for the night. He had slept in the same clothes he had changed into prior to his meeting with Amanda. The shirt was a blocky green and brown camouflage color with the pants a solid faded olive green. He still has his Wolfhound pistol strapped to his leg, the cap and satchel rested on the seat next to him.

Confirming that he was the only living creature in the surrounding hundred meters or so, he swung open the door to the roller and stepped out, stretching to ease the tension and aches in his body from the less than ideal sleeping quarters. He took a few moments to relieve himself by one of the boulders, then opened a panel on a small storage compartment on the left rear quarter panel of the roller to reveal two metallic tanks with spouts. He pulled one out and opened a small cover on the large boost engine mounted on the back of the Duni to pour the remaining petrohol into the tank. By his judgment, it would be just enough to get him back to his home back on the Iron Demon ranch in Madera, one of the small territories that comprised Paradise, before the end of the day.

Petrohol was the new source of fuel that had replaced gasoline after the terraforming of the world. It was a by-product created by the ingestion of gulanite by Hellbugs, hence one of the reasons why gulanite was much demanded by the populace of the world, and the maker of fortunes for those who could mine it. Usually, a roller of Wyler's type would be unable to sustain a journey the length of which he undertook with just two containers of petro, but thanks for some modifications made by a friend of his – a Sensoth named Torc Mok – there was little worry of running out of fuel before the journey's end.

The Sensoths were one of the two main Votan races who were least like humans in appearance, the Liberata being the other. Sensoths were tall, heavysset creatures, though not as large as the Volge, and more resembled the gorillas of Old Earth. They tended to be the most long lived of the five races, and despite their outward appearance and habit of being slow and deliberate, were as intelligent as any of the other races, with perhaps the exception of the Indogene. Torc was the resident mechanic of Paradise, and like Cooper and Nolan, fought in the Battle of Defiance, though he served in the Votan army. After the Battle, he had befriended the humans and now spent some of his time assisting the Paradise Lawkeeper in maintaining order, though often reluctantly and refusing to do so in any official capacity.

After he returned the petro tank to its proper resting place and secured the panel, he reached into the rear of the passenger area of the vehicle and pulled out a sack of supplies he had procured prior to leaving Defiance. He pulled out a portion of hardtack and a couple of Votan hybrid fruits, the kind that were engineered and grown to be longer lasting in the lack of any real refrigeration or preservatives. As he was finishing his breakfast, he had a sense of a slight vibration in the ground. A few moments later he thought he could hear a deep and low rumble in the air, right before EGO broke the silence in his head.

"I'm detecting an incoming Arkfall, let's go earn some scrip!"

The first thought that went through Wyler's head was that when he got back to Paradise, he was going to ask Eren Niden, the local Indogene doctor, to give his EGO a personality overhaul.

"Well, that's rude," the EGO replied to the thought.

Wyler sighed and just shook his head before speaking out loud, "Where's impact going to be?"

"I estimate that the impact zone will be 68 kilometers to the Northwest."

As the sound and vibration began to grow, Wyler looked up and could see the streak of reentry burning a line in the blue morning sky.

"I suppose we can afford a quick side trip," Wyler said as he tossed the sack with his remaining supplies back into the roller. "Besides, I forgot to pick Cass up a souvenir."

He jumped into the driver seat of the roller and fired up the engine as he swung the door closed. The tires spun as Wyler gunned the engine and roared out of his hiding spot, kicking up a cloud of dust and rocks.

Wyler could see the smoke rising above the horizon as he neared the impact zone. He began to see debris scattered about the landscape as he drove along. Most of the remains were small bits and pieces of metallic hull, which grew larger in size the closer he drew to the point of impact. The amount

of wreckage he encountered indicated that this was no small Arkfall, but perhaps one of the larger ships, and that meant it could be a very large payday if the ship was able to survive reentry relatively intact. Many of the Arkfalls encountered in the Bay Area were bits and pieces of the larger ships – mostly hull plating and the occasional ark-core embedded in the melted slag that remained of the debris upon crashing to the earth. He had heard tales of much larger Arkfalls in and to the west of the Storm Divide, and in fact, the very Arkfall that Rynn had told him about where she had first encountered Nolan and Irisa, was one of those rare larger ones. A wry smile crossed his face as he recalled Rynn’s story, and the fact that Nolan had one of the biggest paydays an Ark hunter could dream of snatched out of his hands, thanks to the Volge attack.

