**CHAPTER 5: THE HUNT**

I was up early. I ordered breakfast to the room for two but when I left my room found a note from Lina that just read, “I will not be late. –Lina” Well no point in wasting food, I ate both meals, dressed and headed out. I wanted to purchase some light combat armor today and also stop in to see Marie. Light combat armor was generally security guards and rent-a-cop types. It didn't restrict movement, relatively light weight and offered complete body protection as well as a closed environment for operating in space. The life support was only good for 6 hours but could be upgraded. It cost about 7500 credits but was well worth it. My new fame apparently helped as I was instantly recognized and I managed to get the brand new suit custom fit for 7000. It was flat black and had a copy of my sheriff star on the left chest and sheriff on the back. They did this for free and actually didn't tell me about it until it came out of the back room. I smiled and thanked them even though I was opposed to the graphics.

The fitting and finishing took all morning. It was a little after lunch time when I made my way into Vlad’s Bistro. The place was nice. A bakery on the left side flanked a deli on the right and beverage stand was directly ahead. The high ceiling main room had three dozen tables scattered about. Half were full with patrons. Marie was working behind the bakery counter pulling some loafs out of the oven. I waited patiently till she noticed me. It took 10 minutes, just as I was starting to feel foolish. Her face lit in a smile and she told a young man to take over as she tossed her gloves on the counter and came to great me, “My white knight has come to see me. I saw you on the news feed and know you brought my parents killers to justice.“ She gave me a peck on the check. “Wait here I will get you the best sandwich in the house.” She rushed off to the deli. Said something to a large man behind the counter, he looked at me and nodded. He ignored the line and immediately went to work slicing meat. The aromas in this place were fantastic, baking bread, brewing coffee, and cooking deli meats. Marie brought over my sandwich and it was huge. She sat down with me at a table, “How long will you be in the city?”

I was studying the mound of meat between the loaves of bread. I was a massive pastrami sandwich. It probably weighed 5 pounds total. My gaze lifted to Marie. “I will be leaving in a few hours. I just wanted to drop in before I left.” She looked disappointed.

“Jed, things have been going really well for me in the last two weeks. I own a third of the bistro, the bakery section. I invested most of my money in it but it is already paying off. I also met someone. We just started seeing each other but,” she reached out and touched my hand, “if you are ever in town don't hesitate to call on me. I owe you so much.” We chatted for thirty minutes and I managed to finish half the sandwich and had the remainder wrapped up to go. Marie gave me another peck on the cheek and whispered in my ear, “Next time you are in the city lets spend some quality time together.”

This encounter answered a lot of questions I had in regards to my status with Marie and I was very tempted to reschedule my departure for the next shuttle, which was a day later. Instead I went to a bar by the spaceport and had a few expensive beers. At 5:00pm I walked out to pad C and there waiting for me was Lina. She had a 1.75 meter sniper rifle slung over her shoulder and two large bags at her feet. She gave me a half smile, turned and boarded the passenger shuttle as I approached. I followed, getting a weird sensation that I might not be 100% in control of this relationship.

I was trapped in the passenger cabin with seven other people for the trip back. No window to look out of. I thought a lot about Marie on the flight back. The blonde bear sitting next to me was definitely more attractive and more my type but I felt a strong connection to Marie. I even briefly thought about making her my next companion. But that would be foolish. Who needs a baker on a ship?

During the trip back Lina let me know what she had purchased. She purchased her sniper rifle, 500 rounds, a used combat armor chest plate and some minor focused charges for breaching doors. She was very happy with herself, especially the chest piece that was remolded for her figure. I complimented her on it and fell asleep for the majority of the flight.

The shuttle entering the atmosphere woke me. The landing was smooth and I was the first to exit the craft and looked down the long central road in Mycell. The orange glow of the sun created unique shadows. My sheriff station sat four buildings down on the right and after taking a deep breath I stepped down the ramp and went home.

It was mid-afternoon and I dropped my large bag in the storage chest in my room and fell into the bed. The door was open and Ellie was standing in the hallway with her gear. I pointed to the door across the hall with the ‘Deputy’ written on it. She nodded, went in and closed the door softly.

