

Exchange of Debts
Chapter 4 – Morning Interludes

Wylar was jolted out of sleep by a loud bang followed by the crashing clang of metal hitting the wooden floor. Instinctively he reached for the pistol he had left on the small table next to the head of the cot, as he tried to get his wits about him. The waking nightmare of fighting off the Afflicted at Kenn Farm had turned into sleeping nightmares after his return to the ranch. He was still dressed in the short-sleeved shirt and pants of his Deputy uniform, but the outer armored vest and boots were in a pile on the floor near the cot. He grabbed the pistol and sat up, swinging his legs to the floor as his eyes came into focus on the room.

“Well, glad to see my favorite Ark hunter has finally gotten back to town,” said a familiar voice.

A smile crossed Wylar’s face and he relaxed, leaning back against the wall and lowering the pistol to the cot next to him. “Hello, Cass.”

The female Irathient was bending over to pick up a small cast iron skillet that had fallen to the floor and caused the noise that awoke Wylar. In one hand was a six pack of beer, or at least the three remaining cans of the six pack. After Cass tossed the skillet back on to the stove, she made her way to the desk and plunked down the cans next to the computer keyboard. Wylar could see where the other three cans had gone, and why her entrance had been such a noisy affair. Wylar had no doubt that the three cans had been preceded by a full six pack. She was wearing her usual faded lavender shirt that tended to show more skin than it covered, in addition to barely covering the black bra dotted with turquoise sequins. A thin leather belt from which hung a sheathed dagger wrapped around her bare waist above a green sash. She had on her tan leather shin chaps over her dark grey pants which also covered the tops of her short black boots.

“I saved a few for you for the celebration,” Cass said as she half sat, half fell into the chair in front of the desk. “It looks like that Indogene’s plan worked.”

Wylar closed his eyes and sighed in relief, leaning his head back against the wall. “Thank all the Gods for that,” he said quietly.

Cass let out a belch before removing one of the three cans from the plastic rings that bound them together and opening it up and taking a long swig. “Drink up, this Irathient haigyi is finally free!”

Wylar thought a moment, and then said, “Normally I would say it’s a bit too early, but after the last few days, I could use a good belt.”

He put the pistol back on the table and patted the tops of his thighs to indicate she should come over and join him. As Cass fell into his lap, Wylar took the can from her and down a couple of swallows before handing it back and wrapping his arms around her waist. It wasn’t her usual brew of choice, unless scrip was a little short – it was a much inferior brand than he had been used to since teaming up with the local Ark Hunter after his initial, fiery, arrival in Paradise. He smiled and began to examine the white markings on her face as if seeing them for the first time.

Cass finished off the beer and tossed the can on the floor, letting out another deep belch. After a moment, she said “OK, what is it? You’re kinda freaking me out, man.”

Wylar realized he was still had the grin on his face and had been staring at her face much longer than he should have been. He looked into her golden eyes as he said, “I almost forgot how beautiful you were.”

Cass let out a snort of laughter. “Woah, you must have been out in the Badlands for too long.”

Wylar shook his head slightly and followed with, “But it does feel good to be home. I did miss having you around.”

Cass draped her arms over Wylar’s shoulders and brought her face in close to Wylar’s. He could smell the alcohol on her breath. “Aww, that’s sweet of you,” she said, and then paused. “I missed you too. Business has been slow since you’ve been gone.”

They moved in closer, their lips almost brushing just before Cass pulled back and got up off Wyler's lap, heading back towards the desk. "Time for another one," she said, opening up another can.

Wyler let out a sigh of frustration. "All right Cass, it's time for you to level with me."

Cass had the reputation in Paradise of having some loose morals, along with some loose clothing. However, Wyler hadn't been counted in the list of her many indiscretions. He knew it wasn't because of their racial differences as Cass usually wasn't all that discriminating. He did know the attraction was there, however, and this wasn't the first time that seemed to stop herself from going any further. He hadn't pressed her on the prior occasions, but at this point, he had to know what was behind her motivations.

