

Exchange of Debts
Chapter 3 – I Had a Little Bird

It was dark, and in the distance Wyler could see the lights of the outlying settlements of Paradise ahead of them. Wyler looked over at his companion. Chance had his head cradled up on one arm against the side of the door, asleep. They were almost home. Despite the terraforming, Paradise was still one of the larger territories left in what used to be the United States. It wasn't quite the metropolis that the area used to be, but it was much larger and more populated than what was left of Saint Louis. The map of the San Francisco area had changed, but still would be somewhat recognizable to those who remembered the Bay Area of old. San Francisco, or what was left of it, was now an island, and the ruins of the Golden Gate Bridge marked the only land passage to the former city. It was here that the battle of Defiance took place, and San Francisco laid waste by a massive terraforming explosion during the battle.

To the north, most of the Marin County area was filled with farmland and gulanite mines. The living settlements surrounded the heart of Paradise in the surrounding foothills of Mount Tamalpais and beyond. As Wyler was driving through the outskirts of the New Rafael settlement that was north of Iron Demon Ranch, he noticed that there was no one else on the streets. It wasn't that late to where most of the activities of the day would have wound down, but for not the lights shining through closed curtains and shuttered windows, he would have thought he was driving through a ghost town. As he was nearing Mill Valley Pass which would take them through the mountains just to the East of the Delta bunkers he slowed to a stop and got out of the roller.

The sound and movement awoke Chance from his sleep. "What's going on?"

Wyler looked back at him. "I don't know. Something's not right. Stay here."

He had stopped a few hundred meters before the entrance to the pass began. There was farmland on either side of the dirt road, and up ahead he could see the dim outline of a farmhouse at the edge of the light cast by the Duni's headlights. Wyler turned around to look at the town, and strolled back in that direction.

"Have you been able to contact Cooper, yet?" Wyler asked EGO.

"I have been able to make a connection, but have not received any response."

"What about Top Notch, or Cass?"

"No reply from them, either," EGO replied.

Wyler grimaced and let out a breath of frustration. "It's too damn quiet back there," he said, meaning the settlement. "But there doesn't seem to be anything else out of the ordinary."

"I haven't detected any signs of Raiders or 99ers," EGO replied. "It appears quite ... peaceful."

Wyler turned and started to head back to the roller. "All right, let's just get to the ranch and find out what the hell's going on," he said.

As he was just about to climb back in, EGO spoke up again, "I have detected three life forms in the farmhouse ahead ... but, something is different about them."

"What do you mean different?" Wyler asked.

There was a pause before EGO replied. "The signatures appear to be human, but there is something different about them ... something not right."

"Mutants?" Wyler asked.

Thanks to the terraforming and other Votan technologies used during the war, many of the human soldiers who had fought in the Pale Wars under the Earth Military Coalition banner in Mount Tam had been mutated and their minds warped. They were still human, but twisted and altogether mad. That madness, however, usually kept them confined to the area around Mount Tam and Tranquility. Only rarely did a few wander into Madera or beyond. Certainly not enough to have warranted the concern he heard in Cooper's voice from the radio transmission.

“Not Mutants,” EGO replied, “but they are definitely not normal humans.”

With that, a deep groan came from the farmhouse, followed by a high pitched screech that chilled both Wyler and Chance to the bone.

“What was that?” Chance asked from the roller.

Wyler leaned over and grabbed his sniper rifle from the back of the Duni. He looked at Chance and said, “Stay here.”

Chance just nodded as Wyler closed the door. He was still weak from his injuries, despite having slept most of the way here, but if push came to shove, he could fire up the roller and take off if the need arose.

Wyler chambered a round in the rifle and undid the snap on his leg holster so he could also have quick access to his pistol, as he slowly approached the farmhouse. In the dim light he could see a figure shuffling about on the front porch, but couldn't make out any details. He noticed that the front door was open, and there was no light inside at all.

“Hello,” Wyler called out to the figure on the porch. “I'm Deputy Wyler. Is there anything wrong? Do you need help?”

He saw the figure's head move to look in his direction, but did not receive an answer. Wyler stopped and waited, remaining at a safe enough distance to defend himself if necessary. He felt and heard more than saw the other two figures shuffling about in the darkness beyond the open doorway. The figure on the porch let out a small grunt, then with a speed that surprised Wyler, the figure leaped from the porch at him. Wyler's eyes widened in shock as he realized that the figure's leap would be able to cover the distance he had given himself, and he barely had enough time to raise the rifle to block the blow that came when the figure collided with him. The strength of the figure caught Wyler off guard and he was knocked off his feet, tumbling back towards the roller, losing his grip on the rifle. He heard it clatter to the ground, the force of the impact causing the gun to fire, the bullet traveling off harmlessly into the darkness.

Wyler rolled back to his feet and pulled the pistol from its holster. He backed up past the cone of light given off by roller as the figure also regained its feet. He hoped to draw whatever it was into the light to get a better look at it. The figure let out another, louder grunt and Wyler heard the two from the farmhouse shuffle onto the porch and begin to descend the stairs. Wyler raised his pistol and aimed it at the figure that had attacked him as it shuffled into the light. He drew a sharp breath as he finally got a clear look at what used to be the human farmer. EGO had been right, it was human, but it wasn't normal. Nor did it look like one of the EMC Mutants. The head and face of the creature appeared to be in some sort of decay – the skin was pale, with a faint yellow-green hue. Puss and blood oozed from open blisters on the left side of its face. The creature's clothes were covered in dried patches of the stuff, and Wyler could smell the stench of decay coming from it.

“Stop where you are,” Wyler commanded the creature, but it ignored the order and kept slowly coming towards him. Out of the corner of his eye, Wyler could see the other two approaching at the same steady pace.

“This is your last warning,” Wyler told them. “All of you stop where you are.”

One of the other figures stopped, distracting Wyler momentarily as he looked and saw the creature preparing to make a leap for him. At that moment, the creature that had initially attacked him let out a howl and charged. He was out of time. Wyler dropped and rolled backwards just as the second creature leaped, missing him by inches, but it gave the first creature the opportunity to close the distance and pummel Wyler in the chest, throwing him back and knocking the wind out of him. The force of the blows were much harder than a normal human's should have been. The first creature pounced on top of him and bared its teeth through cracked and oozing lips, moving to tear into Wyler's neck.