It was through the use of the Libera Nova Gem that Nolan had “appropriated” from Wyler in Paradise that allowed him to get his hands on a Terrasphere – one of the core components of the Votan terraforming technology. And it was that very piece of Ark tech that had to be used to save Defiance from the Volge attack, the power unleashed from the sphere wiping out the entire invading army.

“The Arkfall should be just over the next ridge,” EGO spoke, interrupting Wyler’s thoughts.

The land here was mostly undulating hills and shallow valleys made up of hard packed arid soil. Very little indication of wildlife could be seen, though in the surrounding distance, there were pockets of alien plant life - mostly large purple and blue oval shaped leaf-like structures that sprouted from the ground. As he crested the final hill, he was able to see that the Arkfall was indeed one, or part of one, of the ships, and that it had come to rest in a shallow bowl of land created by the surrounding ridgeline. He stopped the roller at the top of the ridge and got out to get a better look at his prize. It appeared that there were two large sections of ship and that it had probably broken apart just before impact. The two main sections were about half a kilometer apart, and the intervening distance was covered by the same small debris pieces he had seen earlier. Though both sections of the hull were ripped and shredded, there was enough intact to give indication that this was one of the smaller escort ships and not the large sleeper ships that the Votan used for the centuries of travel it took them to get to Earth.

“Well, let’s see what we have today,” Wyler said quietly to himself.

He reached back into the roller and pulled a pair of black binoculars out of the satchel. He scanned the impact area, as well as the surrounding landscape, looking for potential competition.

“I’m not picking up any signs of life,” the EGO confirmed. “I am detecting some power readings from the aft of the ship, though.”

Wyler nodded to himself. It just may be a good day after all if some of the ships systems were still operational after the crash. The aft of the ship was the closest to him, only a couple hundred meters away. He hooked the binoculars to the back of his belt, then climbed back into the roller and headed down the ridge towards the wreckage. After he was close enough, he grabbed the satchel and shrugged the two straps over his shoulders, making it into a backpack. After he got out, he reached into the back of the roller to pull out his sniper and assault rifles. The former he hung over his right shoulder while the latter remained firmly in his grip.

Half of the hull had been sheared away from this part of the ship, exposing much of the interior of the engine compartment. This part of the ship has come to rest on its side, so when he stepped into the ship proper, he ended up walking along the wall instead of the floor. He headed towards the engine control room, pulling a small scanner out of his belt pouch to better locate active systems and power sources in the room. The interior of the ship had been twisted and bent from the violence of reentry and impact, causing Wyler to move cautiously and attempt to avoid the many hanging pieces of girder and bulkhead, while he tracked down the source of the power that the EGO had detected.

He managed to find some components and bits and pieces of the ship’s larger computer systems that were relatively undamaged and functional under the right circumstances, but still nothing that wasn’t worth more than a handful of scrip. He was about to give up on the control room when he finally found the source of one of the larger power spikes – an ark-core, not unlike the one that his former

employer, Karl Von Bach, had with him on their arrival to the Bay Area. The Votan had several different types of cores, the primary one of which was used to power the Terraforming technology, but there were also others used to provide power and AI to many of their other technologies as well.

Wylar held the core up to better admire his find and grinned. "Jackpot, baby!" he said out loud. "Cass is going to flip when she sees this." While not quite as lucrative as the terraforming ark-cores, this one was easily worth a few thousand scrip to the right people.

He removed the satchel backpack and was placing the ark-core inside, when the EGO said, "I'm detecting movement outside to the North."

Wylar quickly finished securing the ark-core and put the satchel back on. He picked up both the rifles, but this time kept the sniper rifle in hand while the assault rifle went over the shoulder. He moved as quickly as the twisted ship around him allowed to the opening created when the ship had ripped in two. In the distance, between the two halves of the ship he could see a cloud of dust kicking up on the ridge of impact zone. The source of the dust became readily apparent—a group of Raiders was approaching the Arkfall. Half a dozen of them were on motorbikes, which were accompanied by three other vehicles, one of which was a Cerebus with a large turret machine gun mounted to the bed of the truck. The other two smaller vehicles were open air jeep-like rollers and had three Raiders each. Altogether, Wylar counted sixteen Raiders in the group.