She finished half of the beer before she looked at him and answered. "We got a good thing going here with our business arrangement," she began. "I've made more scrip in the last few months than I have for a long time."

"You don't think that would change, do you?" Wyler challenged her.

Cass was normally composed and self-confident, but Wyler could see her starting to be uncomfortable and unsure of herself. "No, but ... shtako."

She came back over and sat down next to Wyler, downing the rest of the beer in a couple of gulps before continuing. "You know I'm not the domesticated type. Not that that's what you need anyway." She looked Wyler in the eye and almost seemed to sober up as she continued on. "You've been one hell of a friend to me, but you know I'm not that type of girl to settle down. What you do need is someone a lot better than me.

"Besides, that Top Notch chick has got the hots for you, and I don't want her sending that Indogene after me – she kinda creeps me out."

Wyler leaned back and gave Cass a look. "Rosa?" Not that it came as any real surprise, nor would it be a shock for him to admit that he did feel an attraction towards the Top Notch proprietor.

Cass nodded. "A girl knows these things. Besides, she's been driving Coop crazy asking about you ever since you took off."

"I don't know Cass. A person's past is a hard thing to get over, and she certainly had it rougher than most deserve." He took a deep sigh, memories of his own past flashing across his mind. "I've got my own ghosts to battle too."

"Which is why she needs you as much as you need her," Cass told him.

Wyler grunted and raised a hand to brush back a bit of hair from the front of Cass' face. "You know something, Cass? You don't give yourself enough credit. We probably know each other better than we know ourselves, sometimes."

"Thanks, Ark Hunter," she replied, her face breaking into her usual smile that had come to be one of Wyler's favorites.

They sat in silence, both just leaning back against the wall and enjoying the momentary silence, peppered only by the occasional shout or sound of farm equipment coming from the outside. After a few moments, Wyler stood up and headed over to the desk.

"I guess we shouldn't let this go to waste," he said, indicating the last can of beer. "But first, I did bring you back a present or two from the Divide."

He knelt down next to the desk and opened the safe. He glanced at the three data recorders, realizing where his first trip of the day needed to be, after having a debriefing with Cooper and Rynn. He then pulled out a small canvas bag in which he had put the Ark-core and the rest of the salvage he had taken from the Arkfall in the Storm Divide. He quickly removed the Ark-core, making sure to keep it hidden as he tossed the bag to Cass, who remained sitting on the cot. He stood and grabbed up the last can of beer and turned to face Cass, keeping the core hidden in his other hand behind his back. Cass emptied the contents of the bag onto the cot and began to pick through the debris, mentally calculating the value of each as she looked it over.

She shrugged her shoulders as she finished picking over the pile and looked up at Wyler saying, "We got a couple hundred scrip here. At least it's something."

Wyler feigned a hurt expression on his face. "You don't sound very enthused." Cass was about to reply when he tossed her the Ark-core and said, "How about his then?"

Cass caught the core and her eyes widened as she realized what it was after a moment. "Ho-lee shit!" she exclaimed. She looked up at Wyler, shocked expression still on her face. "Is this what I think it is?"

Wyler nodded as he cracked open the tab on the beer and took a swig, strolling over to stand in front of her. "Still fully functional, too."

"Damn, I think I just had an orgasm," Cass said, looking back down at the core as she ran her fingers over the device in her hands.

"Happy to oblige," Wyler said, taking another gulp of the beer. He reached down and took the core from Cass. She stood as he held it up to examine it while offering the rest of the beer for her to finish. "This will pay for the next year's worth of the finest Irathient Ale, I think."

Cass gave a snort of derision. "A hell of a lot more than that," she said. She downed the rest of the beer, letting the can drop to the floor as she draped her arms around his shoulders like she had done earlier. Wyler tossed the core onto the cot with the rest of the salvage and wrapped his arms around Cass' waist, pulling her in close.