The Deputy activated his Overcharge ability, the orange glow surrounding his hands and forearms. He bashed the butt of the pistol into the side of the creature's head with as much force as he could muster. The blow, enhanced by the extra energy imparted by the EGO ability was enough to stun the creature and send it flailing into the dirt road. Before he could get to his feet, the second creature made its own charge, but Wyler was able to raise the pistol and fire a burst into the chest of the creature, knocking it back to the ground where it lay still. He had lost sight of the third creature, but didn't have time to look for it as the first creature recovered from the blow and turned back towards the Deputy. Wyler rolled back into a crouched position to give him enough space and time to take aim and put another half dozen rounds into the chest and head of the first creature.

As he rose to his feet, he heard a shout come from behind him, just in time to feel the blow of the third creature land in the middle of his back, sending him flying to the ground once again. However, he was able to hold onto his pistol and roll on his back just as the creature charged to follow up on its initial attack. It looked smaller than the other two, but was no less powerful. As it leaped towards him, Wyler was able to raise his legs, and catch the creature with his feet, using the momentum to propel the creature up and over his head, sending it tumbling into the grass off to the side of the road. Wyler got unsteadily to his feet and took aim at the mass moving in the darkness ahead, and emptied the clip just as his Overcharge's power expired.

Wyler holstered his pistol and retrieved his sniper rifle and went to examine the bodies of the larger creatures. As he looked down at the second creature, he noticed that it was female. Undoubtedly the first creature was the farmer, and this was his wife. Wyler didn't want to think about what the third, smaller creature was.

"I've been able to analyze their DNA and it appears they are infected with a form of the Irathient Flu," EGO replied.

Wyler just nodded. He was familiar with what was termed as the Irath Flu, thanks to his parents' work with the Votan immigrants in the past. However, he had never seen a result like this come from the disease, which seemed to only have an effect on humans.

"It appears that this is a new mutation of the disease," EGO replied to Wyler's unspoken thoughts.

"We need to get back to Iron Demon, quickly," Wyler said out loud.

He marched back to the roller, and climbed back into the driver's seat.

"What the hell were those things?" Chance asked him, eyes still wide in shock and fear at what he had witnessed from the Duni.

Wyler paused for a moment. "They were human," he said. "But now they're dead."

Chance didn't press for more answers as he saw the Ark hunter staring silently at the two bodies that lay in the middle of the road in front of the roller. He started the vehicle and drove towards the pass that would take them into Madera and on to the Iron Demon Ranch where Cooper, and now he, had made their homes. He drove around the bodies in the road – he would have to send someone to take care of the remains of the family properly after they got back to the ranch. As it was now, he didn't have time to give them the burial they deserved. Chance groaned slightly as the unevenness of the dirt road jostled the roller's passengers and reminded him of the injuries he had received earlier in the day, but they otherwise passed the remainder of the journey in silence.

Wyler pulled into the entrance of the ranch and drove up near the ramshackle house that Cooper called home. He got out and walked to the other side of the roller to help Chance get out of the vehicle. He saw one of the farmhands approaching as he came around the roller.

"Is Cooper here?" Wyler asked the farmhand as Chance stood up with a groan.

The man nodded. "Him and the Indogene just got back a few minutes ago. They're downstairs."

Wylar helped support Chance by putting the boy's good arm around his shoulder. "He's been shot. Can you help me get him to the doc?"

There was a human doctor that stayed on at the ranch, but he didn't have the same kind of tools and equipment that Eren had back at Top Notch, nor did he have much experience working on any Votan except for the occasional Irathient. Wylar planned on making sure Eren would go to help him out, when he went to meet them.

"Will do," the farmhand said.

As the farmhand helped Wylar walk Chance towards one of the barns, the Deputy noticed a few campfires burning at various points around the grounds, all surrounded by white tents that looked like they could fit a half dozen people or so. Near the barn, they saw a group of human children holding hands and dancing around one of the campfires. As they got closer, he could hear them chanting as they hopped along, back and forth in a circle:

"An Irath had a bird
Its name was Enza
The Irath opened the door
And in flew Enza."

"What are they singing?" Chance asked, his curiosity of the human children overtaking the discomfort of his wounds.

Wylar listened to the verse one more time. "It sounds like an old nursery rhyme my parents told me about when I was little. It's very old as I recall, and the original doesn't mention Iraths, naturally."

When they entered the barn, Wylar could see rows of cots set up, every one of them occupied by a human being, some in various states of obvious illness. Many of them were groaning in pain, and occasionally would shout something out of delirium. Once they had passed Chance off to one of the doctor's assistants, Wylar headed back towards Cooper's house.

Wylar went to the right side of the house, towards the open storm cellar doors. He climbed down the ladder that was the only way in or out of the storm cellar which had been repurposed into Cooper's office. Once he reached the bottom, he could hear voices coming from the main room of the cellar. The voices stopped as he hurried towards the makeshift office, his footsteps echoing off of the cinder block walls of the outer room. As he came around the corner into the main room, he saw Eren and Cooper standing next to the table that sat in the center of the office. To the right, in a small alcove was Cooper's desk, with the seven computer monitors adding to the ambience of the two overhead florescent light fixtures. Eren and Cooper were looking in the direction of the outer room, waiting to see who would arrive. A look of relief came over Cooper's face, while Eren's continued to remain stoic.

"Wylar, about God damn time you got back," Cooper said.

"What's the situation, Coop?" Wylar said, approaching the pair.

Before the Lawkeeper could answer, Eren raised her hand showing the injector she held. "Give me your arm," she said.

"What's that?" Wylar asked her, holding out his arm and allowing her to roll up his sleeve.

"Immunization against the disease," she answered.

"I have been immunized," Wylar told her.

Cooper gave him a questioning look as Eren stopped just before the injector had made contact with Wylar's skin. "When?" she asked him.