"Stupid bandits, this is our Arkfall," EGO said.

Wylar just sighed. He then saw the motorbike Raiders veer off and head towards his section of the ship while the others headed towards the other half. Wylar backed away from the opening before he could be spotted and searched around to see if he could climb to the top of the wreckage for a better vantage point. The direction they had come from and their current line of site to the ship didn't allow them to see where Wylar had parked his roller, but it would only be a matter of time before they decided to take a look around and discover that they were not the only scavengers here. As he heard the motorbikes skid to a stop outside, he found a likely spot to climb and made it to the top of the ship just as the Raiders were approaching the gap in the center of the aft section, where the ship had torn in two. All six of the Raiders were wearing helmets of one type or another, and each had a pair of black horns, either painted or physical protrusions, on either side of the helmets. From the exposed bits of skin he could see through other parts of their clothing three appeared to be human, while two had the dark red skin of an Irathient. The last one, and the smallest of the bunch was more covered up, so Wylar wasn't able to easily discern his origin, but could tell that he was still too tall and thin to be a Liberata.

There were many forms and flavors of Raiders, who were nothing more than savage outlaws not unlike the bandits of the Old West from 200 years ago. However, this new breed tended to be much more savage and deadly than their predecessors, and though they were often humans or cyborgs, could count many Sensoths and Liberata among their ranks. Most of the Raiders made their living out here in the Badlands and Storm Divide, attacking Overland and supply transports, but quite a few had also moved into the Bay Area in an attempt to take over many of Varus Soleptor's Gulanite mines.

One of the human Raiders pushed the small one towards the ship and said in a deep, gravelly voice, "Get in there, and don't come out until you've found us something good."

Wylar had to act quickly before he or the Duni were discovered. Even with the advantages the EGO gave him, more than a dozen of these outlaws might be more than he could handle on his own. He didn't risk open gunfire at the moment, the distance between the two halves of wreckage, plus the acoustical nature of the bowl of land in which the ship had landed would carry the sound of gunfire to the rest of the Raiders who were in the front half of the ship. His best chance would be to draw the remaining five into the remains of the ship and take them out in close quarters combat. He dropped back down into the ship and began to search for the smaller Raider who was already inside.

It was only a few moments when he heard the noise of something hitting a bulkhead in the engine control center. Wylar snuck up to the entrance of the control center and engaged his Cloak. He

took a peak around the doorway and got a look at the Raider inside. The outlaw has his back turned to him, but his helmet was off and still rocking on the floor next to him. Wyler grunted to himself as he saw the short white hair and pale neck of the outlaw that indicated he was of Castithan origin. Though not unheard of, it was rare to see a Castithan taken in among the ranks of the Raiders – they were usually killed outright. The Casty appeared unarmed as far as Wyler could see, as the Votan continued to pull apart at the control console in front of him, looking for suitable parts to salvage. As Wyler entered the room, the Casty suddenly stopped and spun around. Wyler had to swallow back a shout of surprise as the outlaw surveyed the room.

The surprise came in part from the fact that he thought the Casty might have spotted him despite the invisibility of the Cloak, but also from what he saw now that he could see the Votan's face. This wasn't a man, but only a boy who couldn't have been more than a young teenager. The fact that the boy was a Castithan and unarmed on top of that gave Wyler the suspicion that he wasn't a member of the outlaw clan that had arrived at the Arkfall, but one of their captured slaves.

Many an unwary and unarmed traveler had fallen victim to Raider attacks when travelling across the frontier. Those who weren't killed in the raids were often taken prisoner and used as slaves by the outlaws. If they were women, they were often used as breeding "vessels" to keep up their numbers. If they were children, they were put to work as laborers and performed the menial tasks around camp, and often tortured. Needless to say, anyone who found themselves under an impending attack prayed to whatever Deity they believed in for a quick death rather than enslavement.