"Ark Hunter, you're the best damn partner a girl could have," Cass said.

Wyler smiled and said, "Thanks."

He then leaned forward and kissed her hard on the lips. This time she didn't pull away. One of her hands grasped the back of his neck while the other ran up the back of his head, into his hair, pulling their bodies even closer as her tongue darted into his mouth. After about a minute they disengaged, Cass gasping slightly for breath.

"Damn, BJ, I take back everything I just said."

"I'll keep that in mind if things don't work out with Rosa," Wyler replied, turning up a corner of his mouth in a mischievous half-grin. It was one of Cass' favorites, which made her all the more annoyed at this particular moment.

"Shtako, I should have kept my mouth shut for once," Cass said, a hurt look crossing her face.

"Oh, come now my dear. You know you will always have a special place in my heart," Wyler said reaching for his hailer that was resting on the table next to the pistol. "But at any rate, we have a busy day ahead of both of us. I have to go to Top Notch, after having a talk with Cooper and Rynn, and you need to take care of our special package."

As Wyler called Cooper to arrange the debriefing, Cass gathered up the Ark salvage, including the core, and placed everything back into the bag, while mumbling something about needing a special place in bed at that moment.

"Well, enough time for a shower, then back to work," Wyler said. He put a hand against Cass' cheek, rubbing it gently with his thumb. "I'm glad you're the one who found me in that escape pod," he said, remembering back to the New Freedom crash.

"Me too," Cass said, holding up the bag.

Wyler smiled. "Take care. I'll see you later."

Cass watched as Wyler headed off towards the bathroom and saw him getting ready for his shower. She took a step towards the door, and then stopped, taking a look at the bag in her hand.

"Aww, hell," she said before tossing the bag back on the cot. She strode to the bathroom while pulling her shirt off over her head, and letting it drop to the floor.

Now that it was daylight, Wyler could see the extent to which the ranch had been turned into a refugee camp, as he crossed the compound heading towards Cooper's house. Nearly every unused open space was filled with tents and people bustling about, getting their morning chores done. He was wearing a spare deputy uniform, having his left the other in a large white canvas bag along with the rest of the traveling attire he had used outside of his door. A group of the ranch hand wives helped the little Iron Demon community out by volunteering as the laundry service. As he passed by a campfire where a couple of the wives were cooking up sausage and eggs he could feel a grumble in his stomach and realized he was starving.

He sauntered on over and joined the small group of men and women around the campfire for some breakfast and small talk for a few minutes. He remembered he also wanted to check on Chance, to see how the Castithan youth had made out with the assistance from Eren, but that would have to wait until later. As he resumed his journey, he scanned the area around Cooper's house to see if he could spot the roller that Rynn had appropriated from the Badlands and continued to use around Paradise. It was with little surprise that there was no sign of the vehicle.

As Wyler descended into the basement, he could hear Cooper's voice, followed by a tinny response that came from a hailer, but one that was easily recognizable as Torc's. From what he could hear, it sounded like the Sensoth was finishing a debriefing on the events at the Diablo Refinery, and then mentioned something about receiving the special shipment he was expecting.

Cooper eyed Wyler as he entered the room and spoke into the hailer, interrupting Torc mid-sentence. "Copy that on the package. I'll meet up with you at Headlands to go over the details."

There was a pause on the other end, after which Torc replied, "All right, I guess I'll see you later then."

Cooper cut the connection and nodded to his deputy. "Wyler," he said in greeting. "I hear you had your hands full at the farm."

"You could say that," Wyler replied, the images still fresh in his mind. He plopped himself down in one of the chairs by the table, and Cooper took a seat opposite him.

"Did Cass come see you?" Cooper asked him.

Wyler couldn't help but cracking a smile. "You could say that." Cooper gave him a look, but didn't press for details. "She said the synthesizers did the trick."