I spent the next two hours on my back working with Athena, taping on my holo display and going through messages. Lots of messages contained congratulations from NPCs and thank yous for eliminating the Bonner family. Ellie had sent me a message that she found a job in a small town a few hundred miles away and was moving there to start over. I went to my real world messages and there were six of them unread. Five were from Katrine Severt. I opened them and read through them all. The first was an apology letter from forcing me into this game. The message was a massive book explaining how she didn't want to lose me and how she had fought with the insurance company to get me a new body but it was futile. The second letter from her was an update on my parents and how they handled the funeral. The third letter was Katrine informing me she was going to join the game by getting the full VR implant. The fourth letter said she was in the FORGOTTEN REALM but couldn't find me. Apparently my privacy setting prevented her from locating me in ALLSPACE. She had remembered our fellow firefighters talk about playing in the FORGOTTEN REALM and she assumed I would have selected it. The last message was from four days ago. It was another apology letter, asking me not to be mad at her and to contact her. It gave some information where she was adventuring so we could meet up. I composed a letter saying she made the right choice in sending me into to this VR. I let her know that I was in the ALLSPACE REALM and doing well. I sent the letter off and 5 minutes later got one back.

Jed! I am so happy to hear from you. After work today I will get an account on the ALLSPACE server and we can meet up. Where are you located?

I sent my location to her and began to wonder if she was feeling guilty or lonely. It didn't matter right now. I had things to do. I checked my estate, 6,568 credits generated so far. I reset the counter and asked the Kommish family if they needed anything. Able said they were doing well and he was working on sifting soil to save as many apple trees as he could. Apparently these were the only known apple trees in 24 light years! He said if I could purchase an enclosed greenhouse an acre in size it would really help. The fruit the trees were bearing was horrible and local animals pillaged them before they ripened. He really needed to control everything in an enclosed space. A greenhouse that size was 5,000 credits. I only had a little over 6,000 to my name. Money ran through my fingers like water! I told Able he could sell one of the hover cycles to purchase the greenhouse. The value was about equal. Of course he said we needed another specialized drone to manage the apple trees and specialized soil preparation machine, another 5,800 credits! Athena chimed in and said that apples would be a luxury good and would bring a steep profit margin. Fine, I was thinking of my future retirement anyway! I had Athena make the purchase mumbling to myself about having to eat cardboard because I was so poor. I heard some noise downstairs in the kitchen and went to explore. Lina was making dinner. I never noticed her leave her room and that kind of spooked me since my door had been open the entire time.

It was late and she informed me she had explored the town and was settling in just fine. Dinner was some white fish dish with some green and yellow vegetables I didn't recognize. I did learn Athena was not a good cook and made secret plans to finish my pastrami sandwich in the privacy of my room tonight. Athena mentioned there was only one hover cycle out front and we would have to ride tandem to get anywhere. I couldn't tell if this was a good thing or a bad thing from her tone. I still had 57 days before my skill became ‘active’ so I let her know I would ride pillion without betraying the knowledge of my current ineptitude. I let her know that in two days time we would be heading out to Gunther’s ranch to work on his problem and sent her the information.

Mission Available: Trouble at the Ranch, find out who has been stealing Rancher Gunther’s cattle, reward: 500 experience, one uncommon item, 500 credits, this mission should be done in a group.

It was the last mission I had from my initial login and since it was a group mission I had held off. Now I felt more confortable in gameplay and had some back up. It was unlikely the Bonner’s were responsible as the ranch was outside their territory and I figured it would have been completed after I had wiped the family out. Lina suggested I purchase a hunting drone to help track whatever was taking the cattle. Unfortunately I did not have the needed 7,000 credits on hand. I waved off her comment noting doing it ourselves would be good practice. After the meal we went to our rooms and I slept soundly.

The next day I awoke to a priority message, Sheriff Jed Knight you have been promoted to planetary sheriff on Bruin IV. All local law enforcement officers report to you. Your monthly salary will be increased to 500 credits. A new hover truck will added to your inventory – arrival 2 days.