Upon seeing nothing out of the ordinary, the boy turned back and continued tearing the console apart. Wyler shouldered the rifle in his hands and quietly pulled his pistol out of its holster. Before the power on his Cloak ran out, he approached the boy from behind and quickly placed one gloved hand over his mouth while pressing the barrel of the pistol against the boy's temple. The boy jumped in Wyler's grasp and let out a scream, muffled by the Ark hunter's hand. Wyler could see the Castithan's pale white eyes widen in fright as his Cloak disengaged and he became visible.

Wyler kept a tight grip on him as he said, "Do not make a sound, otherwise you'll be dead before the breath leaves your body, understand?"

The Casty nodded in Wyler's grip.

"Good," Wyler replied. He didn't loosen his grip on the boy's mouth and head, nor did he move the pistol from its spot on his temple. "I'm going to ask you some questions. You nod for yes and shake your head for no, understand?"

There was a single quick nod of the head.

"Are you a member of the clan of your friends out there?"

A couple of quick shakes of the Casty's head was the response.

"Were you captured by them?"

There was a nod in response this time.

"How long ago? Quietly," Wyler asked and instructed. He loosened his grip enough for the boy to speak.

The Casty stuttered a bit before he could whisper the answer of, "two years, I think."

"Would you like to get out of here and away from them?" Wyler asked.

"Yes," the boy stammered. "Can you help me?"

Wyler nodded, even though the boy wouldn't be able to see it. "As long as you do exactly what I tell you to do, and don't do anything stupid. Otherwise you'll be as dead as they will be, understand?"

"Yes," the boy replied again. "Thank you."

Wyler released his grip and stepped away, but kept the pistol leveled at the boy's head. "What's your name?"

The boy paused for just a moment before answering. "My friends used to call me Chance. You can just call me Chance."

“Fine,” Wyler said, drawing his arm back into a more relaxed position. “I am going to take care of your friends out there before they find my roller, then we’ll ...”

The rest of his sentence was cut off by a muffled shout that came from outside of the ship. From the sound, it had appeared that the Duni had been spotted by one of the Raiders.

“Shtako,” Wyler cursed and glanced towards the entrance to the control room. He then turned back to Chance. “Stay here, and don’t move until I get back.”

Chance just nodded in reply as Wyler ran out of the room.

The Ark hunter hurried towards the rear quarter of the ship where he had made his original entry. He could hear the Raiders talking amongst themselves as he approached the gaping hole in the side of the hull, near where he had parked the Duni. As he rounded a corner, he could see three of the Raiders around the roller.

One of them pointed towards the front of the wreckage and shouted, “You two, get inside and find the kid.” He then turned to his two companions, “Let’s go find the haigyi who owns this and show him what happens to those who come into Blackhorn territory uninvited.”

Wyler jogged back out of view before he was spotted. He had debated taking out the three right then and there, but still didn’t want to risk any sound reaching the rest of the outlaws at the other part of the ship. Once they were inside the hull, he would be able to dispatch them easily enough, then get to the other two before they found Chance. He moved back behind the corner in the corridor, holstered the pistol, and removed both rifles and set the assault rifle down next to him. He kept the sniper rifle in his hands and chambered round. He picked up a twisted piece of bulkhead and rapped it on the side the corridor a few times. The sound seemed to ring throughout the ship, but had the effect he desired. He could hear the first Raider shout to his companions, followed by the sounds of footsteps heading in his direction from the gap.

Wyler engaged the Cloak once again, and while still crouched down, inched around the corner and saw the three Raiders cautiously approaching. The leader was one of the Irathients, and the other two following a few steps behind were human. Regardless, they would be dead within moments. Wyler looked down the site at the leader, at this range his head filled the scope, and pulled the trigger. The shot rang out, and Wyler winced as it echoed off the walls and caused his ears to ring. The Raider’s head snapped back and a fine red mist exploded from the back of his helmet. The force of the shot knocked the body back into his two companions, giving Wyler the time needed to chamber another round and take out the second Raider before he even had time to react. The third and final Raider had just enough time to right himself and turn towards the source of the shots when the third round pierced the plastic goggles covering his eyes and blew out the left side of his head, leather helmet and all.