The Lawkeeper pushed around some of the paperwork he had on the table and nodded. "Eren's been getting reports from around the area that the plague is starting to be contained. Now, why don't you tell me about this Casty you picked up in the Badlands."

Wyler took a breath and began to relate the details of his journey and the Arkfall, but decided to leave out the details he uncovered about the Volge until he had a chance to talk to Eren. After he had finished, and began relating his encounter with Nolan and Irisa back in Defiance, Rynn marched into the room. She still wore the tan jumpsuit from her imprisonment, but had "modified" so that the top became a cutoff shirt, showing the black leather underbust corset that covered her midriff. Though faded, the words Defiance Jail still showed in black ink on the back of the outer shirt. She had a deep red sash wrapped around her waist, covering the top of the jumpsuit pants. Over this was a double black belt from which hung a kukri knife. The ensemble was finished off with knee high black leather boots. She had her hair pulled up behind her head in a style reminiscent of a century Old Earth style called the beehive. Stray strands that were accented with colored thread and beads dangled around her face, one in particular over a vicious scar that marred the left side of her face, running straight down from her forehead to her cheek below her eye.

"What do you want?" she asked gruffly. She had the thick accent indicative of Irathients who had not spent much time among humans and only spent enough effort for the inevitable necessary communication.

Wyler motioned for her to take the unoccupied seat at the table, but she ignored the offer, preferring to remain standing where she was. He sighed and sat back in his chair. "Rynn, you really need to learn to relax. We are your friends after all."

Cooper shot him a glance which he decided to ignore. While Rynn showed no signs of letting the tension in her body go, she moved swiftly to take the seat that Wyler had previously offered.

"Thank you," the deputy said. "I see you managed to come out of this outbreak no worse for the wear."

"Yes," Rynn replied in her challenging tone. "Too bad many of you humans can't say the same."

Wyler ignored the taunt. Cooper shifted in his seat, his patience for the Irathient vagabond clearly reaching its limits.

"At least I am able to bring some good news back from Defiance," the deputy continued.

"So they've agreed to hand me over to you?" Rynn asked him. The disdain was evident in her voice and face.

Unfazed, Wyler nodded and continued. "Mayor Rosewater and Ara will be working to draft the official request to the Regional Governor as well."

Cooper grunted while Rynn let out a snort of derision. "You don't expect the Governor to approve the request, do you?" Cooper asked Wyler.

The deputy shook his head. "I do not. Not only that, but I fully expect that once he receives the request, he will order Captain Grant to take Rynn into custody and have her shipped off to E-Rep HQ."

"So all your little trip across the Storm Divide did was make me a sitting target for the Earth Republic," Rynn said, anger creeping into her voice.

Wyler remained silent for a moment while he turned his focus from Cooper back to her. "Yes ... and no."

There was silence while both Rynn and Cooper waited for Wyler to continue. When he didn't, Rynn crossed her arms and let out a sigh of frustration, while Cooper said, "Don't keep us in suspense. If you knew that was going to happen, what do you plan to do now?"

"Despite what Grant may think or believe personally, he's a soldier and will follow orders," Wyler began.

"No shit," Cooper interjected.

Wyler continued without missing a beat. "However, after I have a little chat with him, he'll report to his superiors that Rynn has gone to ground, and he will need to search for her whereabouts, and that it will take some time."

This time Cooper crossed his arms. "You really think it will be that easy?" The look on his face told Wyler that he thought the deputy thought a little too highly about his powers of persuasion.

Wyler shrugged. "Well, not *that* easy. Grant may be a good soldier, but he's also a reasonable man, and not entirely a fan of some of the E-Rep brass. He'll follow this order like any other, but he'll see reason enough not to put that high a priority on getting it done any time soon."

"That's a dangerous game you are playing," Rynn said. "At some point the Earth Republic will want results and your Captain Grant will have to follow through, no matter how reasonable he is."

Cooper nodded. "Rynn's right, you're going to put him in a bad position."