Huh? Guess I will not be given the option to turn it down. There was nothing in the forums about the position of ‘planetary sheriff’ but my I did notice my progress bar toward ‘Sheriff III’ had moved almost to completion with the notification. The hover truck would also solve the tandem hover cycle problem. I was a little upset about this. My available mission board also lit up. Twenty-seven new missions popped up at various locations on the planet. Most were requests for equipment and help from the eighteen regional sheriffs who now reported to me. I quickly learned the old planetary sheriff was put into early retirement. There had been some questions concerning his budget allocations. The budget covered wages and maintenance for the 18 stations. An additional discretionary allowance of 5000 a month was given to the planetary sheriff. The current balance was 27,350. Which was only due to the fact that a ‘bonus’ 20,000 credit deposit was made for me by the governor of Wellington. The equipment requests varied, one sheriff had his hover cycle stolen 3 months ago and wanted a replacement. Another sheriff had crashed his vehicle in a pursuit and needed a replacement. There were seven requests for small arms as well. To honor all the equipment requests would cost 12,324 credits. I approved them all and 346 experience points were added to my total for completing ‘missions’. The only other major request was for a central detention area. Going through the specifics with Athena the facility would cost 20,000, hold up to 50 prisoners, and also require a staff of 19 which would reduce my discretionary monthly allowance by 1900. Five of the remaining 18 ‘requests’ were prisoner transport. Basically all criminals were prosecuted on Barstow, which seemed a waste of resources to me. It seemed the legislators did not want to live on Bruin IV due to the lower standard of living. The remaining 13 requests asked for assistance in handling problems every thing from small drug rings to a missing puppy. Also the message from Katrine had reached me. She had spawned on Earth and was figuring out how to get out to me. She promised she would eventually meet me. Her note had lots of hints of frustration she was experiencing with this game. I told her we would begin a daily correspondence and I was also planning to head to Earth once I raised enough funds and noted it would be a few months.

I spent two days going over the missions and set a priority list after I finished with missing cattle mission. My brand new hover truck arrived. It was armored and had room in the back for 12 prisoners. The cab had a wide front seat and large back seat, I guessed it had room to comfortably fit 5 men in gear. I decided to do a tour of the towns to meet the sheriffs and pick up the 7 prisoners; two sheriffs had two people in custody. This trip ended up taking 9 days even though the hover truck could do 300 kph over rough terrain and water. I think Lina was happy to be doing something. We spent a lot of time talking in the cab and our relationship grew stronger and it was kept strictly professional. She wanted to make her mark on the galaxy and hitching to my star for now seemed to be a good idea. There were no problems as we finally pulled into the spaceport to transfer all 7 prisoners to a single transport headed for Wellington. I recognized the two guards from my last trip and talked to them briefly as Lina loaded the convicts inside and restrained them. My experience went up 350 and a message flashed: Profession Leveled: Sheriff III, 250 experience, +1 stat point, +1 to Administration. The stat point was assigned to intelligence again. There were two more levels in the sheriff profession and a side goal was to complete them before I got off planet especially since level V gave another bonus companion.

Lina treated me to dinner at the restaurant in town. I could tell all the driving over the last week and half had drained her. I told her to take tomorrow off and meet me the following day at Gunther’s ranch. I would rent a small jeep and take it out there in the morning. She of course insisted on coming with me but eventually gave in to my plan. My plan was to just get a head start by talking to Gunther and driving the perimeter of the ranch in daylight. All the cattle had disappeared at night.

It was 72 miles to his ranch and a bumpy two hour ride in the open top jeep I rented in town. He also practiced polygamy and had three wives and twelve children. Apparently there were no dominant religious foundations in this system. He was middle aged and spoke with an Irish twang in his voice. I had radioed ahead to let him know I was coming and as I pulled up to his massive three story residence he was out front smoking on a cigar waiting. I could hear kids playing and dogs barking in the backyard, which appeared fenced in from my viewpoint. Gunther was taller than me with short blonde hair.