He didn’t stay to admire his handiwork, but simply shouldered both rifles again, drew the pistol from its holster one more time, and jogged back down the corridor towards the control room. He disengaged his Cloak once again, to make sure it had enough time to recharge before engaging the remaining two Raiders. As he ran past the control center, he looked to make sure Chance was still inside.

“Hey ...” the boy started to say, but he was cut off by Wyler

“Stay there,” the Ark hunter said as he continued running down the corridor towards the intersection that would lead to the front part of the wreckage where the other two Raiders would be making their approach.

“The shots came from this direction!” he heard one of them shout.

“That means Sakuuth and the boys must have taken care of our trespasser,” the other said. “Now we just need to find that haint rat and finish this job.”

Wyler crouched down before he reached the intersection, and once again prepared to use the sniper rifle to dispatch the Raiders. He engaged the Cloak just as he heard the Raiders nearing the intersection, but this time, it was followed by a shout of surprise from behind him.

“Yenkitso!” Chance uttered a Castithan curse as he saw the Ark hunter vanish from sight.

Wylar turned to look at the boy and tell him to get back in the room when the two Raiders came around the corner of the intersection.

"There's the skruggin' rat now," the one who was Irathient said.

Chance's eyes went wide in panic and he took off down the corridor, away from Wylar and the Raiders.

"Hey!" the human Raider shouted at him. "Get back here you piece of shtako!"

"Son of a bitch," Wylar said to himself as he turned back to the Raiders.

He saw the human one raise an automatic pistol and begin shooting at the fleeing Castithan. One shot from Wylar ended that after only a half dozen of the bullets had left the magazine.

"What the jekk?" The Irathient said in shock as he saw the back of his companion's helmet explode in a mix of white skull and red mist. He then had just enough time to notice Wylar's form disappear again, after the force of the shot disrupted his Cloak and made him visible for an instant, before another shot sent him into dark silence.

Wylar stood and disengaged the Cloak, prepared to start a search for Chance. He didn't have to look far however. When he turned around, he could see the boy lying prone at the other end of the corridor. As Wylar approached the Castithan, he could see pinkish splotches appearing on his left arm, leg, and side. At least some of the Raider's bullets had found their mark.

"Damn it," Wylar said as he knelt down next to the boy.

Chance groaned in pain and looked up at Wylar. "I'm hit. I'm going to die, aren't I?"

"Not yet, you aren't," Wylar replied as he lifted up the boy's shirt to take a look at the damage to his side.

It had appeared that in all three wounds, the bullets had gone completely through the boy, and fortunately, the exit wounds weren't as bad as Wylar would have feared had the Raider been using different ammunition. He was unfamiliar with Castithan biology, but it appeared that the wound in Chance's side wouldn't be life threatening, as long as he could stop the bleeding. He wasn't a doctor, but his training out in the wild gave him enough knowledge to be able to bandage up the boy and get him back to Paradise. That was if he could find ...

"I think I located what may be the medical bay in this section of the ship," EGO spoke up before he could finish his thought.

"Well, at least something's going right this morning," Wylar said.

"What?" Chance asked, confused.

Wylar looked down at the boy. "Don't worry about it." He grabbed the hand of the boy's uninjured arm and placed it over the wound in his side, eliciting a grunt of pain.

"Keep pressure on that while I get you to the sick bay."

Wylar lifted the boy up in his arms, and positioned his hand so he could carry him and still keep some pressure on the entrance wound of the boy's back. As carefully, as he could, he followed the EGO's directions to the sick bay. While he had a first aid kit in the roller, it didn't have enough supplies to take care of the job needed to patch up Chance's injuries. He knew he had to move quickly, however, as it wouldn't take long for the other Raiders to realize that something happened to their clan mates in this part of the ship.

The medical bay was located near where the center of the ship would have been, had it still been whole. As circumstances proved, it was near where the ship had broken apart. Fortunately, it was on the side of the ship that was not as extensively damaged, but it did require that they climb down part of a corridor, due to the ship's tilt, in order to reach it. Chance, though weak, was able to manage the climb with Wylar's help, though the Ark hunter could see that the effort clearly pained the boy further. When they got inside the medical bay, they saw that one end of it had been sheared away in the break. Though the bay was opened to the outside, the angle of the aft section prevented them from getting a clear view of the other half of the ship. Since the beds in the room were now on the side of the ship,

Wylar had the boy lay down on what was now the floor near one of the supply cabinets and a computer terminal.