"When I was kid," Wylar replied. "My parents did a lot of work with Irathients before the war."

Upon hearing that, Eren continued with the process of injecting Wylar with the antidote as she said, "This is a new mutation of the virus. Previous immunizations will not be effective."

As Wylar rolled his sleeve down, he looked at Cooper again, anticipating the answer to his first question.

Cooper nodded in Eren's direction before he spoke. "Thanks to this damn plague, half of Paradise has been turned into a God damn zombie."

"What Lawkeeper Cooper means is that we have had a severe outbreak of a new strain of the Irathient Flu," Eren said as she put the injector back into a small bag that sat on the table. "The antidote can reverse the effects on anyone infected up to stage three. However, once the victim reaches stage four, the effects are irreversible."

"At stage four, the Afflicted become prone to several virulent strains of Votan fungal infections. The symptoms include shutting down most of the higher brain functions, as well as abnormal skin growths, not unlike what was seen in your people many years ago in what you used to term 'Third World Countries.'"

Wyler nodded, and then fell into one of the chairs next to the table, exhaustion starting to creep through his body. "I think I ran into a few of those outside of Mill Valley Pass," he said.

Eren looked at Cooper, a look of concern crossing her face. "If the outer settlements have begun to reach stage four, then we cannot wait any longer. We have to get the synthesizers on-line tonight."

"They're almost ready." Cooper answered her. "Torc's at Diablo now. The E-Rep has a bunch of those Ark hunters from the New Freedom down in San Francisco. I'm going to Bolinas as soon as I debrief Wyler, here."

"I will return to Top Notch so I can coordinate the launches. Contact me immediately if there are any problems," Eren said as she picked up the bag and started towards the way out.

"Before you go, could you stop by and see the doc?" Wyler asked her. "I found a Casty out in the Divide and he's been hurt."

Eren looked at Cooper. "The synthesizers will be ready an hour," he told her.

"Very well then," Eren replied. "I will see what help I can provide."

After she left, Wyler looked up at Cooper, and saw the strain on the Lawkeeper's face. "What's going on?"

Cooper sat in another chair, across from Wyler. "Guess I could ask you the same thing," he said. "But that can wait until we get this mess cleaned up."

"Eren was able to create a version of that antidote that can be inhaled. We've set up refugee camps around Paradise, but we don't have enough manpower to spare to vaccinate every human in Paradise, especially the outer settlements. I've practically had to deputize the rest of you Von Bach Ark hunters just to protect the Iraths from the God damn lynch mobs that formed after this plague broke out."

"Is Cass all right?" Wyler asked, the concern clear in his voice.

Cooper nodded and gestured at the ceiling. "I've got her up in the house. She's fine."

Wyler started to rise, "I should go see her."

Cooper grabbed Wyler's arm and shook his head. "She's not in the mood to talk to anybody right now, and I can't say I blame her."

Wyler settled back down into the chair as Cooper continued with the debriefing.

"We've been building some synthesizers that will fire off rockets that will carry a concentrated form of the vaccine, and spread it over the heavily populated areas. We've got four locations that should cover most of the settlements, and the areas of Paradise that we can't get to. I've got every spare hand I could round up to protect them until they're finished and Eren can launch the rockets. I need you in charge at Kenn Farm."

Wyler sat back and let out a breath. "No rest for the weary, I see."

"There never is," Cooper told him.

Wyler listened to the hum of the monitors behind him for a moment, before asking, "Is this plan going to work?"

Now it was Cooper's turn to sit back in his chair. He looked Wyler dead in the eye, imparting the seriousness of the situation without having to speak it. "I sure as hell hope so," he said. "If we can't contain the plague, Grant has orders to use whatever force is necessary to make sure it doesn't spread beyond Paradise."

"Fantastic," Wyler said sarcastically. "Do I have time to get changed? I must smell like rotting pow meat."

Cooper leaned back, a slight smile breaking across his face. "That's yes on both counts." He stood up and came around to stand next to Wyler. "But make it fast. I need you ready at Kenn Farm, but we don't have any time to spare."

Wyler looked up at him and nodded. "One more thing, once this is over ... like I said, I ran into a family of ... infected at a farmhouse outside the pass."

Cooper saw the look on Wyler's face and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I know how you feel," Cooper said. "But you have to put who those people were out of your mind. Those people were dead the minute they got infected – they're gone and whatever was in their place is no better than a hellbug. You have to remember that, and get the job done at the farm."

Wyler just nodded, and then stood up as Cooper withdrew his hand. "I'll be ready."

Cooper gave a single nod of his head. "Good. I've got to get going to Bolinas. I'll let them know you'll be at the farm shortly."

Cooper headed out of the cellar, leaving Wyler to his own thoughts, the buzz and flickering of the computer monitors and florescent lights all that was left to fill the room. After a minute or so, he too headed for the ladder and made his way out of the cellar. He didn't bother to collect his roller, instead opting to walk to the small shack that had been made as his quarters now that he had become a part of the contingent of Deputy Lawkeepers in Paradise. A couple of the other deputies who also had no family had similar living quarters on the ranch, each built by hand to accommodate a very simplistic communal living community. Wyler's "home" was situated on the far side of the ranch from Cooper's house.

After he reached the shack he called home, he opened the door and headed over to the wooden desk that was set up against the far wall of the main living space, beneath a small window, and turned on the computer terminal that sat on top – one of the small perks of having helped more than a few people around Paradise after the New Freedom had crashed a few months ago. Next to the monitor was an old style computer mouse, a throwback to the days of his youth, and one that he seemed to have developed more of a fondness for the older he got. He moved and clicked the mouse a couple of times to open the music app installed on the computer. As the song he had selected began to play, he drifted back to the cot that served as his bed, which was set along the windowless adjacent wall.

He listened to the first few chords of the old electric guitar that began to spill out of the speakers that sat at either end of the monitor, and stared out of the window above the desk. He was just able to see the full moon as it made its way across the sky, the glittering of the Arkbelt cutting a line across its path. After a few seconds, the vocals of the song he had chosen cut in, and he lay back in the cot, letting the harmony of the song work its way through his tired body, and realized that even after 81 years, The Beatles sounded just as good as they did when he was a kid, listening to his parents' favorite band. It was not without some irony he felt as he watched the moon rising with *In My Life* playing. He took comfort in the thought that though his planet was forever twisted and changed, it was still the same unchanged moon he had looked at countless times while growing up.