"Understood," Wyler replied. "However, it should buy me the time I need."

"Time for what?" Cooper asked.

"To stir up a hornet's nest in the E-Rep to see what they are really after in Defiance."

Cooper rolled his eyes. "Christ, you're crazier than those EMC leftovers in Mount Tam."

"Maybe," Wyler replied. "But I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that the E-Rep doesn't start another war, nor find a way to commit Votan genocide."

"Why do you care so much?" Rynn asked.

“Because that’s the way I was raised,” Wyler answered, leaning forward and looking Rynn dead in the eye. “And, I am of the firm belief that there is no reason that our people can’t share this mess of a planet and actually live together in Peace.”

“What makes you think you can do anything to stop them?” Cooper asked. “Those who try to oppose the Earth Republic usually come to a messy end – when there’s anything left to find at all.”

Wyler looked at him. “Maybe so. But I am one man with the right friends in the right places.” He held Cooper’s gaze for a second longer before turning to Rynn to include her in that statement.

“Besides,” he said, turning back to Cooper, “the Defiant Few managed to change the course of a war by one small act.”

Cooper gave a slight shake of his head. “Yeah, I guess you aren’t the only crazy bastard around,” he said.

“What am I supposed to do in the mean time?” Rynn asked the deputy.

Wyler gave a slight smile. “Try to lay low and stay out of trouble.”

This time it was Rynn who smiled and leaned towards him as she said, “Where’s the fun in that?” She pushed herself up off the table and stood before the two Lawkeepers, the smile disappearing. “However, I will try to do as you ask. For now. Can I go now?”

Wyler nodded and Rynn spun on her heel and marched out of the room.

Cooper let out a sigh of frustration. “Goddamn Nolan, still leaving me to deal with his mess.”

Wyler looked at him, but the Lawkeeper didn’t elaborate on that statement. Instead, he turned to Wyler and said, “I sure as hell hope you know what you’re doing. The last thing we need is the E-Rep coming down on us.”

“Me too,” Wyler said, then seeing the look on Cooper’s face added, “Don’t worry too much – it pays to have friends in high places.”

“Must be some damn incredible friends you got there,” Cooper replied.

Wyler only smiled, and then stood up. “I have to head over to Top Notch and run some stuff by Eren.”

Cooper looked up at him. “Is that all?”

Wyler knew there was more to that question. “Well ... no, I suppose not.”

Cooper leaned back in his chair and suddenly took on the air of a disapproving father. “Rosa’s a good kid. Anyone does anything to hurt her and they’ll have to answer to me.”

“Understood,” Wyler answered.

As he turned and started heading out of the room, Cooper rose and followed along-side of him.

“You know, I don’t hand out Deputy Badges lightly,” The Lawkeeper said as they approached the ladder which lead to the way out of the basement. “I did some digging on you. I found some interesting stuff, but nothing that makes me feel any easier about these friends you have in the Earth Republic.”

“My mother managed to make a few contacts while the E-Rep was forming. They believed in what she was doing ... enough to put themselves on the line when we need them.”

Cooper grunted. “Well, before these contacts of yours get into any more danger and before I have a legion of E-Rep soldiers coming down on us, I want to know exactly how you are going to get Grant to ignore this order you’re sure is coming.”

“You mean aside from the favor he owes Cass and me for saving his son’s life?” Wyler asked him.

The look on Cooper’s face told him that he would need more than that, as would Captain Grant. Wyler knew that fact as well. He leaned against the concrete wall, gathering his thoughts for a moment before speaking.

“You know something? Humans have spent their entire existence on this planet killing one another. We got pretty good at it by the time the Votan showed up. I guess it was only a matter of time before we tried killing them too.”

“What’s your point?” Cooper interrupted him.