As soon as I was out of the jeep he spoke in a not so polite tone, “Sheriff, nice of you to come by. I assume this is in regards to my request for help 5 weeks ago?” Ouch. I didn't realize it was that long ago. “I have lost six more cattle since then.” He was rubbing in my inadequacies. “I suppose you will want a tour of the property. We can take your jeep or my truck, your choice.” He walked past me and entered the jeep’s passenger side making the decision for me.

Well, ok then. “Sounds good Mr. Gunther.” I slide back into the drivers seat and kicked the engine in. Gunther talked as he directed me with his hands. Each of his 2,800 head of cattle had radio chips in them to prevent theft and find them in case of an emergency. They were free range and the local wildlife generally left them alone. The cattle that disappeared just stopped transmitting and there was no carcass anywhere near where the signal had disappeared. In fact none of the eight missing cattle had ever been found. It took four hours to loop his property and he showed me his remaining cattle. I also learned that one cattle was disappearing every five days. This made me think a moderate sized rouge element was stealing them for food. Also tonight was the fifth day so it was likely a cattle would be taken tonight. We finished the loop and he invited me in for dinner, which I accepted.

He had one massive dining room with a single long table and bench seating. All 17 of us sat down with Gunther and myself at the heads. It was a good thing as there was not much elbow room along the lengths. Diner conversation was lively with many conversations going on at once. We had old-fashioned hamburgers and the meat tasted a little blander than I remember in real life. One of wives explained the cattle ate mostly indigenous grass, which made the meat have an earthy flavor. The burger was still very good with the baked potato and green beans. One of the younger ones asked me, “Sheriff are you gonna save dads cattle?”

I was expecting this question from one of the wives but already had a planned response, “I am going out tonight to try to apprehend the thieves. I will do my best and if I don't succeed my deputy will come and help me tomorrow. We will not quite until your dads cattle are safe.” The young man seemed satisfied as did Gunther at the other end who nodded in appreciation of my response. Now I just had to deliver.

Gunther gave me the codes to the implants to track the cattle. I was able to overlay the signals on a map on my display. The cattle were huddled in six groups over 8 square miles. I chose an optimal point to respond to any disappearing signal and hoped into my jeep and headed out. The point I choose was a small crest and the reflection of the orange glow reflecting of the two circling moons lit the fields below in an eerie glow. I could make out a few of the cattle shifting in their standing sleep. I set Athena to wake me if a signal disappeared hoped into the back seat put up my feet pulled by cowboy hat over my eyes and went to sleep.

Jed a cattle’s signal has disappeared 1.2 miles northwest of your current position. The message came both inside my head and was flashing on my display. I was alert almost instantly and hoping into the front seat and spinning all wheels on the drive jeep. A had driven fairly slowly up to the position where I was on lookout, now I was flying at around 70 km an hour toward the missing cattle. I swore that I had not bothered to put on my seat belt and was bouncing all over the place struggling to keep my foot on the gas. My skill in ground vehicles controlled my actions to prevent me from a serious accident. But skill can only do so much. The unfamiliar terrain yielded to a steep five-foot slope, with my speed I was airborne, I noticed the orange outline of rock as everything went into slow motion. The front of the jeep caught the rock and flung it into a flip. Fortunately the open top jeep flung me out into open air. Flying was extremely pleasurable even though I could not see anything. My disorientation didn't let me see the ground coming. I slammed and bounced and slide and bounced again. I lost track of how many times I hit the ground. Some brush slowed my inertia from the crash. You have taken 38 points of damage from a crash. Your right arm will be unusable for 38 minutes due to injury. Well I could see a bone sticking out my forearm. Pain was intense but I was still able to act normally since I had set my pain settings at 75%.

I struggled to stand and felt the bruising all over my body. I shuffled over to the overturned jeep and grabbed my rucksack. I oriented myself toward where the cattle had disappeared, 400 yards. I made best possible speed in my condition. Three minutes after the crash I was at the site where the cow had gone missing. I fumbled with my good arm in the rucksack for my infrared goggles. I set them to max and spun scanning the area. I could see the herd about 300 yards away but all the shapes matched a bovine outline. I looked in the distance for the fleeing thieves but could see nothing. I scanned more slowly still nothing than my screen flashed, investigate skill has detected a slight thermal imprint in the grass.