As the song came to an end, Wyler closed his eyes and let out a long, deep breath, trying to center his thoughts and let the tension release from his body. He then opened his eyes and rose from the cot, taking a glance at the small gas stove that sat next to the front door. He could feel his stomach grumbling and desiring something more than the fruits and hardtack he had been living off of on the road, but he knew that there wasn't enough time to get a real meal in his belly just yet. Instead, he headed for the open doorway that led to the only other room in the shack that served as his bathroom.

He quickly shed off the dirty and worn clothes he had on and started the shower. The water was fed through a filter that came from one of the wells on the ranch near his shack. Wyler was grateful for some of the small pleasures of home that seemed few and far between in many of the smaller settlements around the Bay Area.

He took a few minutes to rinse off the grime, and once he was finished and dried off, pulled his footlocker from underneath the cot. He opened it and donned the Lawkeeper uniform that had been given to him by Cooper after he had been deputized. Wyler went back to the bathroom where he had left his other clothes in a pile and pulled out the deputy Lawkeeper badge, his pistol, the Hellbug cap, and the data recorders that contained the information and DNA that EGO had downloaded from the Arkfall. He took the latter and stored those away in a small safe that sat next to his desk. He wasn't too worried about someone breaking into his home while he was gone, but wanted to take no chances with those data recorders until he could get them to Eren.

Once he was finished, he left the shack and jogged back to where he had left his roller, in front of Cooper's house. He saw one of the farmhands on the front porch and asked the man to grab spare ammunition for his weapons from Cooper's armory. While he waited, he filled up the Duni's petrol tank with the last of the reserves he had brought with him, and retrieved the Ark-core and other salvage from his backpack. He hurried back to his shack to store the salvage in the safe, and made it back to the roller just as the farmhand returned with several small boxes in hand. Wyler took the spare ammunition, hopped into the roller, and headed out of the entrance to the ranch, making a left onto the main road. He hoped that there wouldn't be too much of an issue getting the synthesizer on-line and ready to spread the cure to Paradise, but he had a gut feeling things were not going to be so easy.

There normally wouldn't be much activity along the road in this area of Madera. Most of the land here was farm or ranch land interspersed with raw terraformed sections dotted with Votan plant life and the odd nest of hellbugs. Even the Raiders seemed to have left the area since the E-REP and VBI Ark hunters from the New Freedom had arrived. Even so, it seemed much deader than usual.

Just a short way down the main road from Iron Demon, Wyler came to an intersection and made a right. An electric sign that hung overhead a few meters down the new road he was on indicated that he was heading in the direction of the North Point and Split Rock mines, as well as the old San Quentin prison. His goal, however, was to head down to the next intersection, past Forbes Hill, and come up to Kenn Farm from the Southwest. It would be the quickest route for him to take. He made the left at the next intersection and as he came around a bend in the road, nearing another intersection, he could see lights and two armored vehicles in the distance, about where the first dirt road leading to Kenn Farm ran off from the highway. There were three such junctions that led to the farm along this stretch of road, but the one that was blocked was the main road that ran through the western part of the farm on through back to the main highway, near Happy Pow Farms.

As he got closer to the roadblock, he slowed and could see several Earth Republic soldiers milling about between the two APCs. One of the soldiers walked towards him with a hand raised, indicating that he should stop his roller. The soldier adjusted his grip on his sub-machine gun as Wyler brought the Duni to a halt and opened the driver side door.

"You're entering a restricted area," the soldier called out as he approached the roller. "What's your business ..." he hesitated as he came around to the driver side and saw Wyler's uniform. "Are you Deputy Wyler?" the soldier asked as he examined Wyler's face in the interior light of the Duni.

"Yes," Wyler answered as he pulled out his ID from his belt pouch and handed it to the soldier.

"Very good," the soldier replied, handing the ID back after he had looked at it. "They're expecting you at the farm. You can go on ahead. Report to Lieutenant Burke when you get to the farmhouse."

"Thanks," Wyler answered, securing his ID once again. He nodded towards the roadblock in front of him. "Do you have all the roads blocked off?"

The soldier nodded. "We've had a couple of patrols run into Raiders in the area. We've secured the perimeter to protect the vaccine until the synthesizers are finished."

"OK, carry on," Wyler said.

The soldier stepped back as Wyler shut the door, and called to the others to allow the Duni through. Wyler eased his way through the roadblock and continued up the dirt path towards the farm. After a few hundred meters, he came up on a tower light with a petro powered generator on his left, and saw the fence that stood between part of the crop fields and the road. Further on ahead he saw another tower light on the right and beyond that the main barn. On the left side of the road, across from the barn was the farmhouse and storage shed. Sitting between the road and the farmhouse, was a contraption that Wyler had not seen before, and something that looked like it may have been better suited in an E-REP camp rather than a farm. Three stabilizing legs jutted out from the launch tubes which were attached to a five foot high central chamber which housed the power supply. Beneath the central chamber was a pair of treads which provided propulsion for the synthesizer.

There were three machinists working on the actual machine with another three or four Earth Republic soldiers standing watch. On the front porch of the farmhouse were another half dozen E-REP soldiers. The front door was open and there was a constant flow of soldiers as well as other machinists going in and out. Around both sides, and behind the farmhouse were parked the various rollers and runners of the Ark hunters who were also on site. Wyler pulled his roller around to the other side of the farmhouse from where the synthesizer was stationed and got out, taking his weapons, backpack and spare ammunition with him. He checked the magazines of his three weapons to ensure they were full, and then filled his belt pouches with the spare magazines for each. In his backpack, he placed the remaining ammunition along with a half dozen of Clusternova grenades. He slung the backpack onto his back and the rifles over his shoulders, and headed towards the farmhouse porch.

"I'm Deputy Wyler. I was told to see Sergeant Burke," Wyler told one of the soldiers.