"It looks like there is still some power left in this terminal," EGO said. "I am going to try to interface with it."

Wylar just nodded to himself as he forced open the cabinet and began to gather up the supplies he needed to bandage up Chance and ease the boy's pain a bit. After only a minute or two, just as he began his work on Chance, EGO spoke up again.

"Some of the data I'm finding is very weird," the device said.

"What do you mean?" Wylar asked.

"Huh? I didn't say anything?" Chance interrupted.

Wylar ignored him and continued to bandage up his side.

EGO continued, "This is an escort ship in the Votan fleet. Its purpose was primarily just to carry maintenance and medical personnel from Ark to Ark as needed."

"So what's weird?" Wylar asked.

"Weird about what?" Chance answered, confused as to what the stranger was talking about, and getting more than a little worried that there was something not quite right with the human.

"Keep quiet," Wylar told him.

"Well, this medical bay would normally be used just for emergencies, to take care of the crew and any passengers as needed. But I am finding a lot of information and stored DNA signatures in the database, something that should only be on an Ark. It looks like ... it might be Volge DNA."

Wylar stopped his work on Chance's leg and looked up at the computer terminal. "Show me," he said.

"Show you what? Who are you talking too?" Chance asked, the worry clear in his voice.

"I said keep quiet," Wylar told him. He then looked at the boy as Chance struggled to sit up. Wylar pushed him back down. "Relax. I'll explain everything later. Just keep quiet for now."

Wylar looked back up and a blue HUD appeared before his eyes. At that moment, as Chance was staring at the human, he could see something flash and spin in his eyes. Though shocked, he elected to listen and remain still, for the moment anyway. From Wylar's perspective, he saw the HUD move and spin, turning into scrolling Indogene letters, which were then translated into human English. The data scrolled by just as if he was sitting at the computer terminal and scrolling through it naturally. Some of the data was accompanied by holographic pictures of what were clearly Volge soldiers.

"Skragi," Wylar cursed under his breath in Irathient. "That's enough."

He stood up and looked down at Chance as the HUD disappeared. "Don't move."

The boy just looked at Wylar as the human walked over to the terminal and removed three small data recorders from one of his belt pouches. He opened up the side of the terminal and inserted all three into the available slots.

"Download everything you can, including that DNA," Wylar told EGO.

"What's going on?" Chance asked Wylar when the Ark hunter returned to finish bandaging his wounds.

"As soon as I'm done with you, we're getting out of here as fast as possible and heading back to Paradise."

A look of alarm crossed Chance's face. "We can't!" Wylar opened his mouth to say something, but Chance continued quickly, "I mean we can't go to Paradise, we have to go back to Blackhorn's camp."

"That would be the last thing we need to do right now," Wylar told him.

"Then you have to let me go, let me go back with the others to the camp."

Wylar kept working on the boy, trying to finish as quickly as possible. "Why do you want to go back? I thought you wanted me to get you out of here."



"I do, but they still have my mother, and some others from our caravan there. I can't just leave her with them."

Wylar kept working on Chance, finishing his leg, and now moving to bandage his arm. His lips drew tight in a look of frustration. "How many are in the camp?"

"About seven or eight, including my mother."

"How many Raiders?" Wylar asked.

Chance paused before answering. "A lot. At least 30 or more."

Wylar shook his head. "There's nothing I can do. I can't take on that many. We have to get back to Paradise to get help first."

"I won't leave her," Chance said firmly.

Wylar looked the Castithan in the eye. "There's no choice. We have to get help first. Your mother will be fine until we can come back. At least as fine as she has been the last two years." He did not want to think about what had been done to the woman during that period of time. "We can do nothing for her if we're both killed trying to get her out without help."

Chance said nothing else. He lay still just staring at the bulkheads above him as Wylar worked to finish dressing his bandages.