I could see it now that it was pointed out. I large wheeled, no, not wheeled since it was so wide. Probably some type of hover vehicle had crushed the grass and slightly warmed the earth. The trail would go cold quickly in this night air. I decided, probably foolishly, to follow at my best possible speed. As I ran it brought back memories of my youth running through Cherokee National Forrest. I lost track of time and found my ideal pace without tiring. I was sweating heavily and knew my pace was pretty intense and thought about turning off the ‘sweat’ controls but this actually made me feel alive so I did not do it. Fortunately this was a game and I didn't need water or rest. A message flashed, you have been running for 3 continuous hours, you have earned the free skill book: Athletics, Endurance. Cool, I was definitely going to learn that skill even though it was outside my character progression since I enjoyed running. The thermal marks had become very feint and I knew the vehicle was quite far ahead of me. I had Athena overlay the path I had travelled so far on my display. It was a straight line. I had Athena project the path for a hundred miles and hopped it would not be that far. After another 2 hours of running the thermal trail had disappeared but the path I had set seemed to be true. I kept running. A new message appeared, you have been running for 8 continuous hours, you have earned the bonus skill: Athletics, Endurance. Whoa! That was not in any of the forums. Getting a free skill for just an eight-hour investment? I could probably sell this information for a pretty penny when I had time. I was also able to slightly increase my own personal pace.

I was getting hungry and pulled out those nasty ration bars. I only had two bottles of some fizzy drink, which I drank. I actually had no thirst but still the drink felt good going down. As I ran I noticed my personal comm was out of the 50 km range. I should of called Lina and let her know my fate. Damn it. I would be sure to upgrade that comm to the 2000km model when I got back. I was realizing it was going to be a long walk/run back unless these thieves had some communication device. I also thought if I was killed I would just respawn in my sheriff’s bedroom so no harm in continuing. So I kept running, determined to deal with problem tonight. The sun rose and strangely I was at peace running along the terrain. The daylight made the goggles useless so they went back in the bag bouncing on my back. The planet’s sights were quite stunning and the smells varied and pleasant.

I lost myself in the run, never fatiguing because of the pace I had set and the fact this was just a game. In the distance I noticed a mountain directly in my path, would I go over it or was this my destination. A shear rock face about 25 meters high and 150 meters in either direction grew as I approached. My path was centered on the rock face. I guessed I was heading for a cave, probably a rouge base. I was in the open, exposed. I could see flattened grasses heading in a straight line toward the cliff along the path I had projected. At least I was in the right place even if I was probably going to be ambushed and killed. I walked the last two km watching intensely for movement. As I reached the stone face I could locate no openings. I touched the aged stone and was shocked as my hand passed through before making contact with something as arm from the elbow forward appeared embedded in the stone. I moved to the left dragging my hand across the surface. It was smooth and seamless. I stuck my head into the stone and was met by blackness. It made sense if the hologram was so intense it blocked light. I tried the infrared / thermo goggles and no change to the settings reveled anything but pitch blackness in the illusion. It was smooth and ‘felt’ metallic. It was probably a base. I was expecting someone to come out and capture me or kill me at any second.

I walked the down the false stone face. Its overall dimensions were roughly 280 meters long, 25 meters high and 70 meters wide. There was a space between the mountain an the illusion but I was not ready to brave the darkness just yet. I went back to where my ‘road’ went into the structure and felt nothing but smoothness. I sat down and had Athena check the forums. The Feyr race had some technology similar to this but nothing this realistic on the forums. To all scans this was a rock in the middle of nowhere on a planet in the middle of nowhere. The sun was starting to set again and I couldn't believe I used all my daylight. I imagined Lina finding the wrecked jeep and thinking the worst. I marked the location an my map and started walking away. I heard a decompressing sound behind me. Before I could turn my body was paralyzed and I fell face forward into the dirt. My mind quickly lost consciousness.