Wylar didn’t answer immediately, but only nodded absently, it seemed his mind had wandered off to the past for a brief second or two before he pulled himself back. “Grant’s a soldier, like you and Nolan were; like Torc was. All those wars in our history were usually a result of a few bloodthirsty people forcing the rest of the world to fight for them. There have been a lot of heroes in those times – most of them weren’t bloodthirsty.” He gave Cooper a hard look in the eye. “Yosemite was a turning point, I think. The good people of this world learned from that. Unfortunately, there are still a few too many bloodthirsty people out there who don’t give a rat’s ass.”

Cooper’s face seemed to soften a bit. Memories of his own whispered across his mind – ones he was all too willing to try and forget. But despite that, he felt that there was more behind his deputy’s words.

Wylar continued on, “Like the Defiant Few, Grant isn’t bloodthirsty. If ignoring an order means saving more lives down the road, then he’ll do it.”

“And the bad E-Rep wants blood,” Cooper said, almost to himself.

Wylar nodded. “More than that, I’m afraid. We seem bound to let history repeat itself over and over again.”

“Then you and your friends had better be very careful.”

Wylar didn’t respond. He simply gave Cooper a look as if to say that it really didn’t matter how careful they tried to be from here on out. There were things the Earth Republic wanted, and nothing was going to stand in their way for long.

The sun glinted off of the large communications array dish that crowned the structure known as Top Notch Toolworks. Top Notch was located on a tall rock island in what was formally known as Richardson Bay that dominated the Eastern part of Marin. Originally a robotics factory prior to the start of the Pale Wars, the factory was eventually abandoned then taken over by Amelio Rodriguez and his daughter Rosa following the Battle of Defiance. Together, they formed Top Notch to supply the Bay area with various machine parts and repair services. The re-purposed factory dominated the skyline and was only accessible via a metal causeway that wound its way from the mainland up several hundred feet in the air to a small open garage area.

As he approached the entrance to the causeway, off the main road, he noticed Rosa’s pink Duni Shetarru parked next to the start of the ramp. Normally, she kept it parked at the top of the ramp, in the open garage, along with the roller that Eren used, which was nowhere to be seen. He pulled his blue Duni up next to the pink one, stepping out, and proceeded to trek up the causeway to the top. When he reached the end of the causeway, he discovered the reason why the roller wasn’t parked in its normal spot. Along the walls on both his left and right were a row of cots separated by curtained privacy screens. Next to each cot was a medical array and small storage cabinets. The cots were empty, but Wylar had no doubt that up until recently they had been used to care for those who had contracted the Irath Flu. Wylar continued on and took the ramp on his right that lead up to a walkway and more ramps that wound around the outside of the factory.

After the third ramp, Wylar followed the walkway to his left and entered an open bulkhead door that lead to the various workshops and living quarters in the heart of the building. The interior corridor also continued to wind its way up, past several closed bulkheads until it opened up in a large open work space with a high ceiling. A metal spiral staircase located near the left corner of the room lead to an overhanging walkway that ran along the back wall and was used for storage of various parts and tools. Hanging from the ceiling were several florescent light fixtures that provided the room’s illumination, and a mobile of sorts that was comprised of bits of scrap metal of various colors. In the front right corner of the room was a long metal “L” shaped table attached to the walls which was sparse except for a couple of computer screens and some scanning equipment.

Rosa occupied her usual position behind a long metal workbench that jutted out from the wall. Above the end of the bench that was attached to the wall was a large screen upon which was a digitized schematic of a Dark Matter monolith. Behind Rosa, attached to the back wall, was another table illuminated by five additional screens of varying sizes. Rosa was busy working on what appeared to be some type of servo motor and paused to reach into one of the drawers that lined her side of the workbench to pull out another tool, then went back to work on the motor.

Rosa's jet black hair was pulled back into a ponytail which fell over her right shoulder, but wasn't long enough to interfere with her work. She wore a sleeveless white and gray shirt that was spotted with grease and grime. Over that she had a tool harness that held some of her finer tools for more delicate work. Covering her left hand and forearm was an orange and black machinist's glove. Visible on her upper arm was a flaming skull tattoo. Her other arm was bare except for a white glove on her hand and a flower tattoo that covered much of her forearm.