"The download is complete," EGO said. "And I'm detecting multiple bionetic lifeforms approaching from the East. I think it might be Volge."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Wylar said. Chance just looked at the Ark hunter, but remained silent. Wylar walked back to the terminal, removed the three data recorders and placed them back in the belt pouch.

He walked to the edge of the opening torn into the medical bay and looked for the front end the ship. He was just able to see it around a piece of twisted, deformed hull. Up on the ridge, on the other side of where the Raiders had parked their rollers and cerebus, he could make out six bulky forms approaching the Arkfall. He pulled the binoculars from the clip on the back of his belt and took a look at the distant figures. He centered on what looked like the tallest one, and saw the unmistakable signs of thin, wing like protrusions coming from its head. He dialed in the zoom and could make out the details of a Viscera. It was accompanied by four of the standard Troopers and a Bomber.

"It's the Volge all right," Wylar said out loud.

"What?" Chance asked, sitting up and twisting to look at Wylar.

The Ark hunter turned and moved quickly back to the Castithan. "Come on, we're getting out of here right now."

There was no argument this time as Wylar helped Chance to his feet. He was able to stand on his own after a moment, but the injury to his leg kept him hobbled as he tried to walk.

"This isn't going to work," Wylar said.

"What do you mean?" Chance asked him.

"With your leg, we won't have enough time to get back to my roller going through the ship. We'll have to make a break for it outside."

Wylar helped him over to the opening. It was just a short drop to the ground. Wylar helped Chance to climb out and hang down from the ledge, to try to shorten the distance he had to drop. Chance let go and tried, with some success, to make sure the brunt of the impact was taken by his good leg. Wylar dropped his rifles down to the Castithan and followed a moment later, rolling as he hit the ground. As Chance was handing the weapons back to Wylar, they saw one of the Raider jeeps spin around and begin to head in their direction. It would reach them only a matter of seconds. Wylar looked around, searching for a place where they could take cover before the jeep reached them. He noticed a piece of the hull jutting out, about a dozen meters to their left. He pulled Chance with him, hoping to make it before they were spotted.

They dove behind the twisted metal and listened as the sound of the jeep pulled up, grinding dust and gravel underneath the wheels as it slid to a halt. Wyler indicated to Chance that he should stay there and keep quiet, as he unshouldered the rifles, keeping the assault rifle in his hands while he left the sniper rifle with Chance. He peaked around their cover, and saw the Raiders hop out of the jeep. They both had submachine guns in their hands.

“Sakuuth! Ebberron! Where are you haigyis at?” one of the Raiders shouted. “We need to get the jekk out of here, now!”

Wyler saw them rounding the ship, heading in their direction. He jumped up and released his Decoy, then quickly ducked back behind the twisted piece of hull.

“Hey!” the other Raider shouted as the movement caught his attention.

As the decoy turned their attention away from the direction of the ship, Wyler stood and raised his rifle, pressing the trigger. The Raiders, taken by surprise, had no chance, and fell before the hail of bullets that was unleashed upon them. It was over in a matter of a few seconds. Wyler shouldered the rifle, smoke still rising from the end of the barrel and eyed the bloodied corpses on the ground. After a moment, turned to Chance and helped the boy to his feet.

“Come on, it’s time to go,” he said as they headed towards the Raiders’ jeep.

The vehicle was still running, so Wyler just gunned the engine and peeled off towards where he had parked his roller. As they got out of the jeep, they heard the sounds of explosions and gunfire echoing through the shallow valley. Neither the human nor the Castithan cared to look back at the battle. There was no doubt which side would come out on top in this conflict. Even outnumbered two to one, the Volge would be more than a match for the outlaws, and Wyler didn’t want to be around when they turned their attention to the other half of the ship. He tossed his gear into the back of the Duni and helped Chance get into the passenger seat.

The Castithan looked over at Wyler as he settled in behind the wheel and started the engine. “Who are you?” the boy asked after a moment.

Wyler turned his head to look at his new companion. “That’s going to take some time to answer,” he replied. “For now, you can just call me Wyler. The rest we’ll go over once we get the hell out of here.”