"Inside," the man replied, nodding towards the open doorway.

Wyler entered after letting two more machinists pass through. When he entered, he saw a wooden folding table set up in the middle of the main room, which had two small petrol table lamps on each side, illuminating the surface, which was covered by papers and data recorders. Behind the table sat a man in an E-REP uniform who looked to be in his mid-twenties. He was looking over a sheet of blueprints for one of the synthesizers, one corner of which was still in the grasp of a Liberata. The squat Votan pointed to part of the drawing and said something to the soldier, who then nodded and waved the Liberata off to another table that was set against the side wall behind him. There, a human machinist sat at a computer terminal with a large Votan Sensoth looking over his shoulder. The Liberata went over and handed the blueprints to the Sensoth, with some words of instruction before scurrying towards the door, past Wyler, and out of the farmhouse.

"Lieutenant Burke?" Wyler asked as he approached the main table.

The soldier broke his gaze away from what looked to be an E-REP communique on the table to look at Wyler. "Yes. Deputy Wyler I presume?"

Wyler nodded and held out his hand in greeting. Burke rose from the table and shook Wyler's hand in a firm, dry grip. "Glad to have you here. I understand you and some of those other Ark hunters we have out there have done a lot to help out the New Freedom after she went down." Burke came around the table and indicated that Wyler should follow him out of the farmhouse.

"Were you on the New Freedom?" Wyler asked him as he left the house and headed towards the main barn.

Burke shook his head. "No, I was part of a Division under the command of Colonel Marsh. They sent a Company here as backup to Captain Grant after the strato went down."

As they passed the synthesizer located near the farmhouse, Wyler asked, "Where are we at with getting this thing on-line?"

“We have about 20 minutes left until the launch time. We will have all three units ready to fire by then,” Burke answered.

“Three?”

“The second unit is by the equipment shed,” Burke answered pointing to their left. “The third unit is on the other side of the barn.”

Burke continued to debrief Wyler as they entered the barn and headed towards the ladder that would take them to the upper level. “We have all main roads leading here blocked off, and have a dozen Earth Republic troops on site. We have another twenty of the VBI Ark hunters here working on the units and to provide additional protection.”

They reached the second level and Burke showed Wyler the synthesizer situated below the large opening in the barn. Wyler could see three machinists working on the unit and another three Ark hunters keeping watch nearby. He caught a glance of the face of one of the machinists by the synthesizer as she moved around the device into the light that shone from light tower set up in the small field further beyond the barn. She had shoulder length straight jet black hair, and seemed familiar to Wyler. She took no notice of the two men looking down from the barn, as she continued to work frantically on attaching several more parts to the central power chamber of the synthesizer.

Wyler turned his attention back to Burke. “I was told that Raiders have been seen in the area.”

Burke nodded. “With trying to quarantine the Iraths and put down the Afflicted, we’ve had our hands full, so the Raiders have been taking advantage of the chaos where they can.”

Almost before the words had left Burke’s mouth, another E-REP soldier appeared at the top of the ladder and jogged over to join the two men. “We’ve just got a message from Alpha Squad – they have been engaged by a group of Raiders at the North blockade.”

“Alert the rest of the Squads. Have everyone get to their positions and watch for diggers,” Burke told the soldier. He turned to Wyler. “I need to you coordinate with the Ark hunters. Some of them are less than ... amiable to the Earth Republic.”

Wyler nodded, “Understood.”

The two men descended and Burke headed back to the farmhouse while Wyler went around and began organizing the Ark hunters who weren’t working on the synthesizers. He sent several who had the ability to act as snipers to the second level of the barn. The others he had move into support positions for the Earth Republic Platoon. After he had finished giving instructions to the Ark hunter guards at the synthesizer near the barn, he approached the machinist he had noticed earlier. The other two she had been working with had moved on to the one near the equipment shed.

“Excuse me,” Wyler said as he neared her.

“What do you need? I’m busy,” she replied without looking up from the synthesizer.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Wyler told her. “But you look familiar, are you a member of Children of Gallifrey?”

With that she stopped and looked up at Wyler. There was a slight tilt of her head, something that only another Ark hunter with an EGO device would have noticed. After a moment, she straightened up and said, “Yes. Name’s Shanna Dumont. Are you James Wyler?”

Wyler nodded and held out a hand. “Pleasure to meet you officially, now.”

“Likewise,” she replied. She held up her hands to show him the oil and grime from working on the synthesizer. “I’d shake, but ...”

“Not a problem,” Wyler said, withdrawing his hand. “Have you seen Daeminos or Sinnafae lately?”

Shanna shook her head. “Not since the outbreak. Last I heard they were helping organize the quarantine camp near the Consulate.”

Wyler nodded, his lips growing tight. Daeminos was the clan leader. Sinnafae was another member, and though she refused an officer title, still opted to perform many of the duties of such. Both

were irathient, so Wyler could only imagine what they might have gone through after people realized that the plague was an outbreak of the Irath Flu. Fortunately, they were also both VBI Ark hunters and could handle their own so he at least needn't worry about their well-being.

"How's it going with these things?" Wyler asked, indicating the synthesizer.

Shanna looked back at the device, a look of frustration crossing her face. "Not the best work we've done, but considering the circumstances, they should work as planned. We'll be cutting it close, but they should be ready in another ten minutes."

"OK, good. I'll let you get back to work, then," Wyler said.

Just as she was about to reply, Wyler heard his EGO in his head, and from Shanna's reaction, her EGO had interrupted at the same moment.

"I'm detecting several large objects moving underground and heading this way. Could be Raiders," EGO said.

After a moment, they could feel a slight tremor in the ground, which began to grow stronger, and then a shout of alarm was sounded from near the farmhouse.

"Looks like trouble," Wyler said as he headed towards the farmhouse.

"Just keep them off us. We need time to finish getting these on-line," Shanna called after him.

Wyler caught up with Burke in front of the farmhouse and began following the Lieutenant up the main road.

"We lost contact with Alpha Squad to the North," Burke told him.