She continued her work, seemingly oblivious to Wyler's presence as he entered the room and approached the workbench, but the Deputy knew that the sensors placed along the causeway and walkway would have long alerted her of a visitor.

"Hey Rosa," Wyler said as he stopped in front of the workbench and gazed down at the servo motor.

Rosa continued working and didn't look up. After a moment she replied with a quiet "Deputy." It was the kind of reception he had been expecting, so in the hopes of keeping the mood light, Wyler said, "Deputy? No need to be so formal, we are friends after all."

This time Rosa did stop and looked Wyler dead in the eye. "Friends? Friends at least come to say goodbye when they decide to take off across half the Goddamn country."

Wyler felt sufficiently humbled and looked down at the table, avoiding the fiery stare leveled at him. "Yeah ... about that. All I can say is that I'm sorry."

"You should be," was the harsh response.

Wyler looked back up and could see the heat in her face. Her brown eyes challenged him to try and wiggle his way out of the situation. Instead he chose to focus on the scar that ran down across her right cheek to her upper lip. It was a memento from a 99er named Joe Teach who also took the life of her father.

"You're a very caring person, Rosa," Wyler started. "I can't imagine what it must be like for you to worry about your friends."

The look on Rosa's face told Wyler that though she didn't quite know what to expect him to say, it still wasn't quite that. She chose to remain silent however, and let him continue.

"I never really had the opportunity to make too many friends when I was a kid and pretty much have been used to doing my own thing. I guess I'm still getting used to having someone else besides me worry about my wellbeing."

He leaned in towards Rosa, locking his gaze with hers. "I'm glad that I have you to worry about me now." A slight smile crossed his lips as he said, "I'll try to make sure you have to worry a bit less."

The corner of her eyes narrowed and it seemed she was doing her utmost to stay made at him, but what she really wanted to do was return his smile.

She managed to hold it back though as she said, "You damn well better, or ... I'll deal with you myself."

She turned to grab some other components from the side of the table next to the wall. Wyler could swear it was to keep him from seeing the smile she had been trying so hard to hold back. As she turned back to continue working on the motor, he came around to stand next to her, one finger on his left hand tracing the ink of the flower tattoo.

"In that case, let me make it up to you. I have to meet with Grant down in Frisco, but when I get back, how about I treat you to a home-made dinner. I know a killer recipe for Pow Mignon."

She looked up at him, this time not hiding the smile. "In that case, I'll let you live ... for now. But it had better be damn good."

Wyler breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief, causing Rosa's smile to widen. "Deal. But before I head off again, is Eren around? I have some data I wanted to look at."

Rosa shook her head, then turned and headed for the table with the monitors behind her. "She's gone to the outer settlements to check on the progress of the cure." She tapped on the keyboard, bringing up some additional schematics on two of the screens in front of her, and then turned to look at him.

"Want me to take a look? What is it?" She asked.

Wyler came up next to her, not saying anything for a second or two as he gazed at the Monolith schematics on the screens. "Ah, it's nothing that important. It can wait until I get back."

He was about to turn and head out of the shop when he noticed the annoyed look returning to her face. "Trust me," he said, then nodded at the screens. "You have a lot more important work to deal with."

Rosa grunted. "We'll see about that."

Wyler turned up a corner of his mouth in his typical sly grin. "I'll tell you after dinner. That's a promise." He leaned in to kiss her on the forehead, then turned and sprinted out of the room before she could press him any further about the data.

He could hear an angry shout echoing down the corridor behind him. "Goddammit Wyler! You owe me!"

As the echo of his footsteps faded, Rosa turned back to the work table and stared at the doorway, another curse leaving her lips. "That Sonavabitch. Just wait 'til he gets back. I'll take care of him, but good," she said to the air. A devious smile of her own crossed her face as she went back to work.