With that he slammed on the gas and hit the boost, spinning the wheels for a moment before they dug in and shot the roller forward. The roller was at full speed just as it hit the bottom of the ridge, and ripped up the embankment. As it crested the top, its momentum carried into the air and over the top, landing hard and bouncing a few times before settling back and continuing away from the scene of the carnage.

Wyler looked over at his new passenger as the roller steadied. “You OK over there?”

Chance looked at him for a moment, eyes wide and unsure now if he had made the right decision to leave the Raiders and put his life in the hands of this human. He was still in pain, and the resulting shocks from the roller hitting the ground hadn’t helped, but he just nodded.

They drove for the next ten minutes or so in silence, Wyler simply desiring to put as much distance between the Volge and the Duni. By this time it was late morning and he estimated that they wouldn’t reach Paradise until the late evening, if there weren’t any more delays.

“What you did back at the Arkfall, what did you ... how did you do that?” Chance asked, finally breaking the silence.

“It’s a special gift of Indogene science,” Wyler answered him.

“Oh,” the boy answered. He hadn’t had much to do with the other Votan races, other than the occasionally business interactions his parents had had with them. But knew that both his race and the Indogenes had shared the same planet back in the Votanis system and both felt vastly superior to the other races, though were times where Chance had felt distinctly inferior, especially with interactions of others of his own race.

“What about you?” Wyler asked. “What brought you and your mother to an Overland in the Badlands?”

Chance stared out of the window, not wanting to relive those memories of the attack on their caravan. “My father had some business in Paradise. We’re from the East. He was a merchant, and was doing something with the Earth Republic and the rail line that is being built.” He paused, the memories still strong, even after two years. “All the men in the caravan were killed, including my father. My mother and the other women were taken, along with me.”

“I’m sorry,” Wyler said. “I promise we’ll get back and rescue everyone. We’ll get your mother out.”

Chance didn’t respond, and only continued to stare out of the window, watching the land speed by in between the slats of the armor covering.

“Get some rest, if you can,” Wyler told him. “We still have a ways to go before we get to Paradise.”

Chance wasn’t sure if he could sleep at all, but the loss of blood from his wounds, and the stress of the morning’s events finally caught up with him, and he eventually drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

The roller was nearing the outskirts of Paradise Territory – Wyler’s new home. It seemed it had been far too long that he had been gone and he looked forward to finally getting back. The remainder of the journey had fortunately been an uneventful one, and the sun was just settling below the uneven horizon in the distance. He had just finished some of the hardtack and fruit left over from breakfast and saw Chance was stirring. He nudged the Castithan to get his attention and handed over the small sack that contained the rest of the food so the boy could eat.

“Once we get back, I’ll get you to Eren so she can patch you up properly.” Wyler said. “Then we’ll go see some friends of mine and work out a plan on taking down those Raiders.”

Chance nodded as he devoured the meal. It wasn’t the best, but better than what was usually offered while he was captive, if anything was offered at all. He hadn’t realized how hungry he was until he had smelled the food.

As they were passing one of the outland radio towers, EGO spoke up and said, “I am receiving a transmission from Lawkeeper Cooper from that tower. It sounds like it was recorded, and set to transmit repeatedly. I will put it through.”

The message was weak and full of static, but with a boost from EGO, Wyler was able to make out Cooper’s voice. “This message is for Deputy Lawkeeper James Wyler of Paradise. Wyler, I hope this message gets to you sooner rather than later, but all Hell is breaking loose, I need you back at the ranch pronto.”

“Any idea what’s going on?” Wyler asked.

Chance looked over at him, not sure if he was speaking to him or to the air again.

“I’m trying to intercept any communications that I can,” EGO replied. “The signals I can pick up out here are still weak, but there is nothing else that is telling me what happened.”

“OK, keep trying. We’re still an hour out.” Wyler said.

“Is something wrong?” Chance asked.

Wyler nodded. “Seems that way,” he answered.

Wyler hit the boost again, planning on getting as much speed out of the Duni as he could. It was a long enough trip already, and Cooper’s message troubled him. It was rare that the Lawkeeper ever sounded genuinely worried, so the tone sounded almost down right frantic to Wyler. Whatever was happening back in Paradise, it wasn’t anything good if Cooper felt he had to blast that message out through the Divide to reach him.