The two men stopped a few dozen meters up the road as one of the Raider diggers burst through the ground, dirt and rock pouring off the large tracks and piling around the single metal hatch that provided access to the vehicle. A half dozen other soldiers and Ark hunters came up behind them, ready to shoot down anything that came out of the hatch.

A shout from behind caught the attention of the group. Burke turned to the group behind them and indicated they were not to take their eyes off the digger. Wyler and Burke took a few steps back down the road to see what the new commotion was about and could see another digger break the surface about a hundred or so meters back down the main road. Another shout in the distance to the East, past the barn, indicated that another digger had broken the surface there as well. Wyler looked up at the barn and could see the sharpshooters reposition themselves to have the best vantage points against the three diggers.

They heard the hatch of the first digger fall open with a clang and thud. "I am detecting Votan life forms and more Afflicted inside that digger," EGO said.

Having received the same message, the Ark hunters around Burke and Wyler activated their Overcharge ability, illuminating the ground around the group in a soft orange glow. After another moment, a squat form charged from the digger, shouting for help. A burst from one of the Ark hunters silenced the Liberata Raider. As the body hit the ground a screech that Wyler had heard before came from the dark interior of the digger, just before the darkness erupted in a mass of flailing bodies. Interspersed with the Afflicted Raiders were a few more Liberata and one Sensoth. The Votan outlaws seemed more interested in escaping rather than attacking, but they were cut down in the hail of bullets that followed nonetheless. The sounds of gunfire coming from the barn and other areas of the farm gave indication that the same thing was happening at the other diggers.

Wyler's EGO broke through the noise and said, "I am detecting more Afflicted life forms coming this way – from all directions."

Knowing that his fellow Ark hunters also received the same message, and trusting their skills and knowledge of what to do, Wyler turned to Burke and told him the news as well. Just as he finished, another one of the E-REP soldiers ran up to them.

"Sir, we have lost communication with all the roadblock squads."

“What the hell is going on?” Burke said in anger. “How can these things take out five squads of trained soldiers?”

The gunfire drew to a close as the Afflicted and Votan Raiders from the diggers were finished off. There were a few shots here and there as the Ark hunters and Earth Republic soldiers made sure there were no survivors, but in the distance could be heard the screams and groans of the other Afflicted that were approaching.

“They’re stronger than they look,” Wyler told him. “Eren said the disease affected the higher brain functions, so they must be acting on instinct. They’re coming to get the tech in the synthesizers. Without medical assistance every Raider group in the area could have become infected and are heading this way.”

Burke turned back to the soldier. “Order the men to take up position around the synthesizers. We need them protected at all costs.”

The Ark hunters were already moving to do the same. Wyler headed for the synthesizer that his fellow clan member had been working on while Burke hoisted the SMG that was slung around his body in his grip and released the safety.

“Here they come!” one of the Ark hunters in the barn shouted and let off a round from her sniper rifle. It was followed by a screech from the darkness from where she had aimed.

Shanna was still working on the synthesizer when Wyler approached and asked, “How much more time before they’re ready?”

She was working on a small datapad with a touchscreen that was hooked up to the main power chamber. “Five more minutes for this one. The other two are about the same.”

Wyler heard a sound in the field near them, but saw nothing in the light. “That gives us two minutes to spare,” he said under his breath, as the night exploded with the sound of gunfire once again.

Shanna looked up from the datapad briefly, something behind Wyler catching her eye. “Shtako, Tremblers,” she said. “Don’t let them get close. They have a nasty habit of exploding.”

Wyler turned and looked down the road that ran between the field and the equipment shed. Three large, lumbering figures had just come into the faint light that bled off in that direction from the light tower in the field. This form of Afflicted was different than what Wyler had thus far seen. It was larger than the typical human, in part because of the greyish fungal growth that encompassed much of the upper body. This was interspersed with pinkish, bulbous protrusions. The Tremblers had no clothing to speak of, and what could be seen of the face was highlighted by a white splotch, which could be part of the creature’s skull. There were more protrusions on the top of the head. One arm appeared to end in two sharp talons while the other was vastly overgrown with the fungus into a large club-like protuberance with another claw at the end.

“There’s an unusual amount of methane gas built up in those Afflicted,” EGO told Wyler. “That growth also appears much stronger than normal skin – it’s almost like armor.”

It looked like the Tremblers hadn’t focused in on the two Ark hunters yet, so Wyler turned back to Shanna while still keeping an eye on the trio of Afflicted, and readied his assault rifle. “Shanna, send your decoy down the road.”

“What?” Shanna asked, looking up from the datapad again.

“I need those things distracted. I don’t think I can take out all three before they get to us.”

Shanna stood up and took a step towards the road as she released the decoy. An exact image of the machinist began to run down the road into the darkness beyond. The decoy did its job as the movement caught the attention of the three Tremblers and they began to shamble after it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw more Afflicted approaching from the field, including another Tumbler. Those however became the focus of the Ark hunters who had stationed themselves up in the barn, and the Earth Republic soldiers who had taken up positions near the corrugated metal fence that separated the field from the dirt path where the synthesizer was located.

Wylar activated Overcharge and let loose on one of the three Tremblers. He could see bits of the fungal growth chip off the creature at the rounds made contact, but even with the extra energy, it didn't look like they were penetrating enough to do much harm. The Tumbler turned to identify the source of the attack while the other two remain focused on Shanna's decoy. As it turned, one of the pink protrusions came into the line of Wylar's attack. As the rounds connected, the deputy could see the Tumbler stagger, visibly affected by the hits.

"Those protrusions are weaker than the rest of the Afflicted's body," EGO told him. "Concentrate on those areas."

Wylar quickly reloaded his weapon and began to fire once again, focusing his attack on the Tumbler's weak spot. The protrusion popped in a mist of red blood, causing the creature to let out a scream of agony. Wylar continued to fire and saw the Tumbler stagger back, then began to shake uncontrollably. After a couple of seconds, the creature disintegrated in an explosion of grey and red mist, body parts flying in all directions for several meters.

By that time, Shanna's decoy had faded and the remaining two Tremblers had turned and began their shuffle towards the synthesizer and the Ark hunters. The E-REP soldiers and other Ark hunters in the barn were still busy dealing with the group of Afflicted in the field, so it was up to Wylar to hold off the pair before they could attack. He dropped to a knee, placing the assault rifle on the ground. It would be a few seconds before the EGO ability recharged. He pulled the sniper rifle off of his shoulder and took aim at one of the protrusions on the second Tumbler's head. The shot knocked the creature back, visibly stunning it. He unloaded two more rounds into another spot in the creature's torso, again the force of the shots keeping it from advancing any further. It was another five shots before Wylar was able to penetrate the skin far enough to trigger a reaction with the methane contained within the creature's body and it met the same grisly end that the first Tumbler had suffered.

Unfortunately, the time spent dispatching the second creature gave the last one enough time to get dangerously close to the synthesizer. With a sudden burst of speed that took Wylar by surprise, the creature bounded towards the Ark hunters and the device, while letting out a screech of anger.

"Look out," he shouted to Shanna just as the creature reached them and took a huge swing with its clubbed arm.

Wylar was able to duck most of the blow, but the creature caught enough of his shoulder to send him staggering back into Shanna. One of the E-REP soldiers was alerted by his shout and began to fire his SMG at the Tumbler. Without the extra power provided by an EGO, however, most of the rounds did only superficial damage and served only to draw the creature's attention on to him. It charged once more and swung its clubbed arm, connecting with the side of the soldier's head with a sickening crunch, sending the body flying back into the metal fence. The remaining soldiers began to fire upon the creature, but also with little effect except for those shots that managed to strike the creature's vulnerable areas.

"Are you all right?" Wylar asked Shanna as the two picked themselves up off the ground.

"Yeah," Shanna replied, pushing him out of the way to get back to working on the device. "I just need one more minute."

The Tumbler took down three more Earth Republic soldiers before one of the Ark hunters from the barn jumped down and charged at the creature in a burst of speed. Thanks to the extra momentum provided by the hunter's Blur ability, he was able to knock the Tumbler back slightly towards the opening in the fence that led to the field. He charged one more time, pushing the creature back again before it was able to take a swing, knocking the Ark hunter back into the side of the barn. The remaining Ark hunters then opened up on the creature, their Overcharge ability adding extra force to the rounds which tore the Tumbler apart and ignited the gas within, finishing it in an explosion of flame.

Wylar looked up at the Ark hunters. One of them looked back down and gave a thumbs up sign while saying, "All clear on this side."

Wyler nodded and walked over to the Ark hunter who had been hit by the Trembler. The man slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position, leaning his back against the side of the barn. He looked at Wyler and attempted a smile. "I'll be fine, give me a minute."

Wyler gave him a pat on the shoulder and turned back to Shanna. She stood up and detached the datapad from the synthesizer.

"Done," she told him. She then pulled out a hailer and spoke into it, "Unit three is on-line."

"That's the last one," the voice said from the other end. After a second, in a lower tone they heard another voice come over the hailer, "Eren, all units are on-line and ready to launch."

Shanna didn't wait to hear if there was a reply and put the hailer back in her pocket. She then went to the side of the barn and picked up a light machine gun that had been leaning up against the wall. She released the safety and looked at Wyler, who had finished collecting his assault rifle from the ground.

"Let's get this done," she said.

The remaining Earth Republic soldiers ran to give support to the other two synthesizer groups and the Ark hunters disappeared back into the barn to do the same.

Shanna and Wyler were heading towards the farmhouse when their EGOs spoke up again, "There's something coming this way, and it's not small."

Several seconds later, cries of alarm sounded from the soldiers and Ark hunters who were protecting the first synthesizer near the house.

"Hulker!" Wyler heard someone shout. "It's a Goddamn Hulker!" Shanna and Wyler looked at each other, a shiver making its way down both their spines.

More than just the Earth itself had been changed after the Votan had arrived. In fact, much was changing long before they had even reached the planet. The fleet of Arks was first detected by NASA Astronomers in early 2000. As a result, several world governments secretly united and began planning a response to the potential alien threat. One of those was to form the Earth Military Coalition. One of the first projects the EMC undertook was the Bioman Project. It was an experiment in genetic engineering to form a race of super-soldiers in order to combat whatever superior technology the aliens might possess. Von Bach Industries oversaw most of the project which took nearly 20 years to complete and perfect the Biomen. Made from human DNA, but more than human, Biomen were created to be extremely resilient and obedient. However, as with any experimental project there were failures.

While the Biomen were the perfection of years of genetic engineering, the Hulkers were the abomination of those experiments. They were much larger than either the typical human or the taller Bioman, most often reaching heights of 12 feet or more. They were masses of pure flesh and muscle, the width of their chests coming in at nearly half of their height. Where the Biomen were created to maintain a level of intelligence that would permit the same functioning as a normal human, Hulkers lacked such intelligence. They were able to obey orders and carry out simple commands, but for all their bulk and power they were little better than the Afflicted that had been threatening Paradise of late. And they had one fatal weakness.

Despite the advances achieved with the genetic experiments in creating a body that was more resilient to pain and damage, when the Hulkers were created, that same resilience failed to carry over to the head and the upper portion of their right arm and shoulder. While they still could survive damage to that particular region, many of the Hulkers were formed without a proper crown to their skulls, thus resulting in the top of the brain being vulnerable to damage, if not outright being exposed through the flesh at the top of their heads. As a result all Hulkers were provided with reinforced armored helmets. After the success of the Biomen, the usability of the Hulkers was diminished. Many were outright destroyed, but there were also many who were kept alive to be used as servants and heavy lifters. Now, most had been appropriated by various Raider clans to use as a veritable tank in their attacks.

Wylar and Shanna rounded the corner of the barn, and were stopped in their tracks. The Hulker was still a hundred or so meters down the road. Its slow, lumbering walk and bulk belied a speed that was to be reckoned with. Its skin was a gray pallor in color and it bore no clothing except for the ragged military pants that covered its waist and upper thighs. White athletic bandages were wrapped around its hands and forearms, and were stained with dirt and blood. Wrapped cross-wise around its chest was a wide canvas strap, to which was attached three EMC bombs that hung by the creature's right hip. On the top of its head was the familiar green armored helmet which was secured by a thick metal cable chinstrap. When the creature had entered the light from the second tower, Wylar could see something unusual on the creature's upper right arm and shoulder – where the weakest points of the body were. Though not fully human, but still borne of human DNA, it became clear that the Hulker too had become infected with the Irathient Flu.

Burke came up beside the two Ark hunters and stared at the creature as it continued to advance. "Jesus Christ," he said when he saw the explosives swinging from the Hulker's waist. "One of those is enough to take out a synthesizer, and half my men."

"We still have over two minutes left before launch," Shanna added grimly.

Wylar turned to the Lieutenant. "Burke, pull your men back to the equipment shed." There were still sounds of gunfire coming from that area as the last of the Afflicted made their march upon the small hill just beyond the synthesizer there. "It's up to us to take this thing down."

Burke gave the order and the Earth Republic soldiers re-grouped to take on the more manageable task of finishing off the Afflicted while the Ark hunters on the ground gathered together around Wylar and Shanna, while the remaining eight in the barn took up positions on the second floor, rifles aimed and ready for the order to fire. Wylar ordered the six of the hunters who had shorter range shotguns to cloak and take up positions on either side of the road. For all the others, no order was necessary to know that the only way they were going to take this beast down was with added firepower.

"Ready?" Wylar asked, looking at the group around him. All nodded in return. "Then let's light him up!"

In unison, the remaining Ark hunters activated Overcharge and unleashed their fury into the Hulker. The sharpshooters in the barn began to let a steady hail of gunfire rain down upon the creature's weak point and helmet, hoping to break off the chin strap and expose the creature's brain. The Hulker howled in pain and fury and reached for one of the explosives at its side. At that moment the cloaked hunters opened fire from their positions along the road, causing the creature to hesitate in a moment of confusion. Once it located the new source of attacks, it grabbed a bomb and threw it at the three who were positioned to the left of the road.

The Ark hunters had anticipated the move however, and once they saw the Hulker grab the bomb, stopped shooting and once again disappeared into the darkness. The bomb exploded between a pair of trees, setting them ablaze, but the Ark hunters had already escaped. The other three Ark hunters positioned near the fence and a stack of hay bales continued to pelt the Hulker with buckshot. Howling again, the creature leaped at them, and nearly landed on top of them. The force of the impact was enough to knock the three of them back, stunning them briefly. The Hulker used that moment to take another bomb and hurl it at the Ark hunters stationed in the barn. All but two had time enough to get away from the point of impact, but while six survived, the force of the blast and the resultant shrapnel of metal and wood left them severely injured.

"Close in!" Wylar yelled at the Ark hunters around him. "But be prepared to move, we need him to use that last bomb."

As Wylar and the remaining five Ark hunters, including Shanna, began to move down the road towards the Hulker, the other six hunters took up position behind the creature and resumed firing. This served to only enrage the creature even more. It spun around and charged at the shotgun wielding Ark hunters. The speed at which it moved, and their proximity to the creature did not allow them enough

time to get out of the way. One was trampled under the creature's oversized feet, his ribcage collapsing under the weight of the Hulker as it stomped over him. The others were knocked to the ground and didn't have enough time to recover before the creature turned and charged again, crushing two more of the hunters, and knocking the remaining three unconscious. The Hulker then turned its attention back to the final six Ark hunters.

By that time, their Overcharge ability had recharged, but the group continued to remain in close formation and fire normally, hoping to entice the Hulker to use its last bomb. It obliged, not being able to resist such a tempting target. As the explosive left its hand, the Ark hunters used Blur to split up and escape the area of impact. The bomb exploded harmlessly in the middle of the road. Having nothing left but its own body as a weapon, the Hulker charged at the nearest Ark hunter again, but this time, with the extra speed afforded by the EGO device, the hunter was able to easily avoid the creature's advance. The Hulker turned and looked to make another charge, but the force of effort it had already expended and the injury already suffered from the attacks had weakened the creature. Instead of charging, it collapsed to its knees, head hanging low in exhaustion.

Wyler pointed at the Hulker's head and shouted, "Someone ... the helmet ... now!"

Shanna was closest to the creature when it had collapsed, and using the extra speed was able to charge and jump at the Hulker, grabbing the helmet as she passed, and ripping it from the creature's head.

"Time to finish this son of a bitch," Wyler said quietly as he took aim with the assault rifle and began to empty the clip into the soft, hairless flesh that covered the Hulker's brain.

The other Ark hunters took up positions around the front of the Hulker and did the same. The blows staggered the creature, blood spouting from the wounds it received. It grunted in pain and attempted to stand back up, but the death blow was dealt. The creature wobbled, its body still waiting for signals to come from a brain that had been torn to shreds. After a moment, it fell to the ground in an earth-shaking heap. A few seconds after that, the sound of rockets firing broke into the night and Wyler watched as the synthesizer near the house sent its payload into the sky.

The surviving Ark hunters checked on their unconscious brethren while Wyler walked towards the farmhouse, Shanna trailing behind him. Lieutenant Burke appeared from around the corner of the barn and met Wyler in front of the house.

"Job well done, Deputy" Burke told Wyler, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Thanks," Wyler answered quietly.

"All of you Ark hunters deserve praise," Burke said, looking at Shanna. "Without your assistance this mission would have failed."

"We're all in this together," Shanna told him. "What about the other locations?"

"All have reported a successful launch. Now we just have to hope that Indogene's plan actually works," Burke answered. He looked back at Wyler. "I've got to start filing my report. Good luck, and thank you."

Wyler just nodded as Burke left and entered the farmhouse. Shanna came up and stood in front of him as he looked around and watched the E-REP soldiers begin to assist the wounded and collect the bodies of the fallen.

"Everything OK?" she asked him.

Wyler broke his gaze away from the E-REP soldiers carrying down the injured Ark hunters from second floor of the barn and looked at Shanna with a blank stare.

"I just need to go home," he said and slowly walked away, heading towards his